

Title: Ready, willing and able
Text: Ruth 4
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Naomi was a woman who lived in tumultuous times. Israel has no king and was in reality was a loose federation of twelve tribes who lived with the constant experience or threat of war. Naomi lived in Bethlehem with her husband Elimilek and sons, Mahlon and Kilion.

Famine struck Israel and desperate for food, Naomi and her family flee east across the Jordan valley to Moab, where they make a new life for themselves. But then tragedy strikes and Naomi's world is turned upside down. After ten years living in Moab, Naomi's husband and then her two sons die suddenly. Naomi is miles from home without her family and without hope.

In desperation she hears that the famine in Israel has ended, and so she makes plans to return. Naomi is not completely alone. Her two sons had married Moabite women who along with Naomi are now widows. She tells Orpah and Ruth of her plans to return to her homeland. They tell her they will go with her. Naomi urges them no to; that they should make a new life for themselves in Moab and forget her. Ruth refuses to do so – telling Naomi that where she goes she will go. And so the two women make the long trek back to Bethlehem.

Back in Bethlehem Ruth and Naomi's future is still precarious. Without immediate family to care for them, Ruth gleanes leftover grain in the field for food for her and Naomi. It is in the field that Ruth encounters Boaz, who happens to be a relative of Naomi. Boaz is a wealthy landowner and invites Ruth from the edges of the field to the centre where she can gather far more grain. When Naomi hears of Ruth's encounter with Boaz, a plan is hatched.

Late one night while Boaz is sleeping near a pile of harvested grain, Ruth uncovers his feet and lies down. Boaz wakes up and is stunned to find Ruth lying near him. In the dark, Boaz doesn't recognize her and asks, not unreasonably, 'Who the heck are you!' She says, 'I am your servant Ruth. Spread the corner of your garment over me because you are my kinsmen-redeemer.' Ruth was saying to Boaz – 'Here I am – marry me!' Ruth was proposing.

Boaz is an amazing man. Not many men are woken up in the middle of the night with beautiful and mysterious young woman lying at their feet proposing marriage. That only happens in a young man's dreams. But Boaz takes it all in his strides. He is clearly smitten with Ruth and ready to marry her. But there is a problem. What is a good story without a seemingly insurmountable story to be solved? The problem is this; under Jewish law there is another unnamed man who has the right to marry Ruth before Boaz. And so Boaz and Ruth trust their hope for marriage to God. As morning breaks Ruth returns home to Naomi, leaving Boaz as a man with a mission. Let's hear what happens next as Ruth chapter four is read to us:

PLAY RUTH FOUR VIDEO

Let me be clear about Ruth and Naomi's predicament. Three thousand years ago in ancient Israel it was a hand to mouth existence. There was no superannuation, pension system, senior's discounts or welfare payment to fall back on. Widows faced a very bleak future. Their only hope was that a male relative of their dead husband – a brother or cousin – would marry them and so take care of them. The relative with such a responsibility was called a goel – a kinsman-redeemer.

Under Jewish law, a goel had two responsibilities:

- Protect any property held by a widow in her dead husband's name. A goel would do this by purchasing the property to ensure it stayed in the family name.
- Marry the widow and through that marriage, hopefully father a male heir who can inherit the protected property.

A goel, a kinsmen-redeemer, had to pass certain tests under Jewish law to be a kinsmen-redeemer.

- They had to be a male relative (kinsmen) of the man who had died.
- They had to be willing. They had a choice whether they took up the role or not.
- They had to be able to do so. There was always a price to pay for redemption.

Boaz passed the test with flying colors. He was ready, willing and able. He just had to deal with the man who under Jewish law was ahead of him in the queue.

I love this part of the story. I mean, I really love it.

Boaz goes the gate of Bethlehem. In ancient Israelite cities there were very few public spaces and the gates was where people gathered to do business, meet people, have matters judges or seek the counsel of the Elders. Boaz spots the man who is his rival for Ruth's hand. He sits him down, making sure there are plenty of witnesses for what is about to unfold. And then he lays a trap.

I almost feel sorry for the other guy. It seems he doesn't know that his relative Naomi has returned from Moab. So Boaz tells him and that she has land that needs to be protected by a kinsmen-redeemer and that he is the first in line. Boaz tells him make up your mind now, because if you don't want to buy the land and care for Naomi, then I – Boaz – will.

