
Title: The Christmas Son: Obed

Text: Ruth 1:1-22, 4:13-17

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Introduction

We are taking some time this Advent season to ponder the miraculous births of sons in the Old Testament. Last week, we considered Isaac and the laughter of our salvation. This week we are going to consider Naomi and Obed. Next week we will be in the book of Samuel, considering the birth of Samuel.

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. It's one of the most popular American songs of all time. The song really doesn't say much. It was written for a 1942 movie, and at the time, its author, Irving Berlin, believed there were other songs in the movie that would resonate and maybe even find a place on the radio charts. Even Bing wasn't all that energized by the tune. But it's White Christmas we remember. Few American songs have been sold more or recorded more. If we're looking for answers as to "why" a song that was not thought much of at the time of its writing, we must start with its context. It's backdrop was World War II. The song resonated with Americans and soldiers alike. Why? Because of its hope, and the benediction that arises from that hope. Dreaming of a white Christmas offered escape from war. I'm dreaming of a Christmas I hope will be like those ones I've known in the past. White Christmas is the American dream. The American spirit. The Christmas blessing based on the hope: May all your Christmases be white. If Christmases are white in the future, then all is OK with the world. I might even be able to relive those past memories that exist in my wistful thinking.

But there's something amiss. White Christmas may be hope, but this hope is based on something fleeting. Indeed, "those Christmases I used to know" is not present. Whatever it was that made Christmases grand, exemplified by white snow, has disappeared and we hope it comes back. We are dreaming of a white Christmas because it is not here.

And the reality is that "those Christmases I used to know" weren't all that glamorous. Fast forward a couple of generations and we're not even sure there was ever a White Christmas. "The party's on, the feelin's here, simply having a wonderful Christmas time." No white Christmas. There never was one. Create your own hope. What we have is what we've got... good feelings and good times, live it up, this is all there is. The moon is right, the spirit's up, simply having a wonderful Christmastime.

Misplaced hope winds up in a dead end: hopelessness. And that's really the bottom line isn't it? What good is a White Christmas on December 26th? The chair is still empty, the bills are still due, the kids are still angry, the conversation is still hurtful, the pain is still constant, and the noise is just as loud. The moon is dark, the spirit's down; simply having a miserable Christmastime. Depression, anxiety, and bitterness are greatest at Christmas because hope is misplaced, nowhere to be found, or overshadowed by reality.

This is the story of Naomi. Last week we considered Sarah. Sarah had misplaced hope. She was self-reliant. This week, Naomi has absolutely no hope. For Naomi, hope is gone.

Why does the Advent season fail to deliver on hope? This question is at the heart of our text this evening. Right off the bat we should note that the events in this text begin in Bethlehem... a town at the heart of every Christmas pageant.

Famine: From Bethlehem to Moab

Let's read Ruth 1: This is what God's Word proclaims to us.

Now it came to pass, in the days when the judges ruled, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem, Judah, went to dwell in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech, the name of his wife was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion— Ephrathites of Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to the country of Moab and remained there. 3 Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left, and her two sons. 4 Now they took wives of the women of Moab: the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. And they dwelt there about ten years. 5 Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died; so the woman survived her two sons and her husband.

The book of Ruth is considered "adorable", a historic "love story." It has this pastoral feel, of grain fields and drama. Choices of destiny. It also has all of the earmarks of a great novella: the tragedy, the dilemma, a champion who saves the day, and the boy gets the girl (or is it the other way around here?). Epic love born in adversity. Make no mistake. This is a great love story. There's a reason why Ruth is a favorite bed time story.

But also make no mistake: this is no typical love story and we must be careful not to impose a Western sense of touchy feely on to the text. There is judgment and heartache and self-righteousness and unbelief and epic unfaithfulness to the covenant.

In fact, the opening lines start off with a jolt. The author wastes no time in placing his original audience in the vise grip of the unfamiliar and shocking. And what unfolds in the four chapters doesn't let up with this sense of the unexpected, and in some cases, for the original audience, a bit of anger and angst.

What would we expect from a story that occurs in the time of the judges? The moment the author opens with this is the moment we should be on the edge of our seats. We read the book of judges and we read of an Israel struggling with a sense of identity. A people who have always had fits of covenantal unfaithfulness are increasingly playing the harlot. There's this rhythm of disobedience, judgment, and obedience throughout the book. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. There is a sense of anarchy and apostasy. Ruled by no one, even God. There is no king in Israel. There is no physical king in Israel and Israel is moving to a place where they will eventually attempt to unshackle themselves from their true king who brought them out of the land of Egypt. What happens in the book of Ruth

exemplifies the spirit of the times of the judges (and we'll see more of that in a minute).

