**Daily Devotions**

**August 2022**

*08-01*

“You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.”

— 1 Peter 4:3

This is an invitation. An invitation to a deeper, richer, more fulfilling way of living. It’s not about becoming a boring, prudish judge of other people’s behavior. It’s about realizing that all of those things—licentiousness, drunkenness, idolatry—don’t fill the God-shaped hole we all have in our spirits. They are an attempt to wrest happiness that is ultimately doomed to failure.

We’ve all done it. We’ve all turned to worldly things to try to find satisfaction and meaning in life. And we’ve all experienced the horrendous let-down when those worldly things fail us.

God is inviting us into a better way. We’ve already spent enough time engaging in those fruitless attempts and manufacturing happiness. Now, we can turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. When we do that, we find that life is full of deep joys and mysteries we hadn’t even realized. Not that this life is easy or perpetually “happy” in worldly terms. But it’s far more satisfying than any substance or behavior we might use to do it on our own.

What have I turned to in the past to try to find happiness or satisfaction with life? Did it work on my own terms?

*08-02*

“They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme.”

— 1 Peter 4:4

Setting boundaries is never pleasant. I have been in dysfunctional relationships in the past. When I started to get healthy through 12-Step recovery and therapy, I began to recognize the dysfunction. So I had to set healthy boundaries around behavior I would not accept from others. And the fact is that no matter how kind and loving you are in setting those boundaries, if the other person is still dysfunctional, there’s going to be blow-back.

Apparently this has been true since at least the first century CE. The writer of First Peter points out that when someone embraces “the Way” of Jesus, and turns away from the old attempts to wrest happiness from the world through extreme behaviors, their old carousing buddies are going to be pretty ticked off. And you better believe they’re going to talk all kinds of trash about God, who they feel is taking their friend away from them.

The good news is that God has your back. No matter how unpleasant it is to set boundaries with others, you can rest assured that God is right there with you, loving and supporting you through the challenge.

When have I had to set a boundary with another person? How did it go?

*08-03*

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

— 1 Peter 4:10

This is one of my favorite Bible verses. It encapsulates stewardship in a single sentence in a way I haven’t found anywhere else in scripture. It doesn’t need the long and sometimes cryptic list of specific gifts doled out in 1 Corinthians 12. Instead, it’s simple and to the point and contains, in my opinion, the entire meaning of life: You all have gifts from God. Use them in love and service to others.

Like, seriously. That’s it.

Look deeply, honestly, and lovingly at yourself. Know that you have something to offer the world—something important and uniquely yours to give. Know that God gave you that gift to share and takes great joy in it when you do. Then share that gift every chance you get and the world will be a better place.

Do I know what my gifts are? How do I share them?

*08-04*

“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you.”

— 1 Peter 4:14

Things are way different in the 21st century U.S. than they were in first century Palestine. Being reviled for the name of Christ back then was truly dire—following in “the Way” of Jesus could get you arrested and/or killed. You could be outcast from family and community. You could be slandered and abused. Knowing that the Holy Spirit was standing in solidarity with you, sharing your place and providing strength, was of great comfort and reassurance.

In my context, there are plenty of people who complain vociferously that they are being “persecuted” because they profess Christ. But they’re absolutely wrong. On the one hand, laws that protect the rights of people who disagree with you are not persecutions of them. In general, they still have all the power and privilege in the situation. And on the other hand, any negative repercussions they might actually experience are not about their professed belief in Jesus, but about their actual behavior. There’s a great quote I’ve heard bandied about in the rooms of recovery: “I judged myself by my intentions, while the world judged me by my actions.”

What’s most unfortunate is that the extreme behavior of a small group of professed Christians has so sullied the public’s perception of what it actually means to be a Christian that the rest of those trying to follow in “the Way” do experience a modicum of negative opinion from the general public. But it’s nothing like what those first century Christians had to endure so let’s not lose perspective. And anyway, the Holy Spirit is right there with us now. So take heart!

Have I ever been in a position where I felt I had to hide my beliefs due to negative public opinions of Christianity?

