

BETHLEHEM: THE PLACE OF PEACE**RUTH 2**

"Be afraid, be very afraid." That was a tagline from the 1986 horror flick "The Fly." But the trick is to be appropriately afraid of the right thing. What people commonly fear is not always what they should fear the most. Are you afraid to fly? You have a 0.00001 percent chance of dying in an airplane crash. On the other hand, the car insurance industry estimates that the average driver will be involved in three or four car crashes in their lifetime and the odds of dying in a car crash are one to two percent. Are you afraid of heights? It's the second most reported fear. Your chance of being injured by falling, jumping, or being pushed from a high place is 1 in 65,092. The chance of having your identity stolen is 1 in 200. Do you fear being killed by a bolt of lightning? The odds of that happening are 1 in 2.3 million. You're much more likely to be struck by a meteorite—those lifetime odds are about 1 in 700,000. How about dogs? Their bark really is worse than their bite: Your chance of suffering a dog bite is 1 in 137,694. On the other hand, your chance of being injured while mowing the lawn is 1 in 3,623. How about sharks? You're much more likely to be killed by your spouse (1 in 135,000) than a shark (1 in 300 million). I want us to think today about fear and about peace.

This Advent season we're reminded of great truths about Christmas by considering the Old Testament story of Ruth. What's the connection between Ruth's story and the birth of Jesus? Bethlehem. The actual, little town of Bethlehem. Some 1100-1200 years separated the two stories, but they happened in the same physical location. That's why I've entitled this message series, *Another Story About Bethlehem: Glimpses of Christmas in the Story of Ruth*. Last week, we were introduced to a Jewish woman named Naomi who left her home in Bethlehem with her husband and two sons because of famine. They moved to the country of Moab. After ten years in Moab, tragedy struck. Naomi's husband and two sons all died leaving her without a means of financial support or protection in a male-dominated world. Hearing that Bethlehem once again had ample crops she decided to return home. Her two daughters-in-law – both of them Moabite women – decided to go with her, but along the way she strongly encouraged them to go back to Moab. One eventually took Naomi's advice, but the other one refused. Her name – the one who stayed with Naomi - was Ruth. Somewhere along the way, Ruth had become a follower of the one, true God. She turned her back completely on her life in Moab and made it very clear to Naomi that she was going with her to Bethlehem and planned to stay with her forever.

Now, last week we reflected on how Bethlehem became a place of hope for Naomi and Ruth both literally and symbolically. Some 1200 years later it was the scene of great hope once again when Jesus was born there. Today, we want to focus on chapter two and reflect on how Bethlehem became a place of peace for Naomi and Ruth literally and symbolically. Additionally, it was once again the place of peace 1200 years after Ruth, because Jesus, who is called the Prince of Peace in Scripture, was born in Bethlehem. Let's think together, first of all, about the most obvious...

THE ENEMY OF PEACE

In a word, it's fear. Good, old fear will rob you of peace or prevent the experience of peace more quickly and effectively than just about any other factor. Not one of us has escaped feeling afraid, but – of course – the reasons for your fear may be different than my reasons to feel afraid. There's the fear of growing old and all that goes with it. One day, you and I will get old and die. Just think how much time, money, and energy people put into delaying the inevitable. There's the fear of some, nameless force overwhelming you. When you were a kid it was the imaginary creature hiding under your bed or in the closet. When you become an adult, it's the concern that you're at the mercy of forces beyond your control. There's the fear of losing an important relationship – a parent, a spouse, a child, a friend – through death or some other cause. There's the fear of what happened in your past – past failures, past sins, foolish choices, or missed opportunities that can fill you with this anxiety that you've somehow missed out on the best in life. Perhaps the greatest fear is just an unknown future. "What if" can become a relentless drumbeat in your heart and mind. Fear is the great enemy of peace.

