

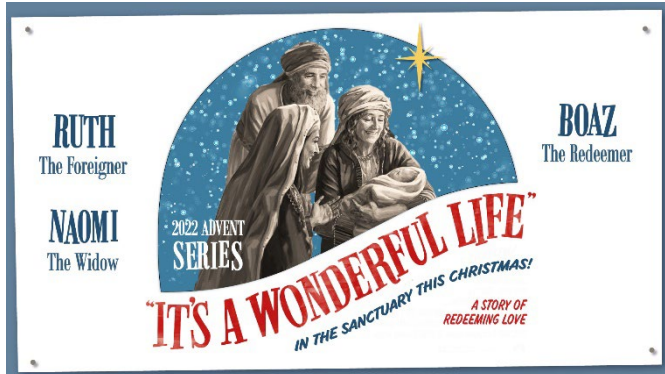
*It's a Wonderful Life, Pt. 2*  
***Under His Wings***

*Ruth 2: 5-13*

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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This Advent season, we are studying together the Old Testament book called Ruth. We're considering that Ruth actually makes a fabulous Christmas story. Our graphic is from the original movie poster for *It's a Wonderful Life*. We inserted the characters that make up the final joyful scene. An older woman

smiles as she holds a baby in her arms. A middle aged man looks on with evident pride. And a young woman, clearly the mother of the child beams that she is now truly a part of this family. Through famine, grief, loneliness, hard work and faithfulness, all the main characters have learned how the LORD has given them a wonder-filled, wonderful life.

Last week we read how a Hebrew family had migrated to the land of Moab during a famine. Both their boys married Moabite women. All seemed happy except there were no children born in that decade. Then all the men died. The mother Naomi determined to return to Israel and her kin folk. She tried to send her daughters in law back to their families in Moab where they might have hope of finding new husbands. Ruth, however, refused to be parted from Naomi. She pledged her life saying, "Where you go, I will go. Your people shall be my people and your God my God."

In this week's chapter, we pick up on their new life in the town of Bethlehem. It was spring and the time of the barley harvest. Ruth was young and strong. The women needed food. So Ruth went to glean in the fields for leftover stalks of wheat. Gleaning was a practice prescribed in Scripture whereby the poor could partake of the harvest by gathering the scraps. God instructed his people who owned lands to be sure to leave intentionally some of the harvest for the gleaners. So this is the story of what happened the first day Ruth went out to the fields.

## 1) The Surprise of Sovereign Chance.

This story is so masterfully written in Scripture. With the genius of understatement, the text tells us that as she worked, Ruth “*happened* to come to the part of the field belonging” to a man named Boaz. We’ve been told that Boaz was from the clan of Elimelech. Now Elimelech was Naomi’s late husband! So that meant that Boaz was a kinsman of Naomi’s. He was a relative. And Ruth just “happened” to be gleaning in his fields when Boaz arrived to check on the work.

Could this possibly be a random occurrence? There’s no such thing. This is a God-incidence. It’s an example of a *sovereign chance*. What appears to be luck to us is really part of the divine will of God. The LORD I AM is sovereign. What seems to be chance is really a moment God has orchestrated. *Sovereign chance* means it may look random to us but it’s really the work of the High King who reigns over all.

Everything would change as a result of this meeting. God arranged it. But we notice that Ruth had put herself into a position to get in on what God was doing. Ruth made a choice to stay with Naomi instead of going home to her birth family. Ruth made a choice to go out to the fields instead of staying at home. Ruth worked hard to take care of herself and her mother in law. Now, we can’t make God arrange things. But when we make choices out of love, service and hard work, we are putting ourselves in position to be part of God’s work. We are getting into the paths where God usually walks. Ruth “happened” on the field of Boaz because she had committed her life to the LORD God and to Naomi. Faith, love and service will lead to God-incidence in our lives. We gather our courage, give ourselves to God, do what is right, live in love, and then wait to see what God will do. In due time, he promises, God will act.

## 2) The Blessing Life of Boaz

And what God did was to bring Boaz out into the fields. We read that Boaz was a worthy man. That meant he wasn’t a kid anymore. Boaz was a landowner. He was responsible for many lives. He was respected in the community, a man of integrity and of faith. Boaz did not stay home while his servants did the work. He went out to the fields. He blessed his workers with these words, “The LORD be with you!” What kind of boss greets his workers that way? A man who actively knows he’s not the point of the story. He serves the Creator. He also sees that his success comes in partnership with his workers. He notices them and cares.

So Boaz asks for God to bless them. It’s such a lovely greeting, “The LORD be with you!” So lovely, in fact, that the people of Jesus Christ decided centuries

ago to speak like this every time they shared together in the feast of the Lord's Supper. From ancient times a communion service begins with this blessing. "The Lord be with you!" And the people reply, as Boaz reapers did, "And also with you!" We're setting our whole lives in the context of God's reality. We belong to him and he has given us to each other. As we partake of Christ together, we bless each other. Perhaps this week the Spirit will prompt you to say this to someone, "The LORD be with you!"

Boaz also knew his workers and he noticed there was a new person gleaning. He asked about her. We realize this was more than just an idle question. Ruth impressed Boaz. He could see how hard she was working. And no doubt she appeared beautiful in his eyes.

