

# reading the Bible with Luther



## Session 12:

## The Book of Ruth: All in the Family, part 1

by Virgil Thompson

From the period of Joshua and Judges the Bible recalls the story of Ruth, a poor woman who might easily have been forgotten in the grand sweep of the greatest story ever told. That the Bible forgets neither Ruth nor her story is noteworthy. Believers may take assurance from the story: the Lord does not forget; no matter how insignificant we may imagine ourselves to be in the grand scheme of things, we have a Lord who does not forget. No matter how desperate we may imagine our circumstance, we may rest assured we have a Lord who has not forgotten us. As Jesus declares to the baptized, “*Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom*” (Luke 12:32). The promise of Jesus serves as fitting epigraph for Ruth’s story and for our story as well.

### Immigration in the Bible

Of course, if it had been up to Ezra and Nehemiah, Ruth might easily have been forgotten from the story of faith. Ruth was a Moabite. By birthright she did not belong to the chosen people of the Bible. She had married into the faith. Both Nehemiah and Ezra, on principle, were dead set against such marriages. When Ezra learned that Israelites were intermarrying with “those people”—Canaanites, Moabites, Amorites, Hittites, and so forth—he was appalled to the point of pulling out his hair and his beard, right down to the last whisker (Ezra 9:1-4). When Nehemiah heard the news, he cursed the offenders, beat them and pulled out their hair (Nehemiah 13:23-27). Nehemiah and Ezra promoted a policy of “Israel for Israelites.” To them, intermarriage was tantamount to “*treachery against God*” (Nehemiah 13:27).

Luther’s explanation of the Eighth Commandment teaches that we are to “*defend our neighbors, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do and say in the best possible light.*” In defense of Ezra and Nehemiah, we can appreciate their concern to guard the truths at the heart of faith. They feared that in “mixing and matching” with those outside the community of faith, the purity of the Gospel might become watered down, misconstrued and mixed up, to the point that

faith would lose both its identity and its way in the world. The concern is not without foundation. However, just as soon as someone begins to circle the wagons around “*the way, the truth, and the life*”—as though its protection depends upon us—the Lord God sends a little reminder of who is God and who is not God, and who is the guardian of whom. The story of Ruth is such a reminder.

### The Protector of the Faithful, One in the Same, Protector of the Gospel

According to the story, “*in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land*” (Ruth 1:1). The famine set into motion events that, you must imagine, gave those worrywarts, Ezra and Nehemiah, something to think about, just as the story of these events gives us something to think about. In the light of this story it appears that the truth of the Gospel does not require our protection. In fact, the very truth of the Gospel is that the Lord God protects and guards us in the life of faith. The Lord Himself will see to it that the Gospel is proclaimed in its purity. As Isaiah promises,

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. — Isaiah 55:10-11*

For our part we are, like the blind man in John 9, free to speak the truth of God as we have received it, trusting that God will keep His promise.

### How It Was Is How It Is

Let me tell you the story of how it was in the time of the Judges, and promises still to be for the community of faith in our time. Ruth’s story could not have a more unpromising beginning. In the beginning, the story is not even about Ruth. It is about an Israelite family from Bethlehem. Under the

pressure of famine, the father, Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, immigrate to Moab, land of opportunity and plenty (Ruth 1:2). There the two sons eventually marry Moabite women, though not before the old father had died. The marriages prove, however, to be relatively brief affairs. Both Mahlon and Chilion die before the tenth anniversary of their marriages. The widowed mother, Naomi, and her widowed daughters-in-law are left alone with their grief and destitution.

How it was in the time of the Judges is not necessarily how it is among us in every aspect of life. Today, for example, women are not necessarily dependent upon men to provide for them. In some families, the women bring home the bacon and the men fry it up. Even in Luther's day, the times were a'changin'! If it hadn't been for his resourceful and enterprising wife, Katie, Luther himself would have been considerably hard pressed to make ends meet. It does not appear that managing family finances was a particular strength of the great Reformer. He had no doubt about how indebted he was to "his rib," as he affectionately referred to his wife. In one letter he writes, "To my dear wife, Katherine von Bora, preacher, brewer, gardener, and whatsoever else she may be..." (Roland Bainton, *Women of the Reformation*, 37). Martin and Katie Luther appear to have enjoyed a marriage in which husband and wife were interdependent in living out their vocation "to strengthen and support one another, serve those in need and be a sign of the fulfillment of God's perfect kingdom." You have to imagine that the Lord of marriage has the same in mind for marriage partners of today.

