

**Series: Joy in the Journey**

**Today: Ruth—The Way God's Work Gets Done**

**Text: Ruth 1:6-17**

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

How does God get things done in the world? This is the topic I want to explore with you as we continue our series on the great heroes and heroines of the Bible using their journeys of faith to reflect upon our own.

There is a hymn in our Blue Hymnal which speaks of the way God works to accomplish God's purposes in the world. The words of the first verse are both majestic and beautiful: "*O God, in a mysterious way, great wonders You perform. You plant your footsteps in the sea and ride upon the storm.*" (*Presbyterian Hymnal*, #270) Perhaps this is the way many of us understand the way God works; the all-powerful, all-knowing God working God's purposes out in the sweep of nature and of history. However, this morning I want to suggest to you that the primary way God gets things done in the world is through people like you and me.

Someone gave me a cartoon recently which shows two turtles having a conversation. One says, "*Sometimes I'd like to ask why he allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it.*" The other turtle says, "*I'm afraid God might ask me the same question.*"

This morning we come to the story of Ruth and Naomi in the Old Testament. It would be a lovely story if we looked at it only as literature, but in the wisdom of those who established the canon of scripture, it was included as a word of God to us. It is the story about a faithful woman, a honorable man, and how God brings them together to continue the blood line which leads us to David and eventually to Jesus.

## A Faithful Woman

Our story begins in Moab, the place we know as modern day Jordan. Here we discover Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, who had moved with their two sons because there was a drought in Bethlehem where they had lived with their relatives. The two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, and within a decade not only Elimelech, but also his two sons were dead. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were widows, and in the male-dominant culture in which they lived, they had no way to survive unless they remarried or found relatives to take them in.

Naomi decides to return to her relatives in Bethlehem, and she advises Ruth and Orpah to return to their families in Moab for their own safety. It is here that we see the true character of our heroine Ruth.

Orpah reluctantly agrees to follow Naomi's advice. She returns to her family, but Ruth clings to Naomi and makes this wonderful statement which is often the only thing we know about the Book of Ruth. I am quoting it from the King James version of the Bible because these are the words our choir sang, and these are the words which my wife had inscribed on the wedding ring she gave me almost 40 years ago: *"Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God..."*

Let's stop for a moment and consider the courage of Ruth. She is asking to return to a place where she has no family. If the relatives of Naomi do not take her in, she will be completely vulnerable. Without family to give her the dignity of work, she will be viewed as an outsider, and given the culture of her time; she will be reduced to begging or prostitution. She knows this, and yet fidelity to the relationship with Naomi is more important to her, and she decides to go with her at the risk of her own life. She knows that Naomi has suffered the deeper loss; a husband and two sons, and she decides that being an encouragement to Naomi is more

important than worrying what will happen to her. She was faithful to their relationship, and God used her to bless the world.

I know many of you are devoted listeners of WITF as I am. One of my favorite parts of their Morning Edition program is Story Corps where people tell inspirational stories from their own lives. On Friday (October 16, 2009) the story was told by Andrew DeVries who had shattered his leg in a motorcycle accident. It became apparent that he would have to have his leg amputated, and he says it was a young female doctor named Sarah who gave him hope in that despairing situation.

The day before the surgery Sarah came in to visit him. She could see how depressed he was, so she asked him, "*Andy, what kind of golf ball do you use?*" Andy said that as he was thinking about what life would be like without a leg, talking about golf balls seemed almost idiotic. Nevertheless he told her that his golf ball was a Titleist Pro V1, and when he woke up on the day of the surgery, he said that there at the foot of his bed was a yellow 12-pack of his favorite golf balls. He said it gave him hope that maybe there would be life after the surgery.

It turned out that they were able to save Andy's leg after all, and while he was in the hospital, he had a chance to develop a pretty deep relationship with this young doctor who was young enough to be his daughter. On the day he was discharged to go to a rehabilitation hospital, the doctor came to him and asked him if he would walk her down the aisle on her wedding day. He responded, "*Sarah, you don't even have a boyfriend.*" And she said, "*No, but I will someday. Will you walk me down the aisle?*" Andy said it got him thinking again. Here he was, going to a hospital where he wasn't even sure if he would get out of a wheel chair, and this young woman was asking him to walk her down the aisle. It gave him hope again.

