

**When Everything Changes:
Finding God in Life's Transitions**
The Long View
May 8/9, 2010

It's probably one of the lesser known books of the Old Testament but, as we'll see throughout this series, the Book of Ruth is also one of the most significant.

Good morning everyone.

As Ladell said, today we're beginning a new series and we're going to take the next three weeks – using the Book of Ruth as our guide – to talk about change and transition and how God might just show up in the middle of it in ways we can't see or don't expect.

When I first decided to do this series, I was pretty confident that it would be *applicable* but I didn't realize how *personal* it would turn out to be.

I knew it would be “applicable” because a lot of us are dealing with change right now:

- It's the end of the school year and we're watching our kids graduate (or we're the one graduating).
- It's almost summer time, and the routine is about to change for many of us.
- More people move in summer than in any other time of the year; more people get married in summer than in any other time of the year – and some of us will be moving and/or getting married.
- It's been a tough economy for many months now, and a lot of us have experienced or will be experiencing a change in our employment status or in our income.

In fact, if you're on our email list or our mailing list here at NHCC, a couple of days ago, you got a note from me (this is the reason why I say this series is “personal”) – you got a note from me in which I addressed some of the changes we're making in our staff. Because of the effect of the economy on our income, we're having to downsize. And this is new territory for us because, in the 15+ years of our existence, I can never remember doing this. We've always added staff or staff members have moved on, but we've never had to make the decision to let people go and not to replace people who are leaving because of finances.

It was a hard call to make, as you could probably tell from the letter, for everyone involved in the decision. And it's going to be hard to live out for everyone affected by it.

But that's how change always is – it's hard to live out. Even if it's a change you desire – something you intentionally choose – change is hard to live out. But it's even more so if it's something you do *not* desire, or something that is forced upon you. For instance:

- Last Thursday morning, I got an email from a guy in this congregation whose Mom passed away on Wednesday. I'll be doing her funeral this afternoon. Life is going to change for that family in a dramatic way and it's going to be painful. It's going to hurt.
- Some of you have gotten a medical diagnosis that's going to change your life. It's going to be hard and you're going to be scared.
- Some of you are becoming empty-nesters (or your kids are moving back into the nest). Either way, it's going to leave you disoriented for a while.

And the list could go on of the kinds of changes that we don't desire that just happen to us ... which is where the story of Ruth and Naomi comes in ... because that's what happened to them. Dramatic life change resulted in pain, fear and disorientation.

Understanding "Transition"

And we'll get back to their story in just a few minutes, but before we do, I want to give you a model that I think will be helpful for understanding change and transition. It comes from Dr. William Bridges who is probably the foremost expert on the subject. He's written several books, the most widely read being *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*.¹

The first thing you need to know about "change" and "transition," Bridges says, is that they're not the same thing.

Change is situational ...

... a move to a new city, taking a new job or losing a job, retirement, graduation, empty nest, stock market decline, marriage, divorce, illness, etc., etc. Change is situational, while ...

Transition, on the other hand, is psychological.

It's the process we go through as we attempt to come to terms with the new situation that change brings about. Transition is about *how we handle* and adjust to the move, the job, the graduation, empty nest, stock market decline, etc., etc.

Now, the thing to notice about this is that most of the time we have very little control over the changes that take place in our lives. There's not a lot we can do about the situation. Where we have the *greatest influence* is in how we handle it – in the transition.

And how well we manage the transition from "what was" to "what is" determines, to a great extent, whether or not we're going to make it ... whether or not we're going to be happy and productive in our new reality.

So, what does successful transition look like? According to Bridges you have to make it through three stages:

Stage 1. The Ending – letting go of the old world.

This is a time of loss and grief and maybe even anger. There's typically a loss of identity: "I knew who I was in *that* world. I knew why I was here." This is why retirement is very challenging, especially for men.

This stage typically produces lots of resistance internally and sometimes, even, externally. And it can take a long time to get through this stage, and some people never do. But if you do, then there is:

Stage 2. The Neutral Zone – exploring the new world.

For the most part, in this stage, we've released our attachment to the old world. We've let go of that identity and purpose, but it's still not clear what we will be and do. Things aren't the "old way", but aren't really a "new way" yet either, which is why this stage is often characterized by feelings of confusion and disorientation.