I believe Ruth's fears loomed very large to her. It must have been a very anxious time for this young woman from Moab. She and Naomi needed basic provision and protection. In addition, Ruth needed acceptance, because she was a foreigner from Moab. Apparently they'd found lodging somewhere in Bethlehem, because that's never an issue in the story. But the most critical need was food. Unfortunately, there were no food pantries, food stamps, or government assistance in that day and time. Fortunately, she'd arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest which was followed immediately by the wheat harvest. Harvest time lasted a total of about two months.

Ruth must have known that God had given the Jewish people a law about something called gleaning. He said, "When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the LORD your God." (Lev 19:9-10 NLT) He also said, "When you are harvesting your crops and forget to bring in a bundle of grain from your field, don't go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all you do.... Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt. That is why I am giving you this command." (Dt 24:19, 22 NLT) Ruth decided to go out and glean. But would she be able to gather enough grain for her and Naomi? Maybe, but maybe not. After all, gleaning was kind of like what some people try to do today to survive – collect glass bottles or aluminum cans and turn them in for cash. A tough proposition, to say the least, if survival is the goal. Would she find a land owner who would even allow her to glean in his field? Maybe, but maybe not. Not every Israelite obeyed God's laws about gleaning. Fear. The enemy of peace.

The whole prospect of gleaning was worrisome. Gleaners were often abused and mistreated. Even if a landowner let you onto his field, the reapers – the paid workers – would often make gleaners the object of verbal and even physical abuse. Would Ruth get beat up or worse? Maybe. Ruth was not only a vulnerable woman, and very poor, but she was a foreigner. Would someone hold it against her that she was a Moabite? Maybe. She might invite additional abuse for just that reason alone. After all, there was

bad blood between Moabites and Israelites. On their way from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan, the king of Moab had refused Moses' request just to pass through his land. Then the king had hired this flaky, false prophet named Balaam to curse the Israelites, but God made that backfire on the Moabites. Of course, Ruth had nothing to do with any of that, but that doesn't matter sometimes. If you just feel the need to hate foreigners in general, it's easy to make the specific foreigner standing right in front of you the object of your hate. Could Ruth become an easy target for someone's prejudice? Quite possibly. Fear is a great enemy of peace.

Fear shows up in a lot in the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. When the angel appeared to Mary, he told her not to be afraid. When the angel then appeared to Joseph, he told him not to be afraid. Why? They were afraid! After presenting baby Jesus with their gifts, the wise men snuck out of town because they were afraid of King Herod. They had good reason to be! But maybe the most fearful experience was that of the shepherds of Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born. After the angles put on their shock and awe light show, what was the first thing they said to those shepherds? "Do not be afraid." (Lk 2:10 NLT) Why? The original Greek literally translated says those shepherds were "afraid with a great fear." Terrified. Panicked. We human beings are just so very prone to fear, to worry, to anxiety, and to imagining the worst. Fear is the great enemy of peace. That's true of your life and mine 2,000 years after the first Christmas. That was true at the first Christmas in Bethlehem. That was also true in Ruth's story some 1,200 years earlier. But God had an answer to Ruth's needs and fears. Let's think of it as...

THE EMBODIMENT OF PEACE

Enter Boaz. Here's what makes this whole story even more meaningful for me. I believe Boaz is a type or symbol of Jesus while Ruth is a type or a symbol of any follower of Jesus. Many Old Testament characters were a type of Jesus: Abraham, Moses, David, and, yes, Boaz, also. Their stories illustrated something about the life or character of Jesus. They point to Jesus in some significant, meaningful way. Boaz became the embodiment of peace in Ruth's story. Jesus became the embodiment of peace in our story and the story of the world itself. So, how does Boaz remind you and me of Jesus? And how is Ruth like you and me?

