

It's A Wonderful Life, Pt. 4
Not Left Without
Ruth 4: 13-17

**First Presbyterian Church
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After more than a decade away, a woman named Naomi returned to her hometown of Bethlehem. The people remembered her. “Naomi’s back!” But Naomi refused her given name. “Do not call me Naomi,” she said. Then Naomi self-identified with a name that means “bitter.” “From now on, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty” (Ruth 1: 20-21). Given the name Naomi, which means “pleasant,” this woman now identified as “Bitter.”

We can understand why. As Naomi, she was *left without*. She was left without food when a famine came through Bethlehem. She was *left without* a husband when hers died. She was *left without* grandchildren when her daughters in law did not conceive. She was *left without* future heritage and security when both her sons died. She was left far from her homeland in Moab, *left without* hope for a brighter future. It certainly seemed the LORD I AM had turned against her. Her identity was “Bitterly Left Without.”

We understand her feelings. We, too, know what it is to be left without. *Left without* so much as a goodbye. *Left without* our life savings after the swindle. *Left without* expectation of ever loving again by the break up. *Left without* career options after the firing. *Left without* the wrongs being righted. *Left without* the slanderer, the abuser, the dominator being punished. *Left without* comfort after the terrible, untimely death. *Left without* dreams. *Left without* a redemption story. It can seem that the LORD’s hand has turned against us. All we once savored now tastes of ashes.

By the end of the story, though, the women of Bethlehem were reporting a different story of Naomi’s identity. They lifted praises to the LORD and showered blessing on Naomi. “Blessed be the LORD I AM, who has *not* left you this day without a redeemer! May his name be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age.” They called her by her old given name. Naomi. This day you are *not* left without. You have a redeemer. You have someone who will re-stock the shelves that were empty. You have someone who

will see you through the rest of this life. You are not left without. *You have*. You have a wonder-filled life.

What happened? We know that Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth refused to part ways and return to her own people. Ruth pledged her life to Naomi as they journeyed to Bethlehem. Ruth pledged her life to the LORD I AM as she worked in the fields of Boaz. Last week, we saw that Ruth dared to ask Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi, to be her redeemer. To buy back the land of her late husband, and to take as his own Ruth, the widow. Boaz joyfully took up the opportunity. There was a nearer relative who had rights to the property and to Ruth. But Boaz bargained so shrewdly with this man, that the man happily gave over those rights. Boaz and Ruth were wed. And before long, Ruth brought forth a son.

That's when the women of Bethlehem rejoiced with Naomi. Her husband's memory was redeemed when Boaz married Ruth. Naomi's future was restored for her through the arrival of a grandson. This grandbaby, by the way, would become the grandfather of David, Israel's great king to whom the LORD gave everlasting promises. I'd like to highlight three aspects of this beautiful conclusion.

1) The Role of Community. The women of Bethlehem played a crucial role in defining Naomi's understanding of her life. The community gave Naomi's life context. Naomi wanted to be called "Bitter." But no one ever took her up on that. None of the people endorse Naomi's attempted change of identity. The collective wisdom of God's people will not let us view the meaning of our lives solely by present circumstances. How we need those people! The LORD's community refuses to let us get too full of ourselves when things go great and refuses to let our suffering be the sole definer of life. They didn't reject Naomi, but nor did they let Naomi sink into isolation and bitterness. Once they lamented Naomi's sorrow. Now they rejoiced in Naomi's blessings.

For the last two years, I've been thinking about the call of our church to be a resistant, resilient and renovative Christian community. I couldn't possibly overstate how important it is that we realize that. Our job is to receive the identity given to us by Jesus Christ. And to help each other resist any other identity claim upon us as having a higher importance. Paul said it so directly to the Corinthians. "You are not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (I Cor, 6: 20). Jesus makes a radical claim upon us. "I died for you. I sent my Spirit into your heart to save you. Now I claim you as my own." We belong to Jesus. That truth fights against our deep proclivity to say, "I belong to me, and me alone. I live *my* dreams. I choose *my* identity." The beloved community of Christ

speaks sharply to us: No, you are not your own. You cannot have Christ and keep yourself as master. Your first identity is that you belong to him. Or you have no part of him, you are left without God.

I think it's time for us to reclaim the truth about baptism. It's not just about how cute the baby is (though they always are verrry cute!). Baptism is an essential identity marker. Parents declare, "You belong to Jesus! Though you do not know it yet, little one, he died for you. He rose for you. He has claimed you and marked you as his own. You do not belong to us as much as you belong to him. But because you belong to Jesus, you belong to us all the more. And to this family of believers in which God has placed you." Baptism is a radical claim about ultimate allegiance. The community of Christ tells one another of these truths.

2) The Redeemer, Restorer and Nourisher. The women blessed the LORD that Naomi was not left without a redeemer. But wait. Who's this redeemer? Boaz didn't marry Naomi. Boaz married Naomi's daughter, Ruth. Boaz redeemed *Ruth* from widowhood. Not Naomi. But hold on again, the women may not even have been talking about Boaz. It sounds like they are talking about this baby Obed being a redeemer. It's Obed who restores Naomi's life with fullness. But wait, they go on to give credit to Ruth, who means more to Naomi by her love than even seven sons. Who is this redeemer?

Of course we've got to widen the lens. The LORD I AM is the redeemer of his people. God is the one who is weaving life out of death. He's bringing blessing out of tragedy. He's sweetening bitterness with love and hope. The parts that Ruth, Boaz and Obed play are real. They truly participate in redeeming love. But that's all within the sovereign, loving actions of the one true God.