You can almost see the dollar signs in the man's eyes. Naomi is an old woman – well beyond child-bearing age. He can redeem her land and protect Naomi without the added responsibility of fathering an heir to whom the land will eventually revert. This is the deal of the century. He's thinking he gets cheap land he can add to his estate in return for marrying an old woman who will probably die soon anyway.

So he says to Boaz – deal. I will redeem it!

Then Boaz delivers the sucker punch. He says, 'By the way, did I tell you that when you purchase her land and assume the responsibility for Naomi that you also assume the responsibility for her daughter in law Ruth?' Oh dear. This fine print changes everything. Ruth is of child-bearing age and as the daughter-in-law of Naomi it would be the responsibility of a Kinsmen-redeemer to marry her, hopefully father a son and so perpetuate the name of Naomi's husband and sons.

Here was the stark reality. As kinsman-redeemer the man would be expected to buy Naomi's land, marry Ruth, father a son and then see the land he has bought off Naomi be transferred to that son when he was of age. Rather than add to his wealth, acting as kinsmen-redeemer in this case was going to diminish it. So, as was his right, and as was financially responsible, he changes his mind. He tells Boaz he can't afford to act and offer his right of redemption to Boaz.

The deal is seized by Boaz and conformed not by swapping contracts, but by exchanging sandals with ten witnesses watching on. It sounds like a scene out of Monty Python. But here is the thing - Boaz and Ruth are engaged! It's a whirlwind romance. They are married, they make love and nine months later Ruth gives birth to a son and heir for Naomi, a boy called Obed. It is a happily ever after ending:

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! 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."
(Ruth 4:14-15)

Redemption is the overarching theme of the Book of Ruth. It is though the sacrificial and gracious actions of Boaz as kinsmen-redeemer that Ruth and Naomi discover a future when their situation seemed hopeless. If redemption is the thread that runs through the story of Ruth, what is it? What does it mean? What possible relevance could it have for us?

I want to give you a one-sentence definition of redemption. It is just a start, not the whole story. That would take longer than you have this morning. But here is a start:

Redemption is the reversal of fortune and renewal of hope.

Reversal of Fortune

Through their interaction with Boaz their kinsmen-redeemer, Ruth and Naomi experience a radical reversal of fortune. Ruth goes from excluded to become radically included. Naomi starts empty and ends up full.

Ruth may be Naomi's daughter in law, but she was also a Moabite woman. When she first meets Boaz in the fields she is acutely aware of her lowly, excluded status:

She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me —a foreigner?"
(Ruth 2:10)

Remember this is the time of the Judges. Foreigners were still being driven out of Israel. Moab was one of Israel's enemies. Foreigners were to be feared. The fact that Boaz spoke to Ruth — a foreigner and a woman — was stunning.

Not only does Boaz speak to Ruth, he speaks words of blessing and affirmation over her — and immediately her status changes. Ruth knows it. She responds to Boaz with this:

"You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants (lower than a servant)."
(Ruth 2:13)

Because of the kindness of Boaz, Ruth is no longer an excluded foreigner, but an included servant — albeit a lowly one.

But Boaz's kindness does not end with his words. He invites Ruth from the margins of his field to the centre where she can glean far more grain. Grace is being poured out.

And so later, when Ruth has her midnight encounter with Boaz when he wakes up with cold feet, this conversation unfolds:

"Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant (maidservant) Ruth," she said.
(Ruth 3:9)

Rather than a lowly servant, Ruth now claims the title of maidservant —a trusted servant. Through her interactions with Boaz the kinsman-redeemer, Ruth is experiencing a stunning reversal of fortunes. Her status has changed from being a mistrusted foreigner to that of trusted servant. But the journey hasn't finished.

Through his sacrificial love, Boaz makes possible what seemed impossible:

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son (mother).
(Ruth 4:13)

Ruth's reversal of fortune is complete. She arrived in Bethlehem a widow, now she is a wife again. She arrived without any children; now she is a mother. She arrived a foreigner and now through her marriage, now one of God's chosen people. Once she was excluded, now she is radically included.

Redemption is the reversal of fortune and the renewal of hope.

Naomi has a similar but different to story to Ruth.

Naomi arrived in Bethlehem empty, but redemption leaves her full.