*08-05*

“But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, a criminal, or even as a mischief maker. Yet if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name.”

— 1 Peter 4:15-16

I can’t read this without thinking about the U.S. criminal legal system. In fact, I just now read an article about the criminalization of black youth in this country and it’s enraging and heart-breaking all at once. I know that’s not what this passage is addressing, but reading it with modern eyes, I can’t help but wonder about how many criminals and mischief-makers in first century Palestine were labeled so by a society that made it a crime to be non-conformist or non-majority culture. This short passage sets up a black-and-white dichotomy between suffering for crime (justified) and suffering for believing in Jesus (unjustified). But the truth is, such dichotomies are entirely artificial and give rise to the kind of “us” and “them” beliefs that lead to the criminalization of, for example, black youth.

Yes, I get what the writer is trying to say: If you get in trouble for doing the right thing, don’t be embarrassed by it—God’s got your back. But maybe we can allow this deceptively simple exhortation to lead us into fruitful discussion about how God also has the back of the murderers, thieves, criminals, and mischief makers. Maybe that will push us toward true justice in our modern context.

Have I ever gotten in trouble for doing the right thing? What were my feelings about it at the time? Now?

*08-06*

“Therefore, let those suffering in accordance with God’s will entrust themselves to a faithful Creator, while continuing to do good.”

— 1 Peter 4:19

In other words, don’t give up. Doing God’s work in the world can be exhausting and painful. Often we face the enormous barriers of an entrenched society uninterested in the welfare of its most vulnerable members, too wrapped up in self-interest to see the damage being done to the environment and its inhabitants—even though it includes themselves!

Following in “the Way” of Jesus, as Christianity was referred to in the first century, is not the easier, softer path through life. It calls us into stark honesty with ourselves; it pushes us out of our comfort zone and into service; it leads us into direct conflict with those in power. And sometimes we suffer for it—discouragement, exhaustion, doubt, loss.

Thus we have to entrust ourselves to God, knowing God is faithful and shares our place in our suffering. But as the writer makes clear, we are not to hide ourselves in God, but continue doing what it is we are called to do.

This is a life far more fulfilling than any that comes from buying into the self-interested society that surrounds us. God sees to that.

When have I been so discouraged I wanted to give up? Did I find the strength to keep going? Where?

*08-07*

“I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly.”

— 1 Peter 5:1b-2

Main Idea: God encourages us to open ourselves to the wisdom of generations that are not ours.

In my first call as a pastor at the tender age of 31, I thought I was all grown up and knew stuff about stuff. After worship each Sunday, I would stand at my post at the back door, greeting worshipers cheerfully and blissfully. When the kids would come, I’d kneel down so that I could greet them on their level. I thought I had it all down until one Sunday after I greeted one of our regular elderly ladies. As she left, I heard her say to her companion, “She always speaks to me like I’m a child!” And then I heard it and couldn’t unhear it. I had always spoken to the kids and the elderly as if they weren’t fully functioning humans. I’d had very little experience with the elderly. My grandpa had spent his last few years sliding steadily into dementia. I did my clinical pastoral education on the Alzheimer’s unit of a nursing home. Of course, my gut reaction was to speak to the elderly the way I had spoken to the ones with dementia—that’s all I had known.

Her comment changed me forever. I started to realize I had discounted an entire generation of wisdom. So, I started seeing them. Really seeing them. I watched their interactions and I listened to their stories. I asked questions. I started absorbing their wisdom. God gave me a gift that day and I have not squandered it.

1 Peter spoke to this, too. He encouraged the elderly not to rest on their laurels, but to take care of the younger generation as a shepherd cares for a flock. He went a step further. He encouraged the flock to respect to the authority of the elders. In a sense, he gave the younger generation a gift—not to squander the wisdom of their elders. We can all learn so much if we open ourselves to those who are older or younger than we are.

08-08

“Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.”

— 1 Peter 5:3

Kids can smell BS a mile away. I know from my experience working with children and youth, especially middle school kids. Those early teens are desperate for someone to be straight with them about what’s what. I’ve found that when I’m real with kids, they respond with an almost palpable relief.

