

“Redemption Center.” – November 12, 2017
by Wayne J. Schneider – Soli Deo Gloria

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Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

One of the characters in Kent Haruf’s novel “Plainsong,” is Victoria, a seventeen-year-old girl who is four months pregnant. When her boyfriend finds out about her condition, he breaks up with her. And, when her mother finds out, she kicks her out of the house saying to her, *“You got yourself into this mess, and you can get yourself out of it.”* It’s the low point in the story, and your heart aches for young Victoria. She has been abandoned by the very people that should be surrounding her with their support.

That’s where the McPherson brothers enter, stage right. The author describes them as a pair of “crotchety” old cattle-farming bachelors, who know more about cows than they do teenage girls. When they are asked to take her into their care, they have to think about it. I mean, who wouldn’t, right? The author says, *“They looked at her, regarding her as if she might be an alien and dangerous. Then they peered into the palms of their thick callused hands spread out before them on the kitchen table and finally they looked out the window toward the leafless and stunted elm trees.”* Then, before you know it, you see them rushing around shopping for cribs, stocking up on diapers and baby clothes, basically winning the love of this hapless young girl, and watching over her with a tender – although clumsy – tenacity, covering her with their protection, resolved that no harm come to her, taking her under their wing, so to speak.

Victoria reminds me of Ruth, who may not have been much more than seventeen herself. Here she was a widow, living as a stranger in the land, taking care of her mother-in-law Naomi, who is also widowed and bitter about it. Bitter about that and the fact that her now deceased husband had sold off the family’s land, had taken them into a foreign country, and then died on her, leaving her without anything. And not only that, but both her sons had died as well. And when

she decided to come back home to Bethlehem, all she could say was, *“I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty”* (Ruth 1:21).

Our Old Testament lesson is interesting in that in a crowded narrative, the Holy Scriptures takes a time out to highlight some small details in the lives of a woman and her daughter-in-law. Note what is *not* uncovered in this story: No miracles, no floods, no humongous insects, and no large bodies of water to cross. Not even a giant fish swallowing prophets.

It appears odd to me because I wonder why something that could easily be handled in a small list of ‘begats,’ is played out in a quartet of small chapters, which are placed in the middle of the Law, the History, the Wisdom, and the Prophecy of God’s people. In a sense, God does not act in the Book of Ruth and no prophecy is stated. That does not mean there is not a word for us to hear here!

God’s word does come to us through the actions and language of Ruth the Moabite. In her we see a stunning model of faithfulness. Her story becomes so necessary it is included with all the other signs and wonders of the Holy Scriptures. In this chronicle, a life lived following God’s way has influence on how other people face, and care, for one another in own lives.

Ruth’s story is how people follow the way of God. If so, it is also a story about the way of God. To grasp this, we need to examine an intimate moment that many rush by, perhaps because it is a bit indelicate for us to read in worship.

In our lesson today, we discover how Ruth is directed to go to Boaz in the middle of the night. What we tend to skip over is an encounter where we listen in to a word of life that gives us hope in the middle of the hopelessness of our time. So much giggling can occur when Boaz and Ruth have this meeting, when she *“uncovers his feet and then lays on them.”*

This means they are having coitus, right? Not necessarily. I think there is intimacy there, but to diminish it to the sex act, misses the point of what is

happening in this midnight scene. Whether they, as the youth say, “did it” is not the point. When Boaz awakens and sees Ruth by his side, she demands that he “*spread his cloak over his servant, for he is next of kin.*” (Ruth 3:9).

What we must note here is that the Hebrew word used for “next-of-kin” is ‘go-el.’ Go-el means a lot more than next-of-kin. We know this because of where the word is found in other places in the Bible. One use is in the Book of Job where Job clearly states to his ‘so-called’ friends, “*I know that my Go-el lives! We remember it as “I know that my Redeemer lives!*”

In regard to the Book of Job, it is both a declaration of faith and perhaps an accusation against God; asking God to be the One who restores life, to be the God who is the hope giver in the middle of life’s ashes, the very one who brings justice not judgment.

Those who redeem have a responsibility to be protectors of life and limb. Redeemers by the Law are the next of kin who guard and defend the vulnerable. So, when Ruth asks Boaz to cover her with his cape, she is reminding him of his duty because she and Naomi have lost everything, and have returned as ‘gleaners’ who live on the leftovers of the harvest to survive. Boaz must accept the request, or find another relative, or knowingly reject this woman and her mother-in-law in their time of need.

This is a key peg in the overall narrative of the history of God’s people. It is another archetype of how we should live as “Followers of God.” It declares redemption as the way of God. It becomes the Way of Jesus Christ, when he becomes a human being and walks the way of the cross, for the redemption of the whole of creation.

It is so revealing that the Holy Scriptures places Ruth’s story in the middle of the lineage of Jesus. Jesus always chose the way of deliverance, of rescue, the path of forgiveness. He will never turn from us, even though we may twist from him. Jesus will always enwrap us with his robe of safety and lead us through life.

In the Book of Ruth we find her example of unwavering faithfulness, even when she could have been blamed for abandoning her mother in law. Being “Followers of the Way” means we are “Followers of God.” Looking at Ruth and Jesus, we find the way to redemption. Alleluia. Amen.