Naomi (Empty to Full)

When Naomi is greeted by the people of Bethlehem who she hasn't seen for ten years she says this:

“Do not call me Naomi (‘pleasant’); call me Mara (‘bitter’) for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.
(Ruth 1:20-21)

Naomi is in all ways empty. Everything is absence. The absence of food and money; the awful absence of her husband and two sons; the soul destroying absence of hope. No wonder she was bitter.

But soon after Ruth meets Boaz we read this:

(Ruth) gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah (22 litres) of barley. And she took it up and went into the city. (Naomi) saw what she had gleaned.
(Ruth 2:17-18)

Naomi’s empty hands are being filled again. Later, after her midnight encounter with Boaz the kinsmen-redeemer, Boaz insists that Ruth return to Naomi with a gift.

These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, ‘You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.’
(Ruth 3:17)

We are not sure exactly how much six measures of barley was except that it was at least double what Ruth had gleaned the day before, and so heavy that Ruth could barely carry it home. Grace always gives more than we expect. Naomi’s empty hands are being filled to overflowing. But the best part of the story is to come.

Ruth marries Boaz. They make love. God gives them a child. And in one of those wonderful verses it would be easy to race past, the narrator paints a beautiful picture.

Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse.
(Ruth 4:16)

God wasn’t satisfied in filling Naomi’s empty hands with grain; he fills her arms and lap with the wonder of a child to nurse.

Naomi returned to Bethlehem emptied of her family; now God has given her a new family.

Naomi returned to Bethlehem full of bitterness; now she is full of joy.

She is no longer Mara – she is Naomi again!

Redemption is the reversal of fortunes.

Renewal of Hope

It is also the renewal of hope.

The child that Naomi nurses does not share her genetic code. Obed is the son of Ruth and Boaz.

But there is no mistake – Obed is Naomi’s grandson. When all seemed hopeless, through the kinsman-redeemer Boaz God has made a way! God is writing a new story for Naomi’s family. As Naomi nurses Obed she clinging to new found hope.

Redemption is the reversal of fortunes and the renewal of hope.

The pattern of redemption that Naomi and Ruth experienced is repeated again and again in the bible.

Here are my questions: Do you need a reversal of fortune this morning? Do you need your hope renewed today?

Has life left you feeling excluded or empty? Do you long to feel included and filled?

Do you sense a separation from God or an absence of God's presence in your life?

Have you made choices that have only led to heartbreak and pain and you long for a fresh start, but wonder if that's possible? Like Naomi, have the circumstances of life left you only with feelings of bitterness?

The bleak facts are this. Like Ruth and Naomi, we live in a world stained by sin, the consequences of which is pain and suffering. Like Naomi and Ruth, the pain you are experiencing may well be no direct fault of your own. That is small consolation. Naomi's bitterness may well have been born out of a sense, 'What have I done to deserve this?'

You might be crying out to God the same question.

Christ our Kinsmen-Redeemer

Here is the awful truth: We all have need for redemption – all of us!

And here is wonderful truth: There is a redeemer! His name is not Boaz; it is Jesus and he surpasses every test required of a kinsmen-redeemer.

To be our redeemer Jesus has to be our kinsman – related to us. Paul says this in Philippians:

(Jesus) made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
(Philippians 2:7)

Jesus clothed himself in human form, becoming one of us – experiencing our frailty and so became our brother. Jesus could not rescue us unless he was one of us.

To be our redeemer Jesus had to be willing. Paul goes on to say:

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:8)

Redemption always has a price. To redeem and so rescue Naomi and Ruth Boaz had to be willing to buy back Naomi's land. Jesus was willing to pay for our freedom. The price of our freedom was his death on the cross. The transaction was not paid for with money, but with his blood.

To be our redeemer Jesus had to be able. It was not enough to be willing; he had to be able to rescue us. The writer of Hebrews says this:

(Jesus) is able to save completely all those who come to God through him.
(Hebrews 7:25)

The price that Jesus paid for our freedom has been and will always be more than enough. The blood of Jesus will never fail us.

Jesus is our ready, willing and able redeemer!

Redemption is the reversal of fortunes and the renewal of hope. Paul says this:

You were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
(Ephesians 2:12-13)

We who were once separated from God's presence because of sin are now brought near through the blood of Christ our redeemer.

We who were without hope now have hope that will hold us fast for eternity.