First, Boaz was a great man with great resources while Ruth was a nobody with no resources. Boaz is described here in terms that suggest he was probably a military hero of some kind. He was a very capable, wealthy man. He was a very powerful, influential person in Bethlehem. Ruth, on the other hand, was just about the polar opposite of Boaz. While Boaz was immensely rich, she was incredibly poor. While Boaz was an Israelite, she was a Moabite – a foreigner. While Boaz was a person of power and influence, Ruth had absolutely no power or influence whatsoever. Now, we can get so used to thinking of Jesus as humble and poor in His humanity – and He was – that we forget what and who He is in reality. He's the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He's the mighty Son of God Incarnate. He's the Alpha and the Omega. He's the Prince of Peace. And He has unlimited resources. And when we compare ourselves to Him, we are nothing and we have nothing. Just like Boaz could have ignored Ruth,

Jesus could have totally overlooked you and me. Is there a bigger contrast in the universe than Jesus and us? But thank God, the story doesn't end there! The gap between Boaz and Ruth made what Boaz did for her that much more wonderful. Likewise, the vast difference – the infinite gap - between Jesus and us makes what He's done for us that much more wonderful, glorious, and special.

Secondly, Boaz was in a position to save Ruth and she needed to be saved. Not spiritually, but physically, economically, and socially. He's called a "kinsman-redeemer" here. Naomi said to Ruth, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." (Ruth 2:20 NIV) An odd phrase, isn't it? Kinsman-redeemer. Other English translations refer to as a "family redeemer" (NLT), a "covenant redeemer" (MSG), or a "redeeming relative" (MEV). In Old Testament times, a kinsman-redeemer was a close relative to whom both law and custom gave certain duties toward the clan – the big extended family to which you belonged. A kinsman-redeemer could be your brother or a third cousin twice removed. He might be expected to buy back the property once owned by a cousin who was forced to sell it for economic reasons so that the extended family kept the land in the clan. He might be expected to buy back relatives who were forced to sell themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. He might be expected to avenge the murder of a relative by tracking down and killing the killer. He might be expected to marry his brother's widow so that the first born child could inherit his brother's name and property. A kinsman-redeemer was someone who bought members of his extended family out of slavery, or bought back the family farm, or helped out in some other very significant way. It turned out Boaz was related to Naomi through her deceased husband, Elimelech. And she and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, were most certainly in desperate need of being saved.

The reason Jesus was born in Bethlehem was to save us – to redeem us. Your sin and mine created a spiritual debt that we owe an absolutely holy, righteous, good God. Sure, we can pay our own debt. How? By accepting spiritual and literal damnation and separation from God forever. The Bible says, "For the wages of sin is death...." But God Himself offers a far better option. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 6:23 NLT) Even though we were slaves to sin, He sent His son to pay the penalty for our sins through His Son's death on the cross. The Bible says, "He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom (redeemed us) with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins." (Eph 1:7 NLT) Redemption is a financial word. It means to buy someone out of slavery and set him or her free. Jesus has become our kinsman-redeemer. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. We were in just as desperate a condition spiritually as Ruth was literally. She needed help in the worst way and Boaz gave it. We need help in the worst way spiritually and only Jesus can provide it. He did just that at the cross and in the empty tomb. We can now have peace with God because the Prince of Peace came to us in Bethlehem – the place of peace. Jesus is the embodiment of peace.

There's a third way Boaz blessed Ruth that reminds me of Jesus. Through Boaz, her kinsman-redeemer, Ruth's needs for provision, protection, and acceptance were met. Chapter two told the story. Ruth came out to glean. She just "happened" to glean in a

field belonging to Boaz. But we know it was no accident. She was led there by the Holy Spirit even though she was completely unaware of it at the time. Boaz just “happened” to drop by his field that day to see how the harvest is coming along. He took notice of Ruth and asked his supervisor about her. He described Ruth as a diligent worker who had gleaned all morning long behind the reapers, and was now seeking permission to glean between the actual harvested sheaves of grain. That was unusual because most gleaners were only allowed to pick up fallen stalks of grain along the edges of the field and not between the sheaves which would result in a whole lot more grain potentially. Ruth was an interesting mixture of boldness and humility. She must have subscribed to that school of thought that says, “Go ahead and ask! All they can say is ‘No!’”