So don’t for one second think that you can expect kids to “do as I say, not as I do” for very long. The writer of First Peter got this. They knew that young people are naturally a little oppositional, and that “lording it over” them wasn’t going to go off too well. They also knew that living the faith openly and honestly is a powerful way to pass it on.

Do my actions support what I say I believe? Why or why not?

*08-09*

“In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another.”

— 1 Peter 5:5a

Kids need security. Even those teens I talked about yesterday who can sniff out BS a mile away. As much as they want someone to be straight with them, they also want to know what is expected of them. For me growing up (and sometimes now) one of my biggest triggers was not knowing what I was doing—not understanding what I needed to know. It sent my anxiety through the roof and often led me to acting out (my kindergarten report card notes that “She still has trouble dealing with frustration.” It’s hanging on my wall.) I was—and am—terrible at asking for help, but when help was offered and I finally knew what was going on, I was able to relax and be a downright pleasant kiddo.

So yes, folks who are younger need to listen to the wisdom of their elders and trust that they have a better grasp on what’s what (most of the time?) When they do that, they can enjoy the security of being lovingly guided, and flourish.

Who is an elder in my life whose wisdom has been important to my faith?

[Caveat: I am not, of course, saying it is ever a good idea to blindly accept the authority of someone just because they’re older or in power or what-have-you. But in a healthy community, elders have much to offer and it should be honored. Just sayin’.]

*08-10*

“Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

— 1 Peter 5:7

I have an anxiety disorder. My whole life, actually. It morphed into Major Depression beginning with puberty and recurring periodically until I was diagnosed at 25 and went on medication. An anxiety disorder, or as I call it “Capital A Anxiety,” is a completely different animal than the anxiety the writer of First Peter is talking about. That “lowercase a anxiety” is felt by everyone at some point in their lives. Life is, at its core, completely uncertain. Nothing is guaranteed, and we human beings are hardwired by evolution for survival. Anytime we are unsure of our circumstances we experience anxiety until we can again feel like we are in control of the situation.

But as finite human beings, our control is illusory. Trying to manage our anxiety by trying to control everyone and everything around us will inevitably lead to more anxiety in the long run. The only solution I have found to my “lowercase a” anxieties is turning them over to the only one who has any sort of real control in the universe: God. God can take them all on and handle them for me. I can let go of all the things that are above my pay grade (which is just about everything) and focus on what is in front of me to do. It’s an enormous relief when I remember to do this. I feel loved and cared for and free to be and do what God wills for my life, for which I am deeply grateful.

What things in my life cause me anxiety? How do I manage my anxieties?

*08-11*

“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”

— 1 Peter 5:8-9

That lion, though. What a vivid image. I don’t mean to be silly but I have seen my cat stalk prey (usually a catnip toy) and it’s, frankly, beautiful—the movement of his body as he sinks low to the floor, the giant pools of his eyes taking in every detail, his ears pricked forward, his tail whipping back and forth with ferocity. One could almost forget the absolute deadliness of this perfectly-created predator. Yet he is deadly.

Far be it from me to associate any of God’s stunning creatures with evil, but the metaphor is apt. Evil, as I see it, is seldom physically ugly. In fact, it tends to be beautiful, seductive, like money and material possessions, for example. It takes discipline and alertness to see things as they really are—to recognize the true ugliness beneath the façade, and the danger of trusting in things that will certainly devour us if we remain oblivious.

Meanwhile, I will continue to enjoy the beauty (and silliness) of my little orange predator who may be deadly, but is not at all evil. Well, most of the time.

How do I recognize evil in the world? What does it look like? How can I open my eyes to its true nature?

*08-12*

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

— 1 Peter 5:10

There’s no B team involved here. In the end, when all is said and done, no matter what has gone down in our lives, good or bad, it is God—the One and only—who will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us.

Think about that for a second. Throughout history most if not all religions (Christianity included) have had a hierarchy of deities or saints or other heavenly beings who have different roles in the lives of humanity. But this text is telling us that we lowly human beings are so beloved that the top banana is right there with us, loving, guiding, inspiring, leading, you-name-it. You know, not to give you a big ego or anything, but wow. Just wow.