And, I remember many years ago when Jetta and I first moved to Kansas City, and we had two young daughters at the time. I was going from a job where I was a software engineer and I had done that for five years. My whole background was in that kind of thinking. I came out here to go to seminary - I went from a very rigid work schedule to a school schedule, which is very different. I had a class like Tuesday at noon, one on Thursday at 2, and a class on Monday night. So, during the day I found myself with lots of

free time. And, Jetta found me with lots of free time and she would say, “honey, would you go to the store and go shopping?” And, I can remember the first time I did that, it was on a Tuesday or whatever it was, in the middle of the day, and I’m standing in line with these mommies and their babies and I’m going, “This is not where I’m supposed to be.” It was very disorienting. It was very confusing. And that is what the neutral zone is like.

“Coping with this stage takes most of people's energy,” writes Bridges, which is why, if you’re in the Neutral Zone, you just feel blah or tired a lot of the time.

Stage 3. The New Beginning – developing a new identity and purpose.

In this stage, our focus has shifted from the old world to the new. We have a vision of what could be and we’re motivated by it. We’re more and more freed up internally to become productive and fulfilled in our new environment.

So, got the picture here? Change is a shift in your situation. Transition, on the other hand, is the process of dealing with that shift and also that new situation; it’s letting go of the way things used to be and taking hold of what they have now become.

Bridges has a nice little diagram that illustrates how transition works in real life.



--- > Time --->

I like this diagram because it illustrates that, at any point in time after the change happens, you’re actually in all three phases of transition.

For instance, when the change *first* happens,

... as you can see by looking at the left side of the graph, you may have a faint sense of the new beginning and a taste of the neutral zone and the confusion and disorientation, but your primary experience in that period of time is that of ending, losing and having to let go of the old world.

But as time goes on and you near the end of the transition (look on the right side of the graph) ...

.... you experience primarily the new beginning, but you still have moments of disorientation and confusion associated with that neutral zone and you also still have occasional pangs of loss associated with the old world and the way things used to be.

God, Naomi, Ruth & “The End”

Now, what we’re going to do over the next three weeks is to try to apply this little model to the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. But we’re going to take it a little further and try to see *where God is* in each of these stages and, more importantly from

our perspective, how we can sense His activity and presence in each stage.

Now, that won't be easy because the Bible says that ...

We live by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5: 7 (NIV)

And in no stage is that more true than in the first stage: *the ending*.

And “the ending” is where the book of Ruth begins. Naomi's husband had died; her sons had died. We don't know why that happened, but we do know what it meant: an older woman, a widow, living in a strange land without any male kin in those days was as good as dead herself.

So, as we heard in the reading, she did the only logical thing – she decided to journey back to her homeland in hopes of finding a relative to care for her. And she encouraged her daughters-in-law, who were now widows themselves, to do the same – to leave her and go back to their own families and seek whatever assistance they could find.

It was a terribly difficult time for all three of them. The scene of the three of them walking down the road, clinging to each other and weeping as they debate whether or not they should stay together or part ways is heart wrenching, is it not?

The Bible says that, finally, Orpah took Naomi's advice and went back. But Ruth did not. And she made it clear to Naomi that she would not be going back,

Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried.” Ruth 1:16-17 (ESV)

The Bible says that Naomi took her seriously and said no more. And the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.

Clearly, life has changed for Ruth and Naomi ...

... and now they're in the first stage of transition – “the ending of what was.”

No husbands, no children, no support, no future. That's where they are. That's the setting of the chapter 1 of the Book of Ruth.

The question is ... where is God? And what is God doing?

If you were to ask Ruth, she would have probably said, “I'm really not sure where God is. Ask Naomi. After all it's her god. She's the one who worships Yahweh, Lord God of Israel. I'm kind of new at this. I'm going to take him as my god but I'm kind of confused by the whole thing.”

So, if you were to turn and ask Naomi, “Where is God?” She would say, “I know where God is ... God is with me, but not in a good way. In fact, God is the source of all my problems!”

Remember what she said to Ruth and Orpah as she was telling them “don't come with me”?

“The hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” Ruth 1:13 (ESV)

You don't want to be associated with me because God is against me.

And remember what she said when she was greeted by old friends in her hometown of Bethlehem? "Is it really you, Naomi?" they asked.

She said ...

"Do not call me Naomi [which in Hebrew means "pleasant"]; call me Mara [which in Hebrew means "bitter"]; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" Ruth 1:20-21 (ESV)

What a dark, dark statement. "God has sought me out, God has found me and God has judged me. He has decided to ruin my life."

And when we go through a major change we don't desire and didn't ask for, that's how it feels a lot of times. It feels like "God has rejected me; God is against me; God has left me to fend for myself." Maybe some of us are feeling like that right now. Maybe you're seeing that your world at some level has to come to an end and, like Naomi, you're not doubting God's existence; you're just wondering what the heck He's doing and what it is you've done to make Him so mad at you!