There is one last twist in the tale. It is easy to miss. The Book of Ruth doesn't so much end with a bang as it fizzles out with a whimper – or so it seems. Of all things, the writer ends this beautiful, romantic, dramatic story with a genealogy. Where is the drama in a genealogy?

A genealogy is like the final credits in a film; necessary but boring. No-one pays any attention to the credits do they. In this case, if we do, we are richly rewarded.

These are the last verses of the Book of Ruth:

Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.
(Ruth 4:20-22)

The twist in the tale of Ruth is in the beginning, middle and end of these two verses.

At the beginning we have Nahshon, the grand-father of Boaz. Nahshon married an Amorite woman called Rahab, who also happened to be a prostitute. Rahab was the woman who hid the Jewish spies when they came to explore Jericho before they conquered it.

In the middle we have Boaz, who of course we know married the Moabite woman called Ruth, and together they had a son called Obed.

At the end we have David – Israel's greatest king, a man the bible describes as a man after God's own heart - whose father was Jesse, grandfather was Obed, great-grand-mother was a Moabite widow called Ruth and whose great-great-great grandmother was an Amorite whore called Rahab.

Through the redemptive work of God the great Redeemer the impossible is made possible. The royal line of Israel claims a Moabite widow and Amorite prostitute as central figures.

But it gets better. God promises that out of the line of David a righteous branch will sprout who will always do what is right and just. And so more than a thousand years later, in a little town called Bethlehem, the same Bethlehem that Ruth and Naomi came looking for hope, a child was born who would change our world and transform all those who receive his love.

Through the redemptive work of God the great redeemer the impossible is made possible. Jesus himself claims a Moabite widow and a Amorite prostitute as his forebears.

Let me get really specific. Today is Mother's Day. On Mother's Day we celebrate family. Families all have stories - stories of triumph and stories of tragedy. Every family has its share of dysfunction. And any person that tells you their family is different is lying. You may have come here today acutely aware of the disappointments, dysfunction and despair in your family. You may have come thinking there is no hope for me or for us.

But through the redemptive work of God the great redeemer the impossible is made possible. If God can turn around the story of Ruth and Naomi, what might he do with yours?

All that remains is a choice. We have finished with the story of Ruth and Naomi. Looking back, their story took a decisive turn from tragedy to triumph when Ruth boldly asked Boaz to be her kinsman-redeemer.

Our stories change the moment we come to Jesus our Redeemer and choose to receive the life-changing love he freely offers. Like Boaz did not force himself on Ruth, Jesus does not force his love on us. Like Boaz, he ready, willing and able to redeem us should we choose to receive his love.

One of my favourite films is Saving Private Ryan, which is set during the Second World War. It is the story of a costly rescue mission to save Private Ryan, whose three brothers have died in other battles around the world, leaving him the only surviving son of his parents. Tom Hanks plays Captain John Miller who leads a platoon of soldiers to find Ryan who is trapped behind enemy lines. They land at Omaha Beach on D-Day and fight one battle after another in a desperate search to find Private Ryan. Eventually they do. They tell him that his three brothers have died and the army wants him home to spare his mother any more grief. Ryan refuses to leave his buddies. The men sent to rescue him have no other choice but stay with him and together fight a battle against overwhelming odds.

Nearly all of the rescue party dies. Ryan lives. At the end of the film, the leader of the rescue mission, Captain John Miller is mortally wounded. He knows he will die. He calls Private Ryan over. He gasps into his ear. He grabs Ryan and pleads with him, 'Earn this!'

Earn this. Earn this sacrifice. Earn the cost of this suffering. Earn this by living a life of consequence. What a weight to bear, the weight of a dying man's plea.

Redemption is all about rescue. Redemption is all about saving men and women from the certainty of spiritual death. Our rescuer, our redeemer was ready, willing and able to pay the price for our rescue. He paid for it with his life. But here is the difference between the story of Saving Private Ryan and the story of the Cross.

When you look at the cross and see Jesus hanging there, what you do not hear, what you will never hear is "Earn this."

You never hear Jesus say, "Earn this."

He doesn't say, "I've given everything for you. Now you need to bust a gut for me....now you need to prove my sacrifice was worth it." He doesn't say that.

What he says is "I chose this." I volunteered for this. You don't have to pay anything for it.

And he simply leaves us with a choice. The choice is not whether we will earn God's love, but whether we will receive it.