It’s just nice to know that when things get rough, we’re in the best possible company.

Do I feel worthy of God’s direct attention? Why or why not?

*08-13*

“Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.”

— 1 Peter 5:12

I wonder about Silvanus. And Phoebe and Euodia and Syntyche and all the other folks who get name-dropped in the various epistles without further explanation. It can be easy for me to read scripture and forget about the embodied humanness of the individuals who heard and shared the gospel and labored in adversity to grow the body of Christ. The writer of First Peter had a lot to say, but it was this dude, Silvanus, who put pen to paper for all to see. Was he young? Old? Single? Married? Was Silvanus his actual name or a nickname? Did he like fish? Was he allergic to pollen? What was his favorite color? Did he have a good laugh?

In asking these questions, I am put in touch with him—and scripture—in a different way. It’s more real, more intimate. I can hear the writer’s words directed to me, sitting among that congregation who originally received it from Silvanus’ pen—and maybe his lips. I know that I am a member of a family that transcends time and space and yet is forever located in a specific context. If you think about it, it kind of gives you the chills, doesn’t it?

I think I would have liked Silvanus. I kind of can’t wait to meet him.

When do I find myself fully engaged with scripture? How could I be more engaged?

*08-14*

“But Ruth said, ‘Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.’”

— Ruth 1:16

Main Idea: Ruth remained loyal to Naomi despite the challenges they faced together.

Likely one of the most familiar quotes from today’s text is Ruth to Naomi, “Your God [will be] my God.” As much as we may want to praise Ruth for choosing God, when we look deeper, she wasn’t choosing God as much as she was choosing Naomi.

Naomi had moved from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab (the two countries were not enemies, but they certainly had a strained relationship over the years; the Moabites were descendants of Lot by incest with his daughters). Even in Moab, Naomi remained faithful to God. But God was not good to Naomi. She lost her husband, and then her two sons, leaving her two daughters-in-law and no grandchildren. Ruth’s husband was one of Naomi’s sons who died despite being loyal to God. So God had done no favors to Naomi or to Ruth.

But when Naomi learned the famine in Bethlehem was over, she decided to return home alone. She did not want her bitter hardships to continue to plague her daughters-in-law. Orpah returned to her family of origin, but Ruth did not. Ruth’s love for Naomi was so fierce, she was willing to give up her lodging, her people and her gods just to be with Naomi. She would even take on the lodging, people, and God of Naomi, even though none had done anything for her.

The two women returned to Bethlehem homeless, widowed, and poor. It would be a hard life for them both. Or so we thought…

*08-15*

“But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

— Ruth 1:3-5

Tragedy can strike any of us at any time. We see it happen to others and secretly hope it doesn’t come our way. I’ve heard it said countless times by those affected by tragedy that they never thought it would have happened to them until it suddenly did.

I’m sure that when Naomi went with her husband to Moab to escape the famine in Israel it was with a sense of hope. Surely she would find security there. She had two beautiful sons, which, in her culture, guaranteed that she would be cared for should anything happen to her husband. They would have enough food, her family would thrive, life would be good.

But that’s not how it turned out. She lost her husband and both of her sons, leaving her completely vulnerable and without resources to survive on her own.

As familiar as the story of Ruth is to most of us, it would be easy to think about how the story ends as some consolation for how it begins. But let us put ourselves in the place of Naomi exactly where she is, and know that no amount of hopeful platitudes and reassurances would be enough to assuage the incredible grief—and fear—she would have been feeling at this point in her life. Just as we ought to do with those in our own lives who are experiencing tragedy, let’s not try to make things better, but just hold the other’s grief with them, and allow them to be. This is what God does for us, also.

Have I experienced tragedy in my life or known someone who has? How does tragedy make me think about God’s presence in life?

*08-16*

“So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.”

— Ruth 1:7

These were some brave women, I tell you. Without any protection from husbands or sons, they pick up and head for Judah. Naomi had some idea of what they might find there—it is where she had grown up after all—but the other women were Moabites, not only unfamiliar with the culture of Judah, but also probably well-aware of Moab’s reputation among the Hebrews (it wasn’t good). Would any of them be welcomed? Would it be worth the dangers of the journey to get there as women traveling unaccompanied?