Famine in Canaan

Life in Canaan was not supposed to be this way. It was not supposed to be a time marked by idolatrous infidelity.

Here's how Deuteronomy describes the expectations of life in Canaan:

The LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; 9 a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper. 10 When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. 14 You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock. 15 And the LORD will take away from you all sickness, and will afflict you with none of the terrible diseases of Egypt which you have known, but will lay them on all those who hate you.

I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. 15 And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled.

God tells Israel in Deuteronomy: I will give you rain, I will bless your land, you will eat and be filled. We hear in Ruth 1: "There was a famine in the land." Huh? Whatever happened to the land flowing with milk and honey? Whatever happened to the bounty that was promised? Already, this story from the beginning sets the listeners on edge. There is a famine where there is supposed to be no famine. And as if to underscore that point, it is followed by "and a man in Bethlehem of Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons." There is famine in Israel's breadbasket, the "house of bread", Bethlehem.

Whatever else we might note of the backdrop or setting of what follows, we must understand that this famine occurs because Israel has been faithless. I selectively chose those passages in Deuteronomy. What immediately follows those passages is a warning: if you disobey me, you will not have your land flowing with milk and honey. You will perish.

Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, 17 lest the LORD's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain,

and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the LORD is giving you.

if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you: 16 "Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. 17 "Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. 18 "Cursed shall be the fruit of your body and the produce of your land, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

This is precisely what happened in the days of the judges. In the days of the judges, there was famine in the land. There's famine because Israel has been acting faithless. But it was not supposed to be this way. The house of bread in Israel, Bethlehem, is experiencing famine because Israel is in rebellion against the Bread Provider.

Bad news gets worse

Interestingly, the bad news in this text gets worse. Rather than responding to God's correction in faith, there is a man who epitomizes the very reason Israel is in God's crosshairs to begin with. The man, we learn later is named Elimilech, leaves Israel to go to the country of Moab. This is the land of Lot. And given the context, there's a bit of a parallel. Just as faithless Lot made choice of land based on his felt needs, so too Elimilech lifts up his eyes in the midst of famine and determines that the grass is greener on the other side. We find out later that this choice is even more grounded in unbelief and infidelity than it first appears (we'll save that for later... when there's another shocking development in the verses and chapters that follow).

Israel is the land of blessing. Israel is where God dwells with his people. Israel is the place where repentance for whatever brought on the famine is to happen. To leave is to leave the land of covenantal blessing. To leave the land during famine is to simply shake a fist at God. Ironically, Elimilech means "God is king." Yet true to the form of the time of the judges, Elimilech (and by extension, Naomi) attempts to be his own king, do his own thing, has a better plan for weathering famine than God does, he's doing it his way.

He leaves Israel and it's a conscious willful decision to abandon Bethlehem. They "sojourned" in Moab. They "remained" there. The fullest consequences of this language will be apparent later in the story (when we find out that he has placed his land and inheritance at risk, a severe no-no under the Mosaic Covenant).

But this isn't a guy who simply decided to weather the famine in a Holiday Inn in a neighboring state. Like Lot, he takes up residence in the foreign country. He has so grounded his life and his interest and his future in Moab, his sons take unbelieving Moabite wives (also a significant no-no). The context here in the early part of Ruth is one of an idolatrous lifestyle. These are the days of the judges, when each one, including Elimilech, does what is right in their own eyes. There is a famine of fidelity. There is a famine of covenantal faithfulness with Elimilech.

It's important to make this point because some think this trip to Moab is simply Elimilech being the good dad, the good husband, and doing whatever it takes to provide for his family. Such is the wisdom of the world. Don't be stupid. The ends justify the means. Make sure you are a responsible father and provide for your family, even if it means leaving your inheritance behind for the land of your enemies.

Given the rest of what is unpacked by the author of this book, I don't think it allows us to go there. In fact, the way it turns out... Elimilech chased a mirage. The grass wasn't greener on the other side. In fact, he would have best filled out a burial form before leaving Bethlehem because he's never coming back. Elimilech dies. The two sons take wives, live another ten years in Moab, and then they die.