So we read in the beloved 23rd psalm, "The LORD is my shepherd...He *restores* my soul." Our shepherd God re-stocks the empty shelves of broken hearts. He re-energizes exhausted bodies. He smooths tangled relationships and revives dashed expectations. It is this God who goes on to sustain us through all the ages of our life. So Isaiah the prophet would write in God's voice to us,

[You] have been borne by me from before your birth,
carried from the womb;
even to your old age I am he,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save.(Is. 46: 3-4).

Those aren't just words for 80 year olds. We're always aging out of one life-stage and into another. You leave elementary school and suddenly you're engulfed in middle school. Those 8th graders are huge! The drama is high! I miss my safe elementary school where all the teachers knew me. But you can't go back. Who will sustain you? You get out of college and after a year, there's no going back to the frat parties or the flexible schedule. Now you have to enter the wide world. Later, if you get fired, there's no going back to that place. Later, should you lose people you love, there's no going back to those familiar relationships. They're gone. At every stage we long to know who will sustain us through these seasons of life? The LORD is the redeemer, the restorer and nourisher of our souls. He bears us along through every year, even to the thinnest wisp of gray hairs we have left.

3) The Savior Christ the Lord.

The women of Bethlehem blessed the LORD "who has not left you this day without a Redeemer." I'm fascinated by the use of the word for "this day." On one level, this is all very obvious. They saw the baby Obed and rejoiced *this very day* that the proof of God's love was nestling in Naomi's arms. But actually the baby hadn't done anything yet. He hadn't grown up to be of great renown. He didn't have a wife yet, or children. He couldn't actually sustain Naomi in old age right now. He was a helpless baby. He was just the down payment on a promise, not yet a fulfillment.

But here's the beauty of Scripture and God's enormous plan for his people and his world. "This day" obviously means this very moment, what happened in the world of space and time on this particular day. But can also mean more. It can mean the whole story that surrounds this moment. It can mean the way this moment will make sense of the past and affect the future. "This day" can mean we've picked up a lovely thread and seen a glimpse of how the whole fabric is woven together.

We see this use of "this day" especially in Luke's Gospel. Remember the Christmas story. The angel says to the shepherds, "For unto you is born *this day* in the city of David, a savior, which is Christ the Lord." Yes, indeed, on the particular day of the first Christmas, our savior entered the daylight world. But *this day* refers to a whole lot more. The angel recalls David, the great grandson of Ruth. David was promised an everlasting kingdom, and that promise took a thousand years to be fulfilled. Then, after all those centuries, Jesus was born. But on Christmas morning, Jesus had not yet grown up to live his life of ministry and love,

of perfect obedience to his Father. He had not yet completed redemption by dying and rising and ascending for us. The word “this day” points to more than the moment. It points backwards and forwards to the whole story of the Redeemer of the world.

#2



Maybe I can show you this. Last month, I met my brother in Rome. We spend a lot of our time visiting churches. When I saw this Nativity chapel at a church called Santa Maria Pace, I thought, “I have to tell my people about this!”

#3



Let’s look more closely at the main painting. It’s a gorgeous depiction of the shepherds adoring the newborn king. All eyes are on Jesus. Peace pervades. There’s even in a dog in the right hand corner! Just in itself, this is a nourishing picture of how “this day” is born a savior.

#4



But let’s widen back out and look up. The nativity painting is set under an arch. There are three paintings in that arch. These three paintings in the vault form a kind of canopy over the Nativity. They are the context in which the event of the painting below occurs. It’s fascinating to consider what scenes they depict.

The creation of man. The temptation of Eve and Adam. Then our first parents being expelled from the Garden.

#5



Here's a close up of the third painting in the arch. You can see the sadness of *that* day, when we lost Eden. The angel drove our first parents from the Garden. Shame and death entered the world with them. All the brokenness and evil in the long, sad history of humanity ensued. Mankind well could have taken the name "Bitter" as our own. For ever since the fall life has been bitterly hard for all of us.

#6



But now let's put it all together. Think of the brilliance of this chapel. The paintings in the vault depict an overarching story of creation and fall in the history of humanity. But right into the midst of that tragic fall, there appears the child. The Son of God arrives in our midst. A new humanity is born. His first worshippers are the lowly shepherds. They begin the community that is resistant to the world's rebellious identity. They have a different story than the harsh cry, "I am my own." They belong now to this child and all he will be. The "this day" of Christmas ties together the whole history of the world!

Suddenly we realize how deeply, truly, the story of Ruth is a Christmas story. Blessed be the LORD I Am, who has not left you this day without a redeemer. He will be to you're a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age. Into Naomi's life of famine, loss, grief and bitterness, God sent a redeemer. She was no longer to identify her life as *left without*. God began to restore her with the love of Ruth. Then he sent a redeemer in Boaz and then in Obed. That's a great story. But it points to an even better one. Into this dark, lost, shattered world, God sent a Redeemer named Jesus, a descendent of Ruth. It is still the This Day of his arrival. He has come to redeem his people. We are the community who belongs to Christ. We don't let people get lost and stuck in the despair that evil and bitterness and grief have the last word. They do not. The Redeemer has come and will come again. Will I, can I, trust this news? Will I trust myself to him? Will I embrace the identity that matters: I do not belong to myself but to my faithful savior born this day! That makes for a truly wonder-filled life.