

Today is Transfiguration Sunday- the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, and we're approaching it in a way never before attempted (as far as I know), through the storyline of the Book of Ruth.

The traditional story of the transfiguration is of Jesus on a mountaintop, bedazzled in a heavenly glow, witnessed by Peter, James and John. The disciples misunderstand what the experience is all about. They think it signals a triumphal moment for Jesus and maybe even the end of his journey. He tells them that what it really means for him is a new beginning, and that will he go down the mountain to live among and serve those down below, the average person in the street seeking a fair day's wage, bread on the table and mercy, justice and peace.

In a sense then, you could think of the setting of Ruth as taking place way down the mountain, where we live our day-to-day lives and encounter God's redeeming love, often through everyday yet still surprising and transforming ways. When you look at the book of Ruth like this, we're given a new way to think about Transfiguration- rather than arriving 'top-down' as a divine bestowal, we can think of it more as about our ongoing, day to day relationships being changed in a patchwork sharing of mutual gifts and abilities, all inspired by God's love.

There is a lot that happens in this final chapter of Ruth, and much to process. Perhaps we can take a lesson from last Sunday-evening's Oscar presentations and a technique that some pastors use to frame a passage with as much movement as this one. That is, we can revisit this portion of scripture as a movie script and begin to frame the passage, scene by scene, using a movie maker's mind to capture the final message of this story.

This is often a fitting approach because a filmmaker is much like a Biblical writer; the story has already been written; the author is not just making it up as he or she goes along (and the Book of Ruth is more than likely the composition of a number of women authors), and the central point is reinforced over and over again, in varied and nuanced ways.

Ruth is a story of redemption, hope and promise made real in unbearably trying times, for more people than the central character alone. In fact, after reading Ruth, you may well be left wondering who the centerpiece of the story really is; and it might not be who you think.

In a good story as in a good film everything has its time and place and moves to a fitting and meaningful end. So it is with the book of Ruth and nowhere more so than in its final chapter. A filmmaker's eye would discern just three scenes in this final chapter. The first revolves around the backdrop of the gate of Bethlehem. The second scene, much shorter, includes Boaz, Ruth, and their wedding night. The third and final scene revolves around now Grandmother Naomi, with bouncing baby Obed on her lap, surrounded by the women of the town of Bethlehem. (Then the credits roll, with the lineage of King David, going back a perfect ten generations from Judah through Obed and Jesse.)

[The 'bare bones' of Ruth, the skeleton of the story with names as the guide to the tale is on our bulletin cover for the day. It may be the way the story was first shared from memory among the people of Bethlehem, so many centuries ago.]

### ***The Story of Ruth***

*"Once many years ago, famine drove My-God-is-King and Pleasant-One from House-of-Bread in the land of Judah/Confessor to the land of Moab/From-Father.*

*There My-God-is-King died. His two sons Disease and Destruction married local women, but after a while the sons also died, leaving only Pleasant-One and her two daughter-in-laws.*

*When they heard that there was bread in the House-of-Bread, they set out to return. On the way, Pleasant-One released her two daughters-in-law and sent them back to their mother's houses to begin new lives and find rest with new husbands.*

*Back-of-neck tearfully turned and left, but Friendly/Dewy stayed with her mother-in-law, now no longer Pleasant-One but Bitter- Woman, for God had killed her men.*

*In House-of-Bread they encountered their redeemer He-who-has-Strength-Within. First, God, then Pleasant-One, then Dewy/Friendly, and then He-who-has-Strength-Within planned to bring them all together.*

*Finally He-who-has-Strength-Within married Dewy/Friendly and from this union came He-who-Serves, the grandfather of Beloved."*

*(adapted from Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, p.254)*

The opening scene appears far less pastoral than previous chapters, but the story line moves us toward a happier ending than what by all rights could be expected.

We see Boaz, a benevolent man, in an animated conversation with an unnamed kinsman about property once owned by Elimelech. They talk about this property; who it rightly belongs to and what will happen to it now.

Interestingly, the relative of Naomi is not given a name (in Hebrew it is translated as "Ploni Almoni", a sing-song name akin to 'John Doe.')

that serves both as an entry point of the town and a gathering place, something like a town square in a New England village.