Verse 5 is serious stuff, especially in Israel. In a foreign country living with foreign in-laws, Naomi has no husband and no sons. She has nothing. She is at rock bottom. The author of Ruth doesn't go into all the details. In fact, the sentences here are almost sterile. There's no comment about "how" they died. We can surmise about the "why" in that the context is one of apostasy and disobedience. But the audience surely can fill in the environment. The pain and anger and depression and bitterness (which comes up later) from losing a husband and two sons in a foreign country is something that resonates with all of us.

She probably wonders "was it worth it?" when they left Bethlehem all those years ago. She is as low as she can go as an Israelite. Outside of the land with nothing to show for it. And in the verses that follow, we begin to learn the fullest extent of her dire condition. But we should not miss in these verses the direst of all details: "left without her two sons". If you're an Israelite, you're left to simply gape at the horror that Naomi is living.

This is the famine within the famine. No bread in Bethlehem. No fidelity in Elimilech. No sons for Naomi in Moab. These five verses are "ALL THINGS FAMINE". There is famine of bread. Famine of covenantal faithfulness. And there is a famine of "no covenantal heir". The covenantal dream for Naomi is dead. She is physically, emotionally, and spiritually bankrupt. There will be no heir, not only to carry out the terms of the covenant, but there will be no heir to embrace the God of the covenant on behalf of the family. There will be no representative to God's people on behalf of Elimilech. The legacy is dead. And it's not just that they will be forgotten. There will be no place for that family in the covenant in future generations. Their stake in all the blessings ever promised to Abraham in the night sky have vanished.

This is the horror of barrenness in the Old Covenant. This is why Sarah, and Rebekah, and Rachel and Manoah's wife, and Hannah and Elizabeth are compelling stories and a focal point of the storyline of the Bible. To be barren is to be excluded from a destiny of participation in the covenantal blessings promised to Abraham. What makes Naomi's case different is that she wasn't barren. She had Mahlon and Chilion. Not coincidentally, Chilion means "extinction" or "at an end". It's the end of the line not simply for the family name, but a stake in all of those future blessings Israel would enjoy as a people of God. Naomi had once been a

full participant in covenant. Now, in the deaths of her sons, she is faced with being cut off from the covenant in its fullest extent.

Let me offer a side note on this. It would be easy here to assume that the only problem for Naomi at this point in the story is that she simply lacked faith. After all, true Israelites partake of the covenant by faith. No heir is no problem, all you need is faith. Those of us living on this side of the cross tend to view these kinds of situations in the Old Testament with our evangelical glasses on. If we do this, we miss the gravity of Naomi's problem. To have no son and to have no land is to not participate in the covenantal blessings. Whether or not Naomi can enjoy personal salvation with no land and no son, is not the point here. She and her family face extinction. At the very least there is a fundamental lack of saving faith in the actions of Elimilech... otherwise, Elimilech and Naomi would still be in the land. As it is, if she has no heir and no land, she will be cut off from the Abrahamic Covenant that saw all nations blessed through Israel.

The return: Journey

Let's read verse 6:

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had visited His people by giving them bread. 7 Therefore she went out from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.

Like the prodigal son, Naomi decides enough is enough. "Life is better where I'm supposed to be." And now the contrast between Moab and Israel has been reversed. It doesn't say "Moab" had a famine. Rather "the LORD had visited his people", the same kind of language used in Exodus: God heard the cry of his people and responded with blessing. Again, this is reminiscent of the time of the judges. The people would disobey, God would correct, there would be repentance and God would bless. This after all, was the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant in the land. You obey, I will bless. You disobey, I will curse. You repent, I will again bless you. God has given Israel food. And to Naomi, this simple fact of God's provision not only increases her dissatisfaction with Moab, she is motivated to action. She hears. She believes. She returns.

This "return" is the rhythm of repentance beginning to work in the heart of Naomi. Her faith is still weak. But there is a stirring. All of a sudden, there is moment of clarity. Moab brought pain and heartache. God is providing his people again with bounty. Naomi is stirred to relocate her life within the boundaries of God's blessing. Her "return" to Bethlehem becomes an indictment of the decision made by Elimilech decades ago. And that becomes more apparent as the story progresses. Her return isn't simply to Bethlehem. It is a return to covenant and the land of covenantal blessing. She is returning to the God of the covenant. Embedded in her "return" is repentance.