Boaz turned out to be a man of incredible generosity and grace. Let me summarize what happens there in chapter two. He basically told Ruth, “Look, don’t even think of gleaning anywhere else! I’ll make it worth your while to glean only in my field. Yes, I will certainly give you full access to any grain that’s fallen between the sheaves. I’ll make sure that none of my employees abuses or mistreats you in any way. In fact, I’ll make sure they deliberately drop some grain on the ground for you to find and pick up. Oh, by the way, when you get thirsty, help yourself to the water I’ve supplied my employees. Are you hungry? Come and join us for lunch. Here’s some bread. Here’s some wine vinegar to dip your bread into. Here’s some roasted barley to enjoy as well. Sure, you can keep any leftovers. You may be from Moab, but I see the one, true God in your life, your actions, and how you’ve treated your mother-in-law, Naomi. May God bless you and reward you fully for all your kindness to her!”

Boaz more than met Ruth’s needs for provision, protection, and acceptance. Ruth collected in just one day’s gleaning enough grain to feed her and Naomi for many, many days. Can you imagine the look on Naomi’s face when Ruth walked in with about 6 gallons of threshed grain? This meant life! This meant they were going to survive! And how did Ruth respond to Boaz’s generosity and grace? She was filled with gratitude. She was humble. She was so overwhelmed that she fell to her knees and then onto her face before Boaz. He had become her peace in bodily form – the one who met her needs. The one who answered all her fears. Boaz was her embodiment of peace.

Do you see Jesus in Boaz? Jesus is the ultimate standard of generosity and grace. It would have been enough for God simply to provide salvation to us through Jesus. Just to save us from Hell and eternal damnation. But, no, God has done far more than that. He invites you and me to become His children – to become part of His forever family – and call Him Father. He provides forgiveness of all of our sins past, present, and future if we will confess them to Him. He invites us into His mission of bringing other spiritually lost men, women, boys, and girls into His eternal Kingdom. He provides us an eternal home when we die. He promises us a new body one day where we will live with Him in a new Heaven and a new Earth.

Here’s how the Bible puts it. “So we praise God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has

showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.” (Ep 1:6-8 NLT) Jesus meets every need in our lives. Jesus meets the need for spiritual provision, protection, and acceptance just like Boaz did for Ruth literally. Jesus is truly the embodiment of peace and that’s why He’s called the Prince of Peace. He banishes fear. We don’t ever have to be afraid again because God is now with us.

And do you see yourself in Ruth? When it comes to Jesus and understanding His incredible generosity and grace, are you grateful beyond words? Do you sort of just go through life constantly dumbfounded and humbled by the magnitude of what Jesus has done for you, is still doing for you, and will do for you in the future? Like Ruth, are you so overwhelmed by God’s generous grace that you just find yourself slipping down to your knees and ending up on your face before God lost in wonder, love, and praise? You should. I should. May this Christmas – and every Christmas – be an opportunity to be grateful beyond words, to be truly humbled, and to worship fully the embodiment of peace – Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Most kingdoms do anything they can to protect their king. This is the unspoken premise of the game of chess, for example. When the king falls, the kingdom is lost. Therefore, the king must be protected at all costs. Another notable example comes from the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill desperately wanted to watch the invasion from the bridge of a battleship in the English Channel. U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower was desperate to stop him, for fear that the Prime Minister might be killed in battle. When it became apparent that Churchill wouldn’t be dissuaded from this dangerous plan, Eisenhower appealed to a higher authority: King George VI. The king went and told Churchill that if it was the Prime Minister’s duty to witness the invasion, he could only conclude that it was also his own duty as king to join him on the battleship. At that point Churchill reluctantly agreed to back down, for he knew that he could never expose the King of England to such mortal danger.

King Jesus did exactly the opposite, didn’t He? With royal courage he surrendered His body to be crucified. On the cross he offered up His own life for the life of His people. He died for all the wrong things we have ever done and will do, completely paying for and redeeming us from all our sins. Are you grateful for Jesus’ generosity? Are you humbled by Jesus’ grace? Will you join me in continuing to worship Jesus, the embodiment of peace - the Prince of Peace, as we gather at His table?