Truthfully I wonder why the daughters-in-law agreed to go in the first place. I don’t know anything about the Moabite culture, but surely there would be something for them in their homeland with their parents’ families. Yet when Naomi said, “I’m going home,” they said, “Okay. We’re coming, too.”

Again I would invite you to put aside what you know about how the story turns out, and put yourself in the place of these brave women setting out on a journey with an unknown ending. Think about the act of faith it was to do so—in spite of the fact that, to Naomi’s way of thinking, she had been abandoned by God in her tragedy. Walk alongside these women in their anxiety and hope, open to what might be next.

When have I had to muster the courage to take a scary step in my life? What got me through?

*08-17*

“[Naomi said] ‘No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.’”

— Ruth 1:13b

I remember a time when I felt abandoned by God. It seemed, one horrible summer, that some unknown forces were conspiring against me. My primary relationship was dysfunctional and sometimes frightening, my children overwhelmed me (and I was not to know about their developmental disabilities for several more years), my church community was in turmoil, my closest friend’s baby had been born seriously ill, and those weren’t the only things undermining my faith in a loving God and a universe that made some basic sense. Probably none of it was on the level of the tragedy Naomi experienced (though I am never one to rank one person’s trauma over another’s) but I shook me deeply nonetheless.

Luckily—miraculously? Blessedly? Randomly?—I wandered into the rooms of recovery for food addiction that fall. I had been attempting to kill the pain of my uncomfortable existence by eating compulsively and I heard about a 12-Step program to address that particular issue. I’d had no idea there was such a thing. I went hoping to get thin. What I got was a complete transformation of my life (and a healthy body weight, but that was just the icing on the cake, if you’ll pardon the food-related idiom).

I believed God had abandoned me. God came to me in my despair and shook me out of the error of my thoughts. God had been right there in the middle of the whole thing. So while I can empathize with Naomi in her grief and disillusionment, I can also know from experience that she is not at all alone in her pain. No one is.

When have I felt abandoned by God or in deep doubt of a loving God’s existence?

*08-18*

“When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”

— Ruth 1:18

Ruth must have been a tough cookie. Yeah, yeah, I know she’s just given an impassioned speech probably accompanied by tears and made it clear what her intentions were. But I just imagine a toddler standing on the dusty road with her feet braced and her little chubby hands in fists, with eyes blazing and a scowl painted on her tiny mouth saying, “No! You can’t make me! I’m not going home!” And I imagine Naomi sighing deeply, shrugging, and muttering, “Suit yourself,” before continuing on.

Not that Ruth was immature or unreasonable. Just strong. So strong of spirit that Naomi knew it was pointless to try to dissuade her any further. I still don’t know Ruth’s motivation in any of this. Naomi’s suggestion that she return to the security of her family made a lot of sense. What would lead Ruth to reject it out of hand and cast her lot entirely in with her mother-in-law when it was a total unknown?

The reason probably doesn’t matter, and anyway, we’ll never know it. What does matter, and what we would do well to remember, is that this story is not about some hapless, stereotypical damsel-in-distress, but about a woman of incredible strength, determination, loyalty, and faith. We would do well to aspire to be just like her.

Is there a woman role-model in my life with the kind of strength and fortitude Ruth displayed? What influence has she had on me?

*08-19*

“She said to them, ‘Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.’”

— Ruth 1:20

Names carry deep meaning. Not just names that can be traced through history to words in this or that language, but any name that is given. My daughter’s name, for example, is the title of a song by a Scottish band. It’s a completely made-up word, and while I have read some analyses of what the word meant to the songwriter, I don’t believe I have seen anything definitive from the source, and sadly he died in 2001 so I couldn’t even write to ask him. And it doesn’t matter. To me, her name means “the spirit of Scotland” and carries a deep connection to heritage, nature, joy, and hope. No one else has to “get it.” I do. And she does. That’s what matters.