And when she returns, she isn't by herself, is she? There's a subtle contrast between verse 5 and 6 that provide a hint of what is to come. Verse 5, Naomi is as low as she can go. Verse 6, we already begin to get a sense of grace... a divine

hand that is already at work in Naomi's life to bring her back into the covenantal relationship with the God of Israel. Orpah and Ruth have decided to return with her.

This "return" is a big deal at this point in the book. The "return" is noted as a point of emphasis in its progressive nature. Notice the writer doesn't locate this conversation in Moab or before the trip. Nor does he simply note that Orpah stayed behind or move Ruth and Naomi to Bethlehem and gives us details after the fact. This "return" is a journey, that occurs over the course of three stages of conversation because the writer wants us to see that the "return" was movement back toward the promised land. This is Naomi's exodus from Egypt. She is headed back to the Promised Land where God dwells with his people. In the worst of circumstances, Naomi hears God has "visited" his people with food and she orients her heart and her desire and her hope toward that news and the land where it came from.

The conversation (part 1)

This return prompts a conversation that unfolds in 3 stages, but also introduces us to the storyline of the book of Ruth. (verse 8)

And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each to her mother's house. The LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband."

The first stage of this conversation notes Naomi's acknowledgement of God's grace at work through her daughter-in-law's. The language used for "dealing kindly" is God's covenantal faithfulness. Naomi suggests that this same kind of covenantal love that God has for his people. This is the same word used for loving kindness throughout the Old Testament. And here, Naomi applies it to these two widows of her sons. Naomi recognizes that God has been gracious to her through these two women. Again there is contrast. The kind of faithfulness that was supposed to be resident in the lives of Israel is found in those who are not Israel. This is a hint of what is to come.

Notice Naomi's directive, "return". She is returning to Bethlehem in repentance, but do her foreign daughters-in-law understand the implications of the return. Are they ready to be Jews? Are they ready to embrace the God of the covenant as she is doing in her return? Are they ready to embrace the gospel that has come from Bethlehem and has been embraced by Naomi? Are they ready to be true Jews? Are they ready for the life of sacrifice and bitterness that awaits Naomi? Perhaps Naomi has noticed something that even the daughters-in-law don't, especially in Orpah.

The conversation (part 2)

That brings us to the second part of the conversation. They lift up their voices and weep. Interestingly, it's after the weeping that the daughters-in-law respond:

They said to her, "Surely we will return with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Are there still sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go—for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, if I should have a husband tonight and should also bear sons, 13 would you wait for them till they were grown? Would you restrain yourselves from having husbands? No, my daughters; for it grieves me very much for your sakes that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me!" 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again.

The daughters-in-law initially rebut Naomi. "We will return with you to your people". And their grace to Naomi elicits a response that encapsulates the dilemma and the tragedy and the covenant infidelity and the rock bottom bankruptcy that is Naomi's life. It's here we find the storyline unpacked through the rest of Ruth. She is returning in repentance, but that repentance still lacks the kind of faith that embraces hope. She's going back to the land of the covenant, but she does so with no allusions about the future and her place in the covenant. She is returning to throw herself at the mercy of God's covenanting kindness. And she spells it out for the two daughters-in-law.

Their Kindness elicits her confession: "Have I yet sons in my womb? I am too old to have a husband." No husband. No sons. And I'm out of time. I'm out of the covenant. It is beyond me to fix. It is an impossibility both for me and for you. You are foreigners. You won't be married in Israel. You will not participate in covenant. Your destiny is among the damned. And so is mine. The hand of the Lord is against me, the worst that could be said of any human any time anywhere, let alone an Israelite who once had been a partaker in Abraham's covenant. No husband. No sons. No heir. No destiny. The hand of the Lord is against me... I will have no son.

The conversation (part 3)

This brings us to the third and final part of this conversation. This confession un.masks unbelief. Faced with a life of sacrifice in the gospel, one daughter-in-law turns back. The end of verse 14:

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 And she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. 17 Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me." 18 When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her.

The stark contrast between what it means to embrace the God of Israel and what it means to reject the God of Israel plays out between two people here, Orpah and Ruth.

Orpah plays the role of infidel. She goes back to Moab. Like Elimilech, she prefers life outside of the Promised Land. Her posterity is more important to her than life in the covenant. Faced with the impossible in terms of being able to physically participate in the covenant through a son, she turns back in unbelief.

