

BETHLEHEM: THE PLACE TO REJOICE**RUTH 4:13-22, LUKE 2:1-20**

Did you know studies have been done to determine what time of day people are happiest? Crazy, but true! A study of Twitter users found an interesting pattern: humans tend to be happy at breakfast time, not so happy at midday, and then happy again near bedtime. The study, which analyzed 509 million tweets from 2.4 million Twitter users in 84 countries, found that moods fluctuate in a predictable pattern. The study's authors used a text-analysis program that scanned the tweets for words that had positive and negative effects. On most days, positive tweets peak between 6 A.M. and 9 A.M., then hit bottom between 3 P.M. and 4 P.M. Then, positive tweets peak again after dinner. Hmm. Do you think true joy should depend on what time of day it is? Or even what day it is? Regardless, Christmas Day is definitely a day to rejoice.

When Jesus was born in the little town of Bethlehem, it was most certainly a moment of great rejoicing. The Savior of the world was born! Mary and Joseph were His parents. But Bethlehem was also the place to rejoice some 1100 years earlier. Ironically, the reason for rejoicing was similar – the birth of a very special baby. But this baby's name was Obed and his parents were Ruth and Boaz. This Advent and Christmas season we've been looking at the Old Testament story of Ruth. It took place in the very same place where Jesus was born – the town of Bethlehem. That's why the title of the message series has been called *Another Story About Bethlehem: Glimpses of Christmas in the Story of Ruth*. About 1100 years separated Ruth from Jesus, but there are some interesting parallels between the two stories. Last week, we considered how Bethlehem became this place of great joy for Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Likewise, the birth of Jesus 1100 years later in Bethlehem was no less joyful.

Now, last week we said that joy is simply great delight caused by something good God has done for you. It's a deep emotion or a powerful feeling. Bethlehem was a place of joy, to be sure. But it also became a place to rejoice as well. While joy is a deep emotion, rejoicing is the expression of that joy. It's expressing gratitude, thanksgiving, and praise to God for whatever good thing He has done and the joy that goes with it. These two stories about Bethlehem provide three great reasons to rejoice. First...

LET'S REJOICE IN A MIRACULOUS BIRTH.

Let's look at the final verses of Ruth's story. So, it says right there that the Lord enabled Ruth to conceive. We're given the distinct impression that there was something miraculous about Obed's birth. God's direct intervention in Ruth's physical body allowed her to get pregnant. It reminds me of other stories in the Bible where God helped someone become pregnant miraculously. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was too old to have children, but God allowed her to give birth to Isaac. Hannah was infertile, but God allowed her to give birth to the prophet, Samuel. Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, was also too old to have children, but God allowed her to give birth to John the Baptist. In every case, the child that was born had a special destiny and purpose given to him by God. Obed not only continued the family line of Naomi which was going to die out, he also became the father of Israel's greatest king, King David, and an ancestor of Jesus.

Notice who got credit for Ruth's pregnancy. Naomi's friends said, "Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family!" (Ruth 4:14 NLT) Obed wasn't merely the product of a husband and a wife coming together sexually. God intervened. God did the miraculous. Bethlehem became a place to rejoice!

The same was true 1100 years later and for the same reason. God intervened in and through a miraculous birth. Now, to be sure, Mary's miracle was different than Ruth's miracle. In the case of Ruth, God corrected a problem in either Ruth or Boaz's body that allowed her to become pregnant the normal way. In the case of Mary, God did something He had never done before. The angel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God." (Lk 1:35 NLT) Christians call this the Incarnation. God made sure that the person who was conceived inside Mary's womb was both fully human and fully God all at the same time. And did this child, like Obed, have a special destiny and purpose given to Him by God? Did He ever! The angel said to Mary, "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High.... His Kingdom will never end!" (Lk 1:32-33 NLT) The angel said to Joseph, "...You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:21 NLT)

A miraculous birth! That's why the angels rejoiced! "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem!" (Lk 2:10-11 NLT) That's why the shepherds rejoiced! "The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." (Lk 2:20 NLT) That's why the wise men rejoiced! "When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him." (Mt 2:10-11 NLT) That's why you and I should rejoice this Christmas Day! Bethlehem was, once again, the place to rejoice! Here's a second reason to rejoice.

LET'S REJOICE IN A REDEEMER.