This does not mean Christian families are immune to tragedy. Even the holy people of the Bible suffered deep affliction in their lives, as did Naomi and her daughters-in-law. In this sense, how it was continues to be how it is. When life is overcome by tragedy, the story of Ruth and Naomi continues to hold promise for people of faith. Naomi, bereft of sons and blessing, reasonably advises that her daughters-in-law each return to the home of their mother. Eventually, Orpah does return to her mother's home. Ruth, however, refuses, swearing an oath of loyalty that has frequently been exchanged between husbands and wives, but only rarely between daughters-in-law and their mothers-in-law. "Where you go," Ruth vows to Naomi, "I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die" (Ruth 1:18-19a). So in the promise of Ruth's commitment to Naomi the two set off for home, making their way back to Bethlehem. The Moabite woman shows the Israelite woman what it means to live for one another in the solidarity of faith.

## Homeing in the Presence

As the women arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi clearly is not the same woman who had left Bethlehem years ago. As she explains to her old neighbors,

*Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara [it means "bitter"], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? — Ruth 1:20-21*

For their part, the Bethlehem neighbors in faith welcome Naomi back, no questions asked, no conditions to be met. They take her in, grief, bitterness and all. They don't admonish Naomi to get over her grief and get on with life. They just welcome her home as a troubled sister in faith.

Luther taught that the art of being a good neighbor in faith is learning when and where to speak the **commands** of God and when and where to speak the **promises** of God. The commands and the promises of God are the two sides of God's Word. Both have the same aim: to create faith in God as God and to give life in His name. Naomi's neighbors are wise enough to know that in her grief-stricken condition, only the promise of God can save her from despair and unbelief. They speak to Naomi the comfort and counsel of God's Word: "Yes, God kills but he also brings to life. Yes, God brings down but he also raises up" (1Samuel 2:6). By such promises the Bethlehem neighbors comfort and reassure Naomi in the midst of her grief and bitterness.

Luther helps us to see that God is at work—even in times of grief and anguish—to move us back home where we are taken in by the promise of the Lord to make all things new. Like Naomi, Luther did not flinch to call a thing what it was. Neither Luther nor Naomi nor anyone else goes looking for suffering, but when it comes our way, Luther counseled, theologians of the cross are free to call it what it is: "The Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me." But even if the Lord grinds us into the

... continued on next page

### Virgil Thompson

*teaches New Testament at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of The Lutheran Quarterly.*



dust we are justified to believe it is only that He may raise us up to the new life of which Paul boasts:

*All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death ... Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life. — Romans 6:3-4*

As Naomi awaits fulfillment of the Lord's promise, her daughter-in-law pragmatically observes that even believers, as they await the Lord to fulfill His promises, must keep up their strength. Ruth volunteers to go into the field to glean a living for the two of them. And, Ruth adds, "*Who knows what may come of it. I may find favor*" (Ruth 2:2).

# reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study

## Session 12:



## The Book of Ruth: All in the Family, part 1

by Virgil Thompson

### Bible Study and Prayer

Here are suggestions for reflection and discussion:

1. When Naomi returns to Bethlehem she declares to the neighbors,

*Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me? — Ruth 1:20-21*

What do you make of Naomi's understanding of the calamity that has befallen her? What perspective does it give us on the upheaval and tragedy of our own lives?

2. The relationship between Naomi and Ruth is quite remarkable. On the one hand Naomi, as she seems at pains to explain to Ruth, has nothing to offer her daughter-in-law. Reason dictates that she return to her mother's home (Ruth 1:6-14). Ruth, however, swears to Naomi—precisely to Naomi who has nothing to offer—an absolute oath of loyalty. I'll bet you can think of friends in faith who have been loyal through thick and thin. What do you think makes one person loyal in friendship to another?
3. We have characterized the story of Ruth as a reminder

### Looking Ahead:

What becomes of Ruth and Naomi in the community of faith will have to wait until the next session. Of course, it is not necessary to wait to hear the rest of the story. If you have a Bible, you can read it for yourself. Nothing's stopping you. Whether you read ahead or not, we'll be here in the next issue with the rest of the story. And if you are inclined to imagine that the Lord God does not exercise considerable imagination when it comes to providing for His people, you have a surprise coming. Just ask Boaz and Ruth as they crawl under the blankets together on the threshing room floor. It is all there. Ruth Chapter 3. And still more. The story of the Lord God and His people. The greatest story ever told.

that the purity of the Gospel does not depend upon our protection, but in fact the very truth of the Gospel is that God is our protector in faith and life. God will see to it that the Gospel is proclaimed for the sake of faith. Nowhere in Scripture is this promise more powerfully proclaimed than in John's Gospel. As Jesus declares, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me. If you know me, you will know my Father also*" (John 14:6-7). Think of other passages from Scripture that speak the promise of Christ for faith.

4. As you think about this first chapter of Ruth's story consider these questions:
  - a. *What do I find most comforting or most disturbing about the story thus far?*
  - b. *What background knowledge would help me understand the story?*
  - c. *What does this story promise to faith? What does this book demand of faith?*

Download a free copy of this article and Bible study:  
<http://www.solapublishing.org/pages/Adult-Education.html>

Select: **Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 12**