But Ruth clung to Naomi. Few images speak to covenant faithfulness and saving faith in God as the ultimate provider of all things than the posture of clinging. We see this in Jacob with the wrestling angel... Jacob clinging to the angel upon the point of death desperate to be blessed by the only One who can ever give blessing. Here, Ruth clings to her only hope. And it's not just her posture.

While Naomi is returning in repentance, her speech articulates a belief that she has been wiped out of the covenantal book of life. But what we would have expected to be the speech of an Israelite is the speech of a Moabitess.

Like Orpah, Ruth faces the impossibility of ever having a husband. Unlike Mahlon, her dead husband, no good Israelite would marry an outcast, an enemy, an infidel. There would be no heir for Naomi, because there would be no marriage and no heir for Ruth. Yet in an amazing display of true faith, on Ruth's lips is the grandest of the covenantal formulas of the Old Testament, the covenantal mantra that occurs dozens of times throughout the Old Testament. This statement is Israel's identity. Nothing spoke to the nature and purposes and mission of covenant than this statement: "I will be your God and you will be my people." God first said it to Abraham and then repeated it again and again: I will be your God and you will be my people. All of Israel's hopes and dreams were bound up in that statement. If ever there was a statement that identifies God's purposes with his people for all time it is this: I will be your God and you will be my people. Wherever you have the covenants being affirmed in the Old Testament, not far away is God's desire to dwell with and live among and make for himself His people: I will be your God and you will be my people.

And here in Ruth it occurs on the lips of a foreigner, who in the face of the impossible, is embracing the core identity of what it means to be "God's people". In fact, she doesn't simply state the covenantal formula... she personalizes it, she makes it her own: "Your people will be my people. And your God my God."

The contrast with Orpah (or even her own husband and Elimilech) couldn't be more stark. One plays the infidel. One identifies herself with God's people. Ruth places her destiny and her stake in the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob even in the impossible. No husband. No son. No heir. No covenantal claims. No future. I don't care. I stake my hopes and my dreams with the God who promised Abraham his offspring would be as numerous as the sand of the sea and the stars of the heavens. And from Abraham's offspring would come one whose kingdom would encompass the entire earth and whose people would be from all people groups, including this widow from Moab. Ruth clings to Naomi. She embraces Israel's destiny. Ruth says: I stake my hope and my dreams with the God who promised Abraham an heir. There may not be a son, there may not be an heir for us now, but there is an heir who is coming through the one who has visited his people with bread and harvest in Bethlehem. There's no heir now. There will be an Heir then. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God.

God is at work. God's grace is on display. Ruth has been graced by God and is giving grace to Naomi.

An heir is born

Most of us know what happens in the rest of the book. Through the love and faith of this foreigner and the provision of a kinsman-redeemer, Naomi will be redeemed. The impossible heir will be provided through the one who says "your people will be my people, and your God my God." Ruth 4 tells us from the marriage of Boaz and Ruth comes a child, a son. An heir is born. And here's the scene as it is described in Ruth 4:

13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. 17 And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

What a change in Ruth's storyline. All of the expectations have been flipped on their head. I thought Boaz was the redeemer. Verse 14: the LORD has not left you without a redeemer... Obed. Boaz steps forward as the kinsman-redeemer, but Obed is identified as the one to redeem Naomi. It is Obed whose name will be proclaimed from one end of Israel to another. It is Obed who will bring life restoration. I thought it was Boaz. Boaz is a redeemer used by God to bring the real redeemer onto the scene. Between them Boaz and Obed secure covenant participation for Naomi. There is no more hopelessness. Naomi has been redeemed. Naomi has been restored to full covenantal participation through Boaz and Obed.

And note the birth language. Three times. Verse 13: Ruth bore a son. Verse 15: your daughter-in-law has given birth to him... a son. Verse 17: A son has been born to Ruth. "A son has been born to Ruth?" Is that what this says here? No. "There is a son born to Naomi." Are you kidding me?? I thought this was supposed to be a love story between Boaz and Ruth and they lived happily ever after. This can't happen. This isn't the way I wrote it for the children's section of the Christian bookstore. This isn't how I drafted the romance novel based on this book.

