

“In the Bleak Midwinter”

Ruth 1:1-22

O Little Town of Bethlehem: Christmas according to Ruth

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The sermon title—idea from Presbyterian pastor Sean Michael Lewis—makes reference to a famous Christmas carol written by the English poet, Christina Rossetti. The opening lines of that poem paint a picture of what Bethlehem was like when Jesus entered the world: “In the bleak midwinter/frosty wind made moan/Earth stood hard as iron/Water like a stone/Snow had fallen, snow on snow/Snow on snow/ In the bleak midwinter/Long ago.” Now strictly speaking, I don’t think it snows in Bethlehem, and scholars say that Jesus likely wasn’t born in midwinter. So there’s some poetic license here. Rossetti is acknowledging the coldness and sadness and darkness of a world that is broken, lost, waiting, longing for warmth and healing and redemption and joy.

Application: Do you feel like that? 2020 has been a rough year. Injustice and divisive politics. Uncertain finances. Disrupted career paths. Weighed on physical and mental health. Spiritual health. Relationships. Ready for it to end, longing for some relief to come.

And that’s what Advent is about...Advent means the arrival or appearing. Not just about Christmas, but it’s the lead-up to Christmas. In this season we remember Jesus’ first advent in Bethlehem—the Israelite people longing for deliverance—and we relate to that as we’re in our own period of waiting, longing, looking forward to Jesus’ second advent, his return to earth bring his kingdom of perfect justice and love to fullness.

And so we’re going to spend this Advent season in Bethlehem, though not with the traditional manger scene that you’re thinking of. We did that last year in Matthew and in years past. But instead this year we’re exploring an earlier time in Bethlehem’s history in the book of Ruth. A similar story of darkness and despair that God brings light and hope into. And in fact, it’s this story that ultimately prepares the way for Jesus’ arrival a thousand years later, as Ruth preserves the promised family line and becomes the great grandmother of King David—and, of course, the great —grandmother of Jesus of Nazareth.

And yet, both for Ruth and Naomi and for God’s people at the turning of the times, it was bleak, hard, cold— little hope of salvation and deliverance.

Main idea: When life goes wrong, turn to God.

1. A Painful Journey to Moab (v. 1-5): The Cost of Turning Away from God

Famine, Faithlessness, and Death.

“In the days when the judges ruled”...Ruth is a continuation of the story of the book of Judges that comes right before it. Judges concludes with this sentence: “In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” This phrase is also repeated throughout the book of Judges. It’s a dark time in Israel, among God’s people—infigting, terrible violence and injustice, unfaithfulness to the Lord. Judges sort of gives us the macro-level, political situation. But here in Ruth we see how all of these events effect one family.

Verse 1 says there was a famine in the land. The Promised Land of milk and honey, Bethlehem, which literally means “House of Bread”—suffers a famine, probably discipline from God trying to bring repentance as he promised he would do in Deut. 11:16-17 if Israel was unfaithful. The house of bread has no food. Famine.

Then, Faithlessness. Elimelek, husband of Naomi, perhaps out of desperation but also likely out of a lack of faith in God and trying to avoid his just judgment, moves his family to Moab, about 100 miles north, modern day Jordan. Moab was Israel’s first and greatest enemy. They worshiped the false god Chemosh, sacrificing their children to it. God had levied some of His harshest words against the Moabites. Israel was to have nothing to do with them. Of course, in saving his family from physical danger, Elimelek puts his family in spiritual danger. His two sons—Mahlon and Kilion—marry Moabite women. Moabites and their idol worship were such an abomination to God that Moses teaches in Deut. that Israelite families that mixed with Moabites would be banned from corporate worship in the temple for 10 generations, 400 years. But Mahlon and Kilion have no children.

Famine, faithlessness, and finally, death. Elimelek dies and both of Naomi’s sons die as well. All of that is stated so succinctly that we might zip right past it and miss the gravity of it. This is an absolute personal nightmare for Naomi. Her whole life has fallen apart, much like Job. Imagine her grief as she attends funeral after funeral after funeral. Picture her. She is now a widowed refugee in the land of her people’s enemies. She has no husband to protect and provide for her. She has no social standing or way of carrying on her family line.

Many of you know the pain of Naomi. I just want to acknowledge the reality of suffering this morning. Some of you have been to multiple funerals of close family and friends—whether COVID or cancer or a sudden illness or accident. Some of you have to battle insecurities or addictions habitual sins that seem to enslave you. Some of you have been really hurt by people in your life who should love you. Just take this past year.

Whitney’s family...

We live in a broken world and have broken hearts that are in need of God’s healing. Paul says in Romans that all creation is groaning, awaiting redemption—everything from hurricanes to pandemics are part of that. And we’re part of that. We’re groaning along with all creation. Paul says in Romans it’s like a woman in childbirth. Painful... I’m thankful that the Scripture doesn’t sugar coat the world for us. It hits us head on with the realities of sin and suffering and despair and death.

But Elimileck and Naomi don’t just help us acknowledge the reality that the the world isn’t as it should be. They also serve as a warning. When times got tough, they turned away from God and

his ways, and just like in judges, they did what was right in their own eyes, compromising themselves spiritually. They distanced themselves from the Holy Land, the Holy City Jerusalem, and the Temple, the presence of God.

Elimileck and Naomi reject the word of God. They seek to take the provision of God's promises as his people apart from the repentance and obedience that God requires. Now maybe they only intend to be there for a little while but they end up there for 10 years!