You have to hear the end of the story. Andy's accident took place in September of 2002, and this past summer Sarah emailed him to tell him she had a boyfriend, and she wanted to walk her down the aisle. And he did. (Source: [www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org))

This is the way God gets things done in the world. When we are hopeless, God sends the Sarah's of the world to give us hope again just like he sent Ruth to Naomi.

### **An Honorable Man**

Our story continues when Ruth and Naomi return to Naomi's home town of Bethlehem. They arrive during the barley harvest in the early spring. Jewish law said that the poor could follow behind the harvesters and pick the leftovers. Ruth did that, fortunately choosing the field of Boaz, one of Naomi's relatives. Boaz takes an immediate liking to Ruth because of her devotion to Naomi. He had his harvesters leave an extra portion of barley for them. This is when Naomi hatches a plan.

Jewish law said that if a man died, the man's brother should care for his widow. That law apparently extended to include other relatives when there was no brother. So Naomi tells Ruth to go to Boaz while he is sleeping and offer herself to him, which she does. Essentially, she makes herself available for an intimate sexual relationship.

Now Boaz could have taken advantage of this young woman, but he was a man of honor. He did not sleep with her. Instead, he said he would take her as his wife only after he had checked with the younger men in his family to be sure that a closer relative didn't want to marry her. It was only after he was sure that no one else wanted her that he took her as his wife. Boaz was an honorable man, and God knows we need more honorable men in our world.

On Wednesday evening I was invited by the President of Millersville University to be one of about 30 community leaders to preview a documentary film on the sexual violence of

pornography. It was an honor to be considered a community leader, and it was even more of an honor to speak to the faculty who wanted to include this film as part of a film series which is offered by the university every year.

The film was graphic in the sense there were images which were disturbing, but not nearly as graphic as the statistics shared by the NYU professor who made the film. For example, I did not know that the average age at which a young person experiences pornography thanks to its accessibility over the internet has dropped to about age 11. I did not know that 70% of the audience who view pornography are straight men who watch it alone, nor did I know that pornography is involved in about 70% of all sexual abuse cases.

The professor went on to say that men who watch pornography do not typically look at the women as real, live human beings. They see them primarily as objects to be used for their pleasure. One of the scenes in the film showed how football fans gathered inside the stadium, hollered obscene chants at women, and tried to get them to take off their clothes. These are things which you and I are not used to seeing, thank God. However, it is obvious that the easy availability of pornography on the internet is changing the way men treat women. Those of us who struggle to be honorable men in our culture need to ban together and say to our peers that there is something wrong with our sexuality when we view women as objects for our pleasure and not as human beings who need the same thing we do; to be honored, loved, and accepted.

I read an article recently on what it takes to be an honorable man. It was by A.W. Tozer who was a well known pastor in evangelical circles in the 1950's. His thinking might be judged by some to be of another generation, but I think it bears consideration here. He lists seven qualities of a Christian man who seeks to do what is right:

1. First is the desire to be holy rather than happy.

2. A man may be considered spiritual when he wants to see the honor of God advanced through his life even if it means that he himself must suffer temporary dishonor or loss.
3. The spiritual man wants to carry his cross.
4. Again, a Christian is spiritual when he sees everything from God's viewpoint.
5. Another desire of the spiritual man is to die right rather than to live wrong.
6. The desire to see others advance at his expense.
7. The spiritual man habitually makes eternity-judgments instead of time-judgments.  
[Source: *A. W. Tozer, That Incredible Christian. Christianity Today, Vol. 41, no. 5.*]

### **Conclusion**

Boaz was an honorable man. He did what was right by placing the future of Ruth above his own needs and desires. Because he did, he earned his place in our history as Christians as the great grandfather of the greatest King of Israel, who also came out of Bethlehem: David. And if you read the genealogy of Jesus, you will see right there in the first chapter of Matthew is the name of Boaz.

That is the way God's work gets done. Women of faith and men of honor come together to do what is good and pleasing in the sight of God, and God uses them to work out God's purposes.