Now, in Naomi's case, there's a reason why she might have felt that God was mad at her. Some commentators say that by moving from Israel to Moab (which we heard in the first part of the story, Elimelech, her husband, took the family, left Israel and went to Moab), some theologians think that by doing that, Elimelech had exposed himself and his family to God's divine judgement. And, if that's true, even after he died, Naomi stayed in Moab for 10 years when she probably could have come home during that time, but she didn't.

But that's not clear; it doesn't say in the text that God was judging and punishing her for any particular disobedience.

But, whether God was or wasn't doesn't really matter because we *do know* from the vantage point of history what God really was *doing*. There's absolutely no question about what God was up to in leaving Naomi without a husband or sons. Whether it was just a circumstance that He *allowed* to happen, or something he chose to *pour out* on Naomi in judgement, His purpose was the same.

In fact, there is probably a whole message in that one sentence itself. So, let me repeat it: Whether it was just a circumstance that He *allowed* to happen Naomi's life, or something he chose to *pour out* on Naomi in judgement, His purpose was the same.

Now, to explain why I say that, I unfortunately have to condense chapters two, three and four of Ruth into about three sentences; we have to fast forward to "the new beginning" – to the end of the transition. So, *spoiler alert*: I'm giving away the end of the story before work through the middle of it. But don't worry. We'll come back and look at the details of those chapters in the next couple weeks and it'll still be good.

OK, so, here's what happens in chapters two, three and four. Three sentences:

- Ruth meets a man named Boaz.
- Boaz marries Ruth.
- Ruth has a son (whom she names Obed).

There you go – three chapters, three sentences.

But let's go ahead and read the part of the story about the son, Obed, because it's really, really interesting.

Chapter four verse 13 says ...

Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. Then he went to her, and the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. Ruth 4:13 (NIV)

... who they named Obed.

But that's not the interesting part. Here's the interesting part. And it's really, really interesting.

Ready?

This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon ...

Are you tracking with this? Are you sitting on the edge of your seat yet, wondering what's going to happen next? Good, let's continue!

Nashon was the father of Salmon and ...

... Salmon [was] the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. Ruth 4:18-22 (NIV)

David ... as in King David, the greatest King Israel ever had.

David ... as in the David who God called "a man after my own heart."

David ... as in the David to whom God said:

I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 2 Samuel 7:12-13 (NIV)

... a prophecy which was ultimately fulfilled when Jesus of Nazareth was born to Mary, who was of the line of David, and adopted by Joseph, who was also of the house of David.

Are you getting the picture here? The ending of "what was" for Naomi and for Ruth was the beginning of the next step in the lineage of the One who God would one day send into the world to save the world because He loved the world. The end of life in Moab (as grievous and difficult as it might have been) had a higher purpose than either woman knew.

When Ruth spoke those words that defined the end for her – "where you go I will go and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God" – when she spoke those words, she had no idea of the significance of her decision that day. She had no idea of the reality to which she was saying "yes."

Now, we do, obviously, because we have the vantage point of history. We can look back and see the significance of what was taking place.

But what about God? That's the question that's most important. The answer is God also knew the significance. But God knew it in a much different way than we do.

To understand that, I want to jump back to Bridge's book on transition for just a minute. He makes this fascinating statement about

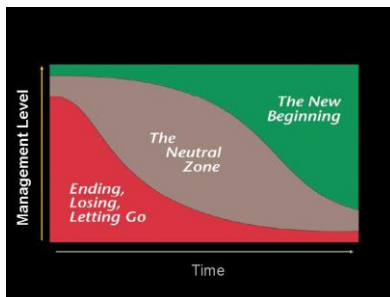
the way organizations work that I think will help us visualize this very well.

He writes:

“The higher a leader sits in an organization the more quickly he or she tends to move through the change process ... *they can see the intended destination before others even know the race has begun.*”

There’s a neat little diagram that shows why that’s true. You can actually see it.

Let’s take a look.



Just imagine, if you’re an employee on the lower part of the management scale, and you’re looking forward into time, what do you see? You pretty much see the ending and may have some hint of the neutral zone. But, the new beginning? You might not be able to envision that at all.

But the higher up you go, the more clearly you see all the layers. In fact, if you are the leader, hopefully you’re the one *planning* the new beginning. You have a much longer view than everyone else.