The story of Ruth introduced us to a unique kind of person in the Old Testament: the kinsman-redeemer. In ancient Israel, a kinsman redeemer was someone who saved you from something terrible - a male relative who stepped in to save a member of his clan or his extended family. He might buy back property from a cousin who was forced to sell it so that the land stayed in the clan. He might buy back a relative who had to sell himself into slavery to pay off his debts and set him free. He might be expected to marry a relative's widow so that the first born could inherit that relative's name and property. That's what happened in Ruth's story. Boaz was related to her mother-in-law, Naomi. He became a kinsman-redeemer for both Ruth and Naomi by marrying Ruth. He saved them from a life of chronic poverty. He gave them lifelong provision and protection. Boaz and Ruth's first born son, Obed, became Naomi's heir so that her family line continued which was a matter of great importance in those days. Obed himself became a kinsman-redeemer for Naomi. We read earlier today, "Praise the LORD, who has now provided a redeemer for your family!" (Ruth 4:14 NLT) Though just a newborn infant at the time, Obed was proclaimed as a redeemer.

Likewise, even before Jesus was born, He was proclaimed as the ultimate redeemer. Again, what did the angel say to Joseph? "...You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt 1:21 NLT) As the ultimate redeemer, Jesus has saved us from the worst fate possible: life now and then eternity without a personal relationship with His Father, the God of the Universe. Let's remember again this Christmas Day what Jesus has done for us. Why was He born as a baby in Bethlehem? He was born to die. He took the penalty for your sin and mine upon Himself at the cross. Then, His Father raised Him from the dead which completed His act of redemption for you and me. Now we can have an eternal relationship with the God of the Universe. Now our sins can be forgiven. Now our lives can have real purpose and meaning. Now death can become a doorway into God's eternal presence rather than the end of everything. How are we supposed to respond? Rejoice! The Bible says, "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 (redeemed) with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding." (Eph 1:6-8 NLT) So, rejoice! There's yet a third reason to rejoice this Christmas Day!

LET'S REJOICE IN A GREAT AND GOOD GOD.

The story of Ruth demonstrated a truth found throughout the Bible: God is always great in what He does. It didn't seem like it at first – at least to Naomi. Her husband and two sons had died. She faced the loss of everything. She felt like God had abandoned her. But as you read the story, you see how God worked through ordinary people like Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz to do extraordinary things. We get a lesson in that word "providence." What is providence? You could define it simply as God's loving care, protection, and guidance for His people in advance. Like I said before, a good theme song for the story of Ruth might well be "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." 1100 years later, we saw God's providence once again in the story of Jesus' birth. God worked in and through ordinary people – Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, for example – to do what was completely extraordinary. The birth of Jesus reaffirmed for all time that God is always great in what He does. And so we rejoice this Christmas Day. If God had Ruth and Naomi's world in His hands and if He had Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus' world in His hands, then He has your world and my world in His hands as well.

The story of Ruth demonstrated another truth found throughout the Bible: God is always good in what He does. Again, it didn't seem like it at first. God allowed tragedy and heartache to come into Naomi and Ruth's lives. But, God did answer prayer. He came to their rescue. He delivered and saved them. Then He blessed them in ways that they would only fully understand once they got to Heaven. They became ancestors of David, Israel's greatest king. But that was nothing compared to the greatest honor of all. They become ancestors of the King of kings and the Lord of lords, Jesus Himself - part of His human family tree for all eternity. No wonder Bethlehem became a place to rejoice!

1100 years later Bethlehem became the place to rejoice, because it was there God demonstrated His goodness yet again by sending His Son, Jesus, into this world. That

was the angel's message to the shepherd on that first Christmas night. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem!" (Lk 2:10 NLT) By sending Jesus, God demonstrated His incredible goodness – that love is at the core of His heart and that He is gracious and merciful beyond comprehension. "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Lk 2:14 NLT) Everyone who puts his or her trust in Jesus becomes a grace receiver and a peace possessor. How can we respond? Rejoice! In the words of Scripture, "What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:31-32 NLT)

Don Castle was waiting in a clinic for his doctor's appointment when an older couple arrived. "Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" the man said to the room full of people. His enthusiasm was infectious. Most of the other patients ignored the greeting, however. After all, it was June! Don decided to return his greeting, "Merry Christmas to you, too!" Sensing a sympathetic ear, the wife of the well-wisher explained quietly: "It started this past year. For no reason, my husband would just get into the Christmas spirit when it wasn't the Christmas season. At first I dismissed it, but then I realized how much joy it brought him. So we started decorating the house, singing carols, and having spur-of-the-moment celebrations. You know, after doing this a number of times, we look forward to it now. Christmas can come any time, any place. It's always a pleasant surprise."

Maybe that slightly confused, older man was on to something important. Christmas – the truth and impact of it - ought to be enjoyed throughout the year. All the more reason, then, that we should rejoice today - Christmas Day! Let's rejoice in a miraculous birth! Let's rejoice in our redeemer! And let's rejoice in a great and a good God! Merry Christmas!