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“Gently Leading Me”  
Ruth 2  
7.24.14  
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This is our second week with the Book of Ruth. To quickly recap chapter 1: after being married and secure with two adult sons (social security of the Ancient Near East), Naomi’s husband dies, and her two sons die. Now Naomi is vulnerable, as are her two daughters in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

Naomi is from Judah, Bethlehem to be exact, but she has been living in Moab, a foreign country. To survive, Naomi has to go home, to Judah. She tells her two daughters - in - law who are Moabites, who will be aliens in Judah, to go back to their mother’s houses and start their lives over. After weeping and anguish, Orpah goes back to her mother’s house. But then Ruth utters those famous words of love and loyalty, “where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people will be my people, and your God my God.” Ruth proclaims to Naomi that she is willing to put her life at risk for Naomi’s sake. Ruth becomes a Christ-like figure. That’s chapter one.

This week, in chapter two, the story's setting changes to Judah, to Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. In the first verse we are told that Naomi has kin in Judah, a rich man named Boaz, a relative on her late husband's side of the family. Boaz might be their only hope for survival.

Boaz is somewhere around Bethlehem. What the narrator has just told us is that Ruth and Naomi need to find Boaz, and then hope that Boaz will be kind and generous enough to care for them, to honor this familial bond. We know something Ruth doesn't know. She doesn't know anything about this Boaz guy. It seems possible, if not likely, that Naomi doesn't remember Boaz, she hasn't mentioned him.

Ruth tells Naomi that she is going to go to the fields to glean with the women, to try to find favor in the sight of someone who can care for them.

Of all the farm fields scattered around Bethlehem, Ruth just happens to start gleaning in a field belonging to Boaz. Quite a coincidence. When Boaz sees that there's a stranger gleaning in his field, a young, foreign woman, Boaz responds with patience and with kindness. He doesn't have to. He could easily respond with, "get outta here." Boaz asks who this young woman is, and he finds out that she has dedicated herself to taking care of her mother-in-law, and this inspires Boaz to respond with more kindness. Boaz tells Ruth, "I've heard how you have taken care of Naomi, may God reward your deeds." And Boaz provides for Ruth and Naomi through the end of the barley harvest.

When Naomi hears that Ruth has run into Boaz and that Boaz has shown kindness, she says, “Blessed be the Lord, whose kindness does not forsake the living or the dead.” This is quite the turn for Naomi, for in chapter 1 she says, “don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara for God has dealt bitterly with me.” “God has abandoned me,” Naomi says. But we can see that Ruth has not abandoned Naomi, and in chapter two we learn that because Ruth has shown kindness, Boaz is inspired to show kindness. We wonder then, “maybe God didn’t abandon Naomi, but maybe God moved through the sacrifice of Ruth. Maybe God was acting in the kindness of Boaz. Maybe God had a hand in organizing these strange coincidences.

The Book of Ruth is unique. It is not only a short story of two women (unique enough), it is also a story where God is not an explicit character. In the narratives in the Bible, God is a central character, and usually the main character. God speaks, God listens, God decides, God has feelings, and God acts. God has a persona. But not in the Book of Ruth. In the Book of Ruth, God is an assumed reality, in the background. God’s action in the story is not clearly revealed. The activity of God in this story is mysterious, one that the reader needs to sort out. This may remind us of real life.

Generally speaking, the picture of God’s activity in our lives looks like the Book of Ruth. God’s activity is not clearly named, not clearly revealed. We are left to sort it out. We have experiences like the Naomi of chapter 1, where we lament and cry out that God has abandoned us, that the whole

notion of a God who is active in our lives, is nonsense. And then we also have experiences, like the Naomi of chapter 2, where we look back and it sure seems like a power beyond us has been manipulating the puzzle pieces of our lives, just a little bit, for our benefit. It's hard to speak about this because we are afraid people will think we are crazy. And we are grateful, and we wonder, "am I crazy, or did God just do something, for me, in my life?"

This is very difficult territory for churches like ours, talking about God actively moving in our lives. Churches like ours tend to feel safest in a rational place. It is easy for us to rationalize out the miraculous, the spiritual, anything that doesn't make sense. It's is easiest for us to focus on the Christian ethic. And yet as we live this life of faith, the spiritual, the mysterious, the miraculous won't go away. I believe God is calling churches like ours to grow in spiritual depth, and I think that means finding the courage to speak about God's mysterious movement in our lives.

There's a song that I listened to a lot when I was in high school, that helped me name my experiences of God moving in my life, and it stayed with me as my faith was changing and I was growing into adulthood. The song is titled, "Gently Leading Me," and it was written by Christopher Grundy. Christopher has become one of the central songwriters within the UCC. Christopher went to Carleton and was active in this church in the 80's. He went to Union Theological Seminary in New York, and then he moved to

Larchwood IA to be the pastor of the church my family attended. And he came with a cassette tape of songs that he had written and recorded. I'd never met anyone with their own cassette tape with their face on the front of it. This was not what I was expecting from my pastor. I listened to that tape, a lot, and I listened to this song in particular. I'm guessing that Christopher wrote this song while in college or during the transition to seminary. (Play Song)

I hear that song with different ears than I did when I was 17, but I still find it helpful. I find it helpful that Christopher is talking about that dimension of life that is difficult to name, the mystery of God's interaction with our lives. And I believe that we reside between these two poles that he names, mere chance and one set plan. That's home for the book of Ruth. I don't believe that God wills the death of Ruth and Naomi's husbands, and it sure seems like more than chance is involved in the story of their survival.

What the song also stirs up in me is a feeling. At times in my life I have a feeling that there's more going on than just me and my decisions. I have a feeling that there's a presence I need to stay open to, there's a mystery I need to pay attention to. What I think God is doing is usually not exactly right, but as I look back at my life it feels like more has happened than I could do on my own.

Ultimately the song “Gently Leading Me” is a declaration of trust. When we can’t see what God is up to, if God is even around, we go on trusting that God is there. Over time, we will see what God has been up to, how God has carried us, the gifts God has provided that we couldn’t have done without. In today’s story, Naomi is able to see God activity again. May we be blessed like Naomi. Amen.