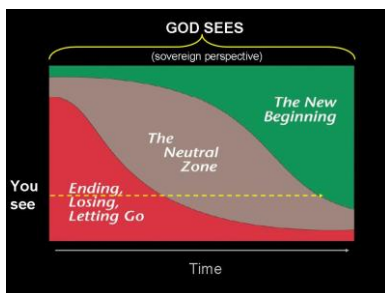
So, how does this apply to God? I think you could make the case that God is “higher in the organization,” so to speak, than any of us are.

After all, as God said through the prophet Isaiah ...

Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Isaiah 55:9 (NLT)

In fact, I think you could make the case that God is off the chart.

So, with that in mind, you could redo that chart to look something like this:



The implication is obvious isn't it? Whatever change is happening to you or me right now ... we can't see very far, but God can. God sees the end from the beginning. God knows what's coming before it even happens. God takes the long view.

In fact, God actually designs the end from the beginning, which is what He said through the prophet Isaiah:

"I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please." Isaiah 46:10 (NIV)

Theologians call this "the sovereignty of God" – God is over all that happens; he sees it all; he knows it all and he directs it all to accomplish his ultimate purpose and plan.

And that's what's happening in the life of Naomi and in the life Ruth ... even though, at the time, they are completely unaware; even though, at the time, they think everything from "what terribly bad luck, what could go wrong next" to "God is really messing with my life! Why are you messing with my life?"

... which, of course, He *wasn't*.

I like how author and pastor John Piper sums up what God was – and is – doing.

"The book of Ruth," he writes, "wants to teach us that God's purpose for his people is to connect us to something far greater than ourselves. God wants us to know that when we follow him, our lives always mean more than we think they do."

I think that's a great way to think of the first phase of the story of Ruth and Naomi. In fact, let's specifically spell out those two observations as lessons we can learn from this part of the story:

1. God used "the end" to connect Naomi and Ruth to His purposes.

What happened in Moab was terrible, no question about it. It forced a kind of change upon them that they would have never chosen for themselves. But that change was not random or meaningless. It was the vehicle through which God connected them to His ultimate purposes. Even though they couldn't see it, we can see it because we have the advantage of history and God saw it because He has the advantage of sovereignty.

Which means ... and this is a *huge* implication:

2. Ruth and Naomi's lives mattered far more than they would have ever believed.

One commentator points out that the Book of Ruth doesn't have any of the typical "God stuff" associated with it. There are no miracles or revelations. It doesn't mention the institutions of Israel's religion, such as the tabernacle or prophecy. It's just simple people going about their everyday lives.² But those simple people mattered. Their everyday lives – just coping with the changes of life – mattered, because God was doing something amazing through them.

Now, in that moment when Naomi realized she was alone and destitute, she would not have believed that. But it was true. In that moment when she and Ruth entered Bethlehem – which, for them, would turn out to be the Neutral Zone in Bridges stages – neither one of them would have believed it. But it was true.

So, God used "the end" to connect Naomi and Ruth to His purposes. Therefore, Ruth and Naomi's lives mattered far more than they would have ever believed.

Letting Go

And those realities are true for you and true for me ... if we belong to God's people in Christ ... because this is actually what God did in Christ as well. Think about this:

1. When Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross, that was the first part of a transition.

It was “the ending”, so to speak. But it led to the beginning of the promised new creation, literally, in the resurrected body of Jesus (and we've talked about this many times). God used the end to connect Jesus to his greater purposes for this world.

And if you're a follower of Jesus, God promises to do that in your life, too – to use endings to connect you to his greater purposes – because whatever happens to Jesus happens to those who belong to Him. That's how it works. That's what it means to be “in Christ.”

2. Jesus death mattered far more than anyone would have believed at the time.

And you know the story, to most people – even his disciples – Jesus' life was over. It didn't really count, which made his death even more meaningless. But, as we know, God used his death in a way that no one would have believed at the time. It was used for the atonement of the sin of the world.

And if you're a follower of Jesus, because his life and death mattered far more than anyone would have believed, the same thing is true of you because whatever happens to Jesus happens to those who belong to Him. That's how it works. That's what it means to be “in Christ.” Your life and whatever changes you're going through matter far more than you would ever believe.

And, I hope you will believe these things. That's partly why God gave the Book of Ruth to us, so that we could see these truths in action and so that we could *put them into action*. See, these truths can help us make it through the first stage of transition; they can help us with the letting go.