### **3) The Shelter of His Wings**

Immediately Boaz wanted to protect Ruth and provide for her. Boaz pulled Ruth aside, "Now, listen, my daughter, do not go glean in another field, but keep close to my young women. Now if you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." Yes, I think Boaz found Ruth attractive from the start. But I think he was old enough that at the beginning he felt more like a father towards her. He was in the midlife stage of being provider for many. When I read this, it reminds me of how I feel about my daughters. "Sweetheart, look, don't get off the interstate for gas in downtown Atlanta anymore. Stop in a suburb at a well lit station. By the way, how's the tread on your tires? Can I buy you an oil change?" These are Dad delights! Boaz wanted to take care of Ruth.

Once again, Ruth replied with a completely open heart. She used words that meant she was all in. Just as she pledged herself to Naomi, she now pledged herself to Boaz. Ruth fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" Ruth was sincerely amazed at such grace from Boaz.

Boaz was struck by remarkable character of this young woman. He replied to Ruth, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law...has been fully told to me, how you left your native land and came to a people you did not know. May a full reward be given you by the LORD, the God of Israel, *under whose wings you have come to take refuge!*"

Let's linger a bit over this remarkable phrase, "under whose wings you have come to take refuge." This sends us to some very important passages in the rest of

Scripture. Several times in the Psalms, we see this language of sheltering under the wings of God:

Keep me as the apple of your eye;  
Hide me in the shadow of your wings (Ps. 17: 8).

In the shadow of your wings,  
I will sing for joy (Ps. 63: 7).

Let me take refuge under the shadow of your wings (Ps. 61:4).

I've loved this picture for many years. In fact, Rhonda made a painting of it for Susie Tucker when Susie was battling cancer. These chicks appear perfectly



safe. The mother bird has a fierce look on her face. No one messes with her babies. Under wings, the little birds don't become less themselves. They become free to sing, to bask in her delight, and let down their guard under her protection.

The LORD our God has mighty wings, stronger than any storm. Come under the protection of his wings. Why go it alone? Why do we think we want to face famines and storms, heartbreaks and decisions, conflicts and tumults on our own? It takes some humility to say, "Father, these storms are too much for me. I want to come in out of the wind and rain and be sheltered by you." It takes some faith to say, "Father, I believe you will keep me safe till this is past. I trust that you will not let more happen to me than I can bear." It takes some willingness to love to say, "I will join those who are also under your wings and love and serve them too." His wings alone are our sure protection.

#### **4) The Abundance of His Table**

Well, finally, let's notice what happens between Ruth and Boaz later in the day. At the afternoon mealtime, Boaz said, "Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine." Ruth ate until she was satisfied. It might well have been the first time she hadn't been hungry in months. We read as well that she had some left over. When they rose to go back to work, Boaz told his workers, "Let her glean even among what we haven't yet harvested. And while you're at it, pull out some sheaves from the bundles, and leave them for her to pick up." Ruth ended up bringing more than five gallons of barley grain home with her. In one day, she gathered enough food to last for weeks!

Now today as we approach the communion table, let's be sure we see some of the connections here. I don't think it's a random accident that the meal Boaz and Ruth shared was bread dipped into wine. Yes, that was a staple of life, but Jesus knew what he was doing when he chose the bread and wine for his sacrament. Even more, Ruth had come to glean as a foreigner. She did not expect to get more than a scrap. She did not feel she deserved more than the leftovers of the leftovers. But Boaz who had seen her faith and love, gave her all she could eat and then all she could possibly carry home. We get this. We come to the banquet table of the Lord of the universe. Yet too often, we don't really expect much to happen but the same old, same old ceremony. If we thought about it, we'd know we do not deserve even a crumb of this holy meal. But see what happens. Our Father offers us not scraps and leftovers. He offers the superabundance of his grace. We'd settle for a crumb. He offers overflowing mercy and love.

I want you to see and hear the prayer we will pray before communion today. It is adapted from a prayer in the English church that is at least 500 years old.

Most merciful Father, your love compels us to come in. Our hands were unclean, our hearts were unprepared; we were not fit to eat the crumbs from under your table. But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation, and share your bread with sinners. We glean for scraps but you pour out the abundance of your love. You satisfy us with the Bread of Life. Cleanse our hearts anew that at the feast of your communion Table, we may be fed with Christ's body and nourished by his blood. In his redeeming name we pray, Amen. (adapted from *Common Worship*)

We are but gleaners after scraps, if the truth be known. But when we come to shelter under the wings of the God of Israel, we discover the startling transformation. He does not give us scraps. He gives us himself. For his very nature is steadfast love and kindness. The echoes of the Christmas story in Ruth resound all around us. Boaz acts like Joseph, protecting and providing for a vulnerable woman. Ruth acts like Mary, giving herself completely into God's care. Loving with an open heart. I can hear Ruth saying Mary's words, "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." And everywhere the sovereign God is weaving the surprises of his extraordinary grace reaching the world through ordinary people. So come to the table, dear ones, in great expectation that the sovereign God will bless you today. Discover anew that in Christ, it's a wonder-filled life.