As they meet, they are not alone; ten men join to constitute a 'minyan' – the necessary number of men to make a binding decision. They talk about land, inheritance and the sad situation of Naomi's family, how it was that her husband and then two sons died, leaving her with no means of a livelihood. [To be honest here, I have not been able to fully unravel the complexities of 9<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. real estate practices; how it was that Naomi may have held deed to her husband's land, but not the right to farm it, and why it was that "John Doe" was perhaps able, but not willing to acquire the land.]

Many commentators suggest that this unnamed kinsman, this "John Doe" is a latter, male version of Orpah; a character in a small role who turns away an opportunity to join with Ruth and Naomi, signaling that these two are once again left on their own in their life's journey.

As a film maker, I might choose to not show 'John Doe's' face in this scene; perhaps all you would see of him is a hooded cloak over his head, shadowed by his own privacy and unwillingness.

Then, in an odd moment and a 'zoom' camera lens shot, "John Doe" ceremoniously hands over one of his sandals to Boaz, symbolically acknowledging his bestowal not only of Elimelech's fields, but the remnants of his family, too. This, of course (and oddly enough) includes Ruth.

Boaz straightens his back to make an announcement, combining the real estate deal with news of an upcoming wedding. There Boaz stands among the small crowd, with Naomi and Ruth within earshot, at the edge of the plaza. What is the look on their faces as they hear this? Surprise, relief, gratitude, wonder, fear?

My best guess is that they both are relieved, thankful and ready for a new life ahead. Given that all the witnesses are still at the city gate, now reciting the names of Rachel and Leah, the foremothers of the house of Israel, Ruth now knows that she will be in esteemed company.

Only now does the scene change, from the gathering at the city gate to a small private dwelling, not far away. The engagement has taken place, just like that. Boaz and Ruth enter the home, hand in hand, and the camera pans up to the sky; a soundtrack of romantic violin strings in the background.

Our final scene flashes ahead in time, nine months later, with a bouncing baby boy sitting on his grandmother's lap, surrounded by the women of the village.

They are so delighted for Naomi, that after losing a husband and two sons there finally is an heir. They are so overwhelmed with joy that they provide a name for him... Obed (short for Obediah?) "servant of the Lord."

It's a happy enough scene, for sure, but where is Ruth? Maybe that's a question that only we, so many centuries later, care to ask. There is no need to worry, she's enjoying a moment of rest and all will be well. As a film maker, I think I'd have the camera back away from a close up with Naomi and baby Obed, surrounded by the village women, panning over to Ruth sitting contentedly nearby, happily chatting with some others. What do you think?



In the end, this is truly a happily-ever-after story, against all odds. That's why it's one of the most beloved of stories; for who doesn't like happily ever after?

But as the credits roll with the family tree listing the ancestry of King David, with a foreign-Moabite Grandmother (Ruth!) and you put down your popcorn and get up from your seat, only then do you begin to recall all that these two women have endured.

Sometimes life is like that. Only afterwards do you have a moment to reflect on what it was that carried you through the difficult times.

What we thought could only happen on the mountaintop somehow took place down below. In its own way, step by step, the story of Ruth is a Transfiguration story.

It is a hard story, even tragic; the hardships experienced by Naomi and Ruth surely took their toll. But as they stuck together, God's love somehow stuck to them. Ruth's faithfulness was met

in kind, working its way through despair to promise, from exclusion to welcome, redefining the content and character of their love and extending out to others as unforgettable examples.

One thing is often forgotten in the ending of this 'feel-good' story, and it is this.

Ruth was a Moabite, or-better said- a Moabitess. They and the Hebrews were mortal enemies. Not too many years before this story takes place, they had been at war with another, as recounted in the Book of Judges. The wars had ceased apparently, but it was said in Judges that the Moabites were to be cursed 'unto the tenth generation thereafter.' At Ruth's time then, they were barely into the fourth generation following. The question is then, what happened to change this situation from curse to blessing?

The answer must simply be rooted in love. First it was a son of Elimelech who loved Ruth, then it was Naomi, and finally, Boaz. Now, I am fully aware of the 'modernity' of the concept of romantic love, but the 'everyday' nature of love is undeniably real. More than mere acceptance or tolerance, Ruth has become part of the fabric of the story of faith; a two-way street of welcome and caring.

Through her arrival in Bethlehem, the 'House of Bread', and becoming fully part of the story of God's family, Ruth's story continues to inspire us to share the welcome God gives us in the gift God gives us made even more real in Christ.

May we together in this approaching season of Lent, live into the love, reconciliation, and welcome that Ruth reveals to us. Amen.