I know some of you have had plans that haven't worked out. Or that your life isn't what you thought it would be. Perhaps you expected to be married by now and you're not, and you're feeling especially lonely in this season. Perhaps you're frustrated about lack of success in your studies or career. I know that the temptation to compromise will come. As you wait for a believer to marry you're tempted to widen your pool and pursue a non-believer. Or you're tempted to turn away from God because you feel he hasn't come through for you. Or you doubt because of the hard circumstances you've experienced.

We'll see near the end of the chapter that Naomi is angry, she is bitter. She is angry with God. But still despite all of the suffering and death, maybe just out of sheer desperation, Naomi returns back to Israel.

2. A Faithful Return to Bethlehem (v. 6-22): The Hope of Turning toward God

In v. 6, Naomi hears that the Lord came through and provided food for Bethlehem, so she heads home, accompanied by her two widowed daughters in law—Ruth and Orpah. Naomi realizes that it's much more likely for them to remarry, rebuild their lives in Moab so she tries to persuade them to go back to their home. If they stay with her they will likely remain widowed, childless, poor, and vulnerable for the rest of their lives. Orpah agrees to go back to Moab, but v. 14 says that Ruth clung to her. **Read v. 16-17.** This is a shocking and beautiful pronouncement of faithfulness to Naomi and commitment of faith in Naomi's God—this is the language of conversion! And remember, Ruth commits to the Lord even while Naomi is blaming God for her situation.

So they return together to the Lord, to the Promised Land, and the Little Town of Bethlehem, which will become Ruth's new home. But when they arrive, the women in town see this poor, downtrodden woman and ask, "Can this be Naomi? (v. 19). Naomi means "pleasant" or "beautiful." But Naomi feels that her name is a mockery of her situation. So she answers back in **v. 20-21.**

What do you think of Naomi's theology here? You know, I appreciate it. In its blunt honesty, its boldness. There are some people who would hem and haw at this. Perhaps saying it wasn't God as ultimately responsible because the idea of God ordaining suffering like this is pretty uncomfortable. But I think Naomi is right that if God is sovereign like he says in his word—that "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted (Job 42, Prov. 16) or "I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things." (Isa 45:7)...then he must be ultimately responsible for Naomi's affliction. Directing her sincere frustration and disappointment at the Lord is actually right. But I do think she's missing one key point. She has

forgotten the story of Joseph who also went to a foreign country, was sold by his jealous brothers as a slave, framed and put in prison for years. He persevered in his faith and the Lord ultimately used all of those circumstances for Joseph's good and for Israel's good. It's the lesson: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20) Naomi understand God's sovereign power, but she needs to grasp his merciful purpose, too.

Now, we can't always see clearly how God is working good even through great suffering, and it's rarely helpful to speculate or use God's good purpose to minimize someone's hurt and grief.

But here in the book of Ruth, we have the hindsight to see how God is at work. See, Ruth is kind of like Esther (last year) where God is more behind the scenes and the characters point to his activity.

It was God who took away the famine and opened a way home. Not only that, Naomi needs to open her eyes to Ruth. What a gift! What a blessing! Yet as she and Ruth stand before the people of Bethlehem, Naomi says in verse 21, "The Lord has brought me back empty." Not so, Naomi! You are so weary with the darkness of adversity that you can't see the light of hope.

This Ruth is not only an example to us of faithfulness and devotion to the Lord, but she is a reminder of God's faithfulness, his *Hesed*, his steadfast love for his people—that though we like Israel fail over and over and over again, God is relentless in love and mercy for us. And what would Naomi say if she knew this Ruth would become the great grandmother of the greatest king of Israel? And what would she say if she knew that Ruth would find herself as a great great great great —grandmother, named in the lineage of Jesus of Nazareth, God's own Son, the King of the universe? See, Ruth is not only an example for us to follow but she points us to Jesus, whose love was so faithful that he endured the worst suffering on earth knowing the joy set before him to come. Jesus could have avoided the cross, he could have summoned a legion of angels to rescue him from that cross, but no he stayed. Like a faithful husband laying his life down for his bride, to win her back. So that as Gabriel read earlier, he gives us a new heart, and our salvation is not based on our own faithfulness but on his. We simply believe and receive and are transformed.

And all of that is made possible by Ruth's commitment to Naomi and to the Lord. What would Naomi say if she knew?

Well, as Paul says, Rom 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose[—that is, our salvation]." How do we know? How can we trust that he loves us and he's working all things for our good? "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

Brothers and sisters, we can stick with God in hard times. We can turn toward him, not away, looking to the cross, trusting that even in the worst of times, he is at work for good.

William Cowper: 18th century British Poet and Hymn writer. BLEAK MIDWINTER

William Cowper's life was marked by periods of intense depression. He was sent to St. Albans, a mental institution, for 18 months beginning in 1763, after a suicide attempt.

He knew what it was like to endure in dark times, through intense personal suffering.

Cowper wrote "God Moves in a Mysterious Way" in 1774. The phrase quickly entered popular parlance, but Cowper's reverent and thoughtful understanding was quickly lost. When he described God's ways as mysterious, Cowper was not shrugging his shoulders in resignation, but expressing a Christian confidence.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

Prayer

Benediction

Romans 8: 35, 37-39

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Go believing in Christ and in his assurance of his love, no matter what he brings your way this week.