By proclaiming herself “Mara,” Naomi has made a statement of identity. She has turned away from her past and taken on the persona of tragedy. Maybe it’s a little melodramatic by modern standards. Maybe it’s no more melodramatic than my daughter’s name. She has decided in that moment who she is and wants everyone around her to know for whatever reason I may not understand.

Regardless of the whys and wherefores, we ought to respect her request for the acknowledgment of her grief every time we utter her name.

Does my name have a particular meaning? What does it mean to me?

*08-20*

“So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.”

— Ruth 1:22

The stage is set. We have the tragic back-story, the demonstration of strength and fidelity by our heroine, the feelings of abandonment proclaimed by her mother-in-law, and the time and place of the next act. Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

In a really good story, the end of a chapter makes you want to turn the page and start the next one, and this is a really good story. I care about Ruth and Naomi. I relate to both of them in different ways. I want to know what happens next.

Life is seldom as well laid out as story, except in hindsight. In the midst of tragedies and challenges it would be impossible—even insulting—to think of it as setting the scene or character development or foreshadowing. Reality is far too messy to hold up to literary analysis.

That being said, hindsight can help us make sense of the senseless. Perspective can help us to heal in time. And that, too, is where we find Naomi and Ruth—deep in the particularities of their present circumstances, unsure of what is going to happen next. A few chapters from now, we’ll have all the hindsight we need for it all to make sense. For now, we wait, a little excited, to see the story unfold.

When I look back at a difficult period in my life from my present perspective, what do I see? How have I changed or what have I learned as a result?

*08-21*

“Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, ‘Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?’”

— Ruth 2:10

Main Idea: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz gave us a rare glimpse of how men and women breached barriers to care for each other.

It’s time to put away our outdated notions that the women of the Bible were helpless and powerless. Today’s text is chock full of women (and men) who bucked the system so that everyone would be provided for.

Ruth—foreign to Bethlehem—had the shrewdness to glean and gather behind the reapers. What this meant was that as the men reaping in the field finished their rows, women in need followed along behind picking up the scraps of what was left. It was easily as difficult work as what the reapers did, but for far less reward. The danger, of course, was that if the reapers lacked integrity, they could bother, harass, or even rape the unprotected women.

Here’s where Boaz had one of many moments to shine. When he learned that Ruth was a relative of Naomi, he made sure to protect her as best he could. He assured her that she could continue to gather the remnants of the harvest. He also went out of his way to speak with the reapers so they knew not to harass her, and even to purposely drop some of the reaped harvest for her to glean. He even gave her access to water from the same vessels the men were drinking from and invited her to eat beside him at mealtime.

This is not a story of a rigid line dividing men from women. This is a story of relationships being formed, alliances being forged, and kindness and integrity expressed. It’s a rare moment we get to peek behind the veil of decorum and see how the men and women truly interacted in ways that were beneficial to the community as a whole. Ruth took care of Naomi. Boaz took care of Ruth. Next chapter we’ll learn how Naomi took care of Ruth and Boaz.

*08-22*

“So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.”

— Ruth 2:3

Plausible coincidence. It’s a literary device. If the coincidence is just too unbelievable, the reader gets frustrated and probably doesn’t keep reading, so you need to be careful, as a writer, to convey the coincidental happening as something that might actually happen.

In this case, we have Ruth just “as it happened” coming to glean in the field belonging to her mother-in-law’s kinsman, Boaz. How is that believable, especially knowing what we know about the rest of the story?

For one thing, Naomi moved back to Bethlehem, where her husband’s family lives. Second, Bethlehem is a small town. We don’t know how small for sure (some very unscientific math from internet sources gives me a number anywhere from around 600 to just over 5,000) but since Boaz was a land-owner, which would have been a smaller portion of the population, and Ruth was gleaning in the fields, sooner or later she would probably have wandered into his field.

Of course, plausible or not, we are to believe that God has a hand in all of this, and that rather than coincidence, the meeting of Ruth and Boaz was actually inevitable. But as with the tragedy that set up the story, the meaning and outcome of this supposed coincidence will only be clear in hindsight. The story continues…

Have I experienced what seemed like a bit-too-unbelievable coincidences in my life? What were the outcomes? Did I see God’s hand in things?

