

*It's a Wonderful Life, Pt. 1*  
***Don't Ask Me to Leave You***  
*Ruth 1: 1-18*

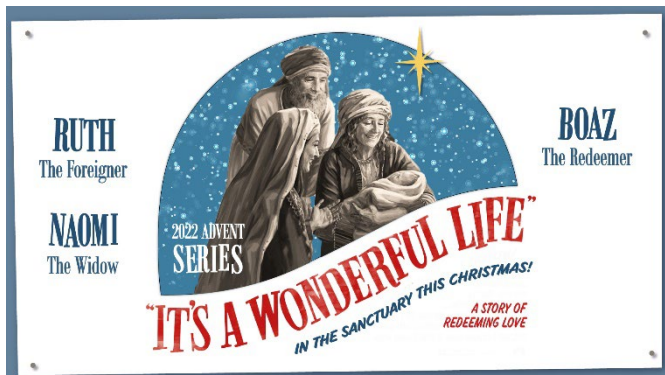
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**November 27, AD 2022**  
**Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---



Have you already had your annual viewing of the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*? I got to see it a couple weeks ago on the plane. Tried to hide my running eyes from the person next to me. The final scene is just so redemptive! Jimmy Stewart has discovered that his life in Bedford Falls has not been in vain. All the while he was sacrificing his personal dreams, he was giving life and hope to the people of his town. So in the end, when he's in trouble, the whole the community surrounds him with love. He holds his child in his arms. Donna Reed looks lovingly into his face. She has forgiven him for his anger over their strife. The Christmas tree twinkles and the bell rings so that we know that Clarence has got his wings. You can't help but cry, even for the hundredth time.



The final scene in Ruth reminds me of that movie. It also touches me deeply. There is an older woman, who had changed her name to “Bitter” for all the loss she experienced. Now she holds a grandbaby in her arms. The middle aged man who thought love had passed him by looks on in pride and joy. And the foreign girl, widowed far too young, who came to a strange land has been gathered into God’s own people. She has borne a child who would be the grandfather of the great King David. This unlikely family overflows with joy as the community of Bethlehem rejoices with them. Through hardship and loss, God has worked all things together for good. Suffering does not thwart the providence of God. It’s a wonderful life in God’s loving care. So this Advent we’re looking at the story of Ruth as a Christmas story. To flip that around, we’re viewing Christmas through the story of Ruth.

Once there lived in the town of Bethlehem a Jewish couple named Naomi and Elimelech. When a famine devastated Israel, this family migrated to nearby Moab. They had two grown sons. It was a good thing, because shortly after arriving in Moab, Naomi's husband died. She depended on her sons to care for her. In time, the boys each married Moabite women. For ten years, there was stability. But no grandchildren. Naomi lived as a widow cared for by her sons and daughters and law. But then the story takes a darker turn. Both of the young men died. We are given no explanation. Suddenly Naomi was left as widow with no children, far from her people. She was left with just her two grieving daughters-in-law, and a cart load of fear for the future.

About this time, Naomi heard that the famine was over and food was plentiful in Israel again. Naomi wanted to go home. But she realized she could not bring her Moabite determined that she would go home and take her daughters-in-law with her. But along the way home, perhaps when the drowsy rhythm of travel freed her mind to think clearly, Naomi realized what an impossible situation she was creating. Naomi was bringing Moabite women back to Israel where there would be little likelihood of finding husbands or having children. So she said to them, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!"

One of her daughters-in-law realized the stark reality of her situation. She wept and embraced Naomi, but then returned to her people. The other daughter-in-law was Ruth. She understood the practicalities of her situation. But her love for Naomi would not let her leave. Ruth did not know what the future would bring. She only knew she would not desert Naomi, whatever suffering or loneliness lay ahead. Then Ruth spoke the words that have become so famous, words often used at weddings to celebrate the joining of two families and traditions. She 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. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you (Ruth 1:16-17).

Where you go, I will go. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Ruth the Moabite woman made a commitment to join herself to Naomi. She gave

up her homeland and her family. She would become what Naomi was, accepting her people and her God. This was a pledge of Ruth's very life to Naomi.

Now when the Hebrew people heard this story being told, perhaps around a fire on a chilly winter night, they would have pricked up their ears at these words of Ruth. We hear these words as beautiful, but quite often miss their spiritual significance. Ruth's phrase would have resounded like a pealing bell in the hearing of God's people. There was a way of speaking that the LORD I AM had used with his people all the way from the beginning of his calling Abraham. There was a code phrase we can find from Genesis all the way to Revelation. It meant God's binding of himself to his people. It was the language of covenant love. This phrase gave his people their very identity and all their hope for the future. God's faithful covenant love is expressed like this, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Some versions say, "I will dwell among you and be your God and you will be my people." This phrase is the heart of God's commitment to us: You are my people; I am your God. And here is Ruth, a foreign woman, echoing the LORD's own words when she says, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Ruth's words are all the more extraordinary when we realize this connection. She is using the words of God's own binding, covenant love. She is imaging the God who committed himself to his people Israel.