And, here is how we put them into action. I think there are three things:

1. Get mad but start walking.

I think when change happens that we don't want, I think we need to get mad. What some people do is get real spiritual, “It doesn't really bother me that this has happened.” And, I'm not trying to make fun of people who do that because they do it from a good heart. I do it from a good heart. But, honestly, when stuff like this happens, we should get mad. We should get mad. Because here is what a lot of people do - they put on the plastic happy face, “oh, it's okay. God loves me. I'm happy,” but then they don't walk. They do some passive-aggressive and stand in place. “I'm not going where God is leading me. I'm just standing. But, I'm happy. Praise Jesus.” No. I think God would much rather that we act like Naomi and say, “Why are you against me? What are you doing?” But we're walking while we're complaining, “God I don't get this, but I'm walking.”

I think that is the first way we put this truth into action.

I think the second thing we need to do:

2. Resist the temptation to idolize the past.

I don't mean that in a figurative sense. I mean it literally. I mean hanging on to the past as if “that's where God is. That's where safety is. That's where I can be happy.” When you think like that, you're trusting the past instead of God. That's called idolatry and idols always disappoint, which is why God tells us to put our ultimate trust in Him instead of idols – whether they're literal idols or

they're figurative, like the past.

"Our real problem is that Jesus' salvation is not as real to our hearts as the significance and security our idols promise us." – Keller
That's a problem for a lot of us. We don't want to believe that God really is doing something in our lives. We would rather say *this* is where our security is. I think we need to resist the temptation to do that.

Last thing I think we need to remember:

3. Remember the long view.

I think when we're going through this phase or stage of transition, we've got to remember this picture of the long view.

Now, last night after I did this message I got an email ... someone sent me an email saying, "I heard your message, but I don't think that if I was in Naomi's shoes I would ever come to peace over what I had lost. I'm not sure Rick, if you lost your wife and your children, that you would ever see that either."

My response back was, "you're right. I might not ever see it, in my lifetime. But this is why we have the story of Ruth, to show us that even if we don't see it, it is true." This is why we have the story of Christ, to show us that, even if we don't see it, it is true. By definition, you and I cannot *see* the long view – we're not God. We can only remember that the long view is there because God is there and because God is sovereign.

We have to trust that. We have to trust that God's plan for this world is never stopped by circumstances, that even when everything seems to say: "This situation is hopeless. This is spiritual calamity in its last stages" that right in the middle of that, God is acting, with a long view. If we belong to Him, we can be sure that his purposes will be accomplished. And, we can be sure that our lives will play a part in that plan for ultimate good.

Friends, there is no such thing as arbitrary change in the life of Christ followers. God is always working out his plan for the redemption in this world and our lives – our stories – are part of it.

Conclusion

So this morning as we close, I want to take time to reflect on that. I think maybe some of us walked in this morning in this first part of change/transition and we're having to look at the end and maybe we're having to let go of some things. So, I want to give God a little bit of time to speak to us. I'm going to ask the band to come up here and get ready while I explain what we're going to do. I want to ask you to think – what are you losing? If you're entering a change right now, if something is changing and you're entering a transition, what are you losing right now? What do you need to let go of right now? What are you hanging on to – trusting more than you trust God?

One wise person has written: "When we are in this stage, we are experiencing change as loss. We are sad about what's passing away. Until our grief is acknowledged we will be unable to embrace the new vision. Our hands must release "what has been" before we are free to take hold of "what will be."

So, in the next few minutes, I'm going to be quiet, and whatever is in our hands from the past that we need to let go of, just before God in this moment of silence, lift it up to God, "I don't really want to let go of this. You need to give me the strength to let go of this. I know there is change happening in my life and I need to make this transition, and I don't want to be stuck here. So God, I'm going to lift this up to you and you do with it what you will."

Then after the silence, I'm going to read a scripture that speaks to that and will be encouraging. Then I'm going to pray for us and the band will do a song that will be encouraging to us, if this is where you are, in this transition.

Let's just have silence for a minute and then I'll read the scripture.

This is what the Lord says through the Prophet Isaiah:

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?

Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it.

They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Though one cries out to it, it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles.

Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels ... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.

Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, you who are far from righteousness. I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed.

Isaiah 46:4-13 (NIV)

Let's pray ...

God, though we walk and stumble along towards a destination we've never seen, you are changing us and making us more alive, more a part of your purposes and plans for this world. Help us to see that with the eyes of faith. Help us to say yes to what you're doing for the sake of Christ's Kingdom. Amen.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Managing-Transitions-Making-Most-Change/dp/0738208248>

² <http://www.angelfire.com/sc3/wedigmontana/Ruth.html>