There is a son born to Naomi. This isn't simply about Boaz and Ruth. Boaz and Ruth have been used by God to bring about Naomi's redemption and restoration. What provision. What grace. What hope. In chapter 1, Naomi returns completely broken and empty. No husband. No son. No heir. And here in chapter 4, where we would expect a Christmas card picture of the mother Ruth with her child, it is not Ruth the author wants us to see, but Naomi who has been provided a son. The utterly impossible has been accomplished by divine grace through a kinsman

redeemer and a foreigner who speaks gospel with her lips: Your God will be my God, and your people my people.

Reflection and response in Advent season

The book of Ruth closes with the intimate scene between Naomi and Obed in her lap, Naomi nursing “her son”. “Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap”. Oh Naomi, Naomi, what are you thinking? What are you believing? Why do you take the child and place him on your lap? Naomi rightly understands that this is her redemption. Naomi embraces what God has accomplished in giving her a son. She takes the child and is satisfied in God’s provision. No more barrenness. No more famine. Through this son, through Ruth and through Boaz... all three together, Naomi once again enjoys covenant status and covenant blessing.

This is an act of faith. This is hope redeemed. This portrait is grand, and glorious grace. God has accomplished the impossible. She was without a husband, too old to give birth to a son, and yet, there in her lap is a son, her son. Naomi lays the child in her lap and begins to nurse him because she has hope she and her posterity will be included in the covenant blessings promised to Abraham.

In that son, there is hope. Through this son, the covenant, and indeed the kingdom will be secured. In this son, all of the covenantal blessings will cascade down on Israel through David and his future offspring.

This picture painted in these verses is the gospel. There in the arms of Naomi in Ruth 4, lies a son from whose line will come a Son and an Heir who will establish a kingdom whose rule and reign is forever. Obed foreshadows the One who will end all famine, all barrenness. The eventual Son and Heir is Bethlehem’s Emmanuel who visits His people with the Bread of Life. This One signified by Obed will realize the hopes and dreams of Ruth, redeeming a people for Himself from all nations, as numerous as the sand of the sea and the stars of the heavens.

What is our response? First, we must realize our state of utter hopelessness without an heir and without a son. We have broken covenant, again and again and again. We have gambled away our salvation on a bet that we know better. We can do it better. We know where there is food. The grass is greener on the other side. We have forsaken the blessings of the covenant for that which does not and can not satisfy. We are covenant breakers in need of a son, an heir.

Second, we must embrace the God who saves by responding in faith in the same manner as Ruth. Like Ruth, most of us are Gentiles on the outside looking in. Our focus and our gaze must be placed squarely on Jesus and our lips must articulate the words of the covenant: Christ is our God and we are His people. What is it that gives us hope when it feels like we have been cut off from the covenant? When our soul is dry, when the kids are a mess, when our wives are not responsive, when our husbands are not listening, when the task of life seems impossible, when the text of the Bible no longer excites us, when we’re being tempted to chuck it all and we feel like a hypocrite because nobody knows.... When our internal life is a desert and our salvation doesn't seem real... when Jesus seems to be absent from his church... when Christmas seems like a bunch of nonsense, where is our hope? What's on our lips? Where are our eyes?

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

Last, it's not all that hard to see Mary and Jesus in that intimate image from chapter 4. It's not all that hard to see Mary laying Jesus on her lap, Mary nursing Jesus. In this advent season, as we contemplate the Son who has been born, it's not all that hard to then understand that these words on the lips of the women of Bethlehem are absolutely prophetic: "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left us this day without a redeemer, and may Christ's name be renowned throughout the entire world! 15 He shall be to us a restorer of life and our nourisher, for Mary has given birth to Jesus."

This is our hope. There never was a White Christmas. What the world offers has always been a mirage. This is where our eyes must be. We must place our gaze on the offspring of Obed, the Son, the Heir of all things. When life seems impossible, when salvation seems out of reach, when we find we've been chasing a mirage: Our hopes and our dreams "of all the years" must be found in Bethlehem's Bread of Life who gives us water to drink and bread to eat.

We needed a Son to be born who would inherit that inheritance we abdicated in Adam. We needed an heir or everything would be lost. That Son, that Heir, was born to Mary. No longer in her lap, Emmanuel dwells with us. The New Boaz-Obed has claimed His rightful throne, secured for Himself a kingdom, and won for himself a people.

We are his people. He is our God. Ruth was right, all those years ago on the road to Bethlehem: there is a Son. There is an Heir. His name is Jesus.