Now let's take a step further. Let's see how this first chapter might be a Christmas story for us. Perhaps we could be so bold as to consider that in coming to us as the baby born in Bethlehem, the Son of God was saying something very similar to us. "Do not urge me to leave you, or to return from following you." God came down to us at Christmas. He came among our fractured relationships, our pierced hearts, our hungry bellies and wandering souls and he promised, "For where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge." I will dwell in skin and bone just like you do. I will make my way through this world of tears and hunger, work and sweat, just like you do. Jesus, the only begotten Son of the Father, donned our flesh. He tabernacled among us, pitching his tent in the midst of the dust and dailiness of life.

Christmas means that God has pledged himself to us in a covenant promise of love. Sometimes, we use the phrase "Get some skin in the game" to mean, "Put some real money behind your words. Risk something. Make it costly. Show you mean it by getting some skin in the game." Well, God did that. He got some skin in the game by joining himself to our flesh and blood. Your people shall be my people. Where you go I will go. And he pledged himself to us right straight down the line to the very end. "Where you die, I will die." Think of this! Where do we

die? We die, all of us no matter how noble, in disgrace, as a result of the sin which plunged the creation into bondage to decay. We die in frailty, at the hands of powers beyond our control. We die in weakness and heart wrenching parting from loved ones. So the Son of God died where we die, in the weakness and shame of the cross.

Ruth would not leave Naomi though there was no gain to following her, and no reason to continue except love. Ruth's words are the words of Jesus the Son of God to us. He would not leave off pursuing us. He left his country for ours. He left the glory of heaven to come dwell in the darkness of our world. He left the intimacy and joy of his Father's presence to come to the loneliness and misery of our land. Jesus enacted the promises of God's covenant love, the love which Ruth showed, as he joined himself to us. Let's look at how this might work out.

**1) Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you.**

This reminds us of the story Jesus told about a father who watched every day for signs of his prodigal son's return home. The Father was just waiting to run to him:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

**2) For where you go, I will go.**

Do we not hear an echo of the parable of the lost sheep and how diligently the Good Shepherd looks for them? Jesus said,

What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. (Luke 15:4-5)

**3) And where you lodge, I will lodge.**

This takes us right to the mystery of Christmas expressed in John 1:

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn.1:14)

**4) Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.**

Jesus made himself one of us, and made his Father our Father:

For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brothers . (Heb. 2:11)

**5) Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.**

Jesus was so joined to us that he experienced death as we all must:

But we see...Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:9)

**6) Thus may the LORD do to me... if anything but death parts you and me.”**

God’s commitment to us was absolute:

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

Think about what Christmas means this year for you in light of this story. Jesus says to you, “Do not urge me to leave you, or to return from following after you.” In other words, Jesus is saying, “I am pursuing you. I came down after my lost sheep in becoming flesh and blood in the baby born at Bethlehem. I am still coming down seeking my little lambs today. Don’t ignore me. Don’t tell me to go away. Don’t ask me to go back to heaven. Let me come to you. Let me come with you into the world where you must live.”

Jesus has not unzipped his skin suit and gone back to a life free from the humanity he came to save. He clung to us. He stayed joined to us. He went back to heaven, yes, but he did so still in skin. He holds on to what we are. The eternal Son of God took up our flesh and blood at Christmas. He returned to heaven forty days after his resurrection. But he held onto our flesh and blood. His joining of himself to our humanity is forever. Not even death could separate him from us. Not even ascending back to heaven. Jesus is the pledge of the Triune God’s covenant faithfulness to us. I will stay joined to you into eternity. That is my pledge to you. I will never let you go.

This is our God. A God willing to say, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people are my people. I am your God.”

How much did Naomi matter to Ruth? She mattered everything to her. Ruth risked it all to stay with Naomi. Think how much you matter to God! He pledges, “I will not leave you. I will not stop pursuing you. I will not separate myself from

what you are. I will hold you to myself until you are fully healed, redeemed, set free, forgiven, transformed, and glorified. I will go with you through famine and loss, through bad economic times and difficult relationships. Don't ask me to leave you. Let me stay."

Jesus is no stranger to anything you are going through. He has been all the way to the far, foreign country of our lives. He did not turn back from us then. He does not turn away from us now. He still wants to go with you every step of the way. He still clings to you. He will not be shaken off. He will not be dissuaded. He will not stop loving you. He has already paid the ultimate price, getting skin in the game all the way to death on a cross. Now he calls to you through his Spirit from heaven, "Do you see me coming to you? Do you hear me pledging myself to you? Turn to me! Answer me! Embrace me." This, dear ones, is the heart of Christmas. When we welcome his arrival and accept his love, everything changes. Even our sorrows and sufferings become woven into what can only be called a wonderful life.