*08-23*

“Then she said, ‘May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.’”

— Ruth 2:13

Just imagine Ruth’s relief and wonder at being accepted and supported even though she was a foreigner. I can only imagine what it would be like to pick up and move to a completely different country, with a different language and culture, and be treated the way BIPOC immigrants are treated in the U.S. What if Boaz had greeted Ruth that way? After all, the people of Moab, according to the Jewish people, originated through drunkenness and incest—he could have come up with all kinds of racist slurs for her, I’m certain. And Ruth could have stayed back in Moab with her family—what if Boaz had accused her of just trying to exploit Judean resources? Also, the Moabites spoke a distinct dialect of the family of languages that included Hebrew—Boaz could have sneered at her accent and insisted that she “Speak American!” as it were.

Boaz did none of these things. He said, “Welcome. I’ve heard about your strength and faithfulness to Naomi. I’ll make sure you have what you need to thrive here.” It was, of course, God’s law that people treat immigrants in this way, but that doesn’t mean they did. Boaz was a classy dude. We could learn a thing or three from him.

In what ways have I been welcoming to new neighbors in my community?

*08-24*

“At mealtime Boaz said to her, ‘Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.’ So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.”

— Ruth 2:14

Boaz now goes even further in his radical hospitality. Radical hospitality is crossing boundaries to love and serve our neighbors. It’s what Jesus did constantly—with lepers, women, people from other cultures, outcasts, people who were poor. He flew in the face of convention, calling social norms out as unjust, and healed, taught, fed, and welcomed everyone, no matter what. Boaz’s act of welcoming Ruth in many ways prefigures this—how fitting that (spoilers!) Boaz is Jesus’ direct ancestor. Note, too, how Ruth “ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over.” Sound familiar? The same thing happened when Jesus fed the multitudes with bread and fish. It makes the point that Boaz’ generosity was of great abundance—that God provides more than we need.

Ruth, for her part, is no passive recipient here. It is brave of her to glean in the first place, risking harassment and even rape by the harvest workers. It is bold of her to accept hospitality from this stranger as she is unsure of the culture and whether she might be inappropriately breaking social norms. It is brassy of her to eat her fill instead of acting demure. But if you think this is bold, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

These are some wonderful characters in a wonderful story. Stay tuned!

When have I practiced radical hospitality in my life?

*08-25*

“When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, ‘Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.’”

— Ruth 2:15-16

I’m starting to get the feeling that maybe Boaz has a little crush on Ruth. It’s not enough that he’s welcomed her openly and fed her lunch. Now he’s instructing his harvesters to let her take barley from their harvested bundles—the good stuff—and not just what’s left on the ground after they’ve gathered what they could. And just in case she feels too shy to do this (though knowing what I know of Ruth at this point, I doubt it) he instructs his harvesters to take handfuls of the good stuff and scatter it onto the ground so it looks like gleaning but really isn’t. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t do this for all the poor women out gleaning in his fields.

It brings up lots of questions. First, why Ruth? Is she beautiful? I don’t think they ever say as much. Is it because of her reputation—all the things she has done for Naomi? That tracks, I suppose. Second, why so subtle? Why not just give her the barley straight up? Too forward too quickly? Does it violate social norms in a way that might damage her reputation? Is it just to build tension and intrigue in the story? Third, does Ruth catch on? So far she strikes me as pretty with-it. I imagine her seeing the harvesters out of the corner of her eye surreptitiously yanking fistfuls of barley out of the sheaves and scattering them on the ground when they think she’s not looking. Does she turn away, unable to suppress a grin? I’d like to think so.

This, too, is good story-telling. It leaves things up to the imagination, drawing the reader in to fully inhabit the story. Are you standing in the field with her? Where is Boaz? Are you one of the harvesters? The other women? Can you see what’s happening here?

At the very least, we’re all in. We’re pulling for the strong and faithful Ruth and the kind and generous Boaz, trusting that God has big and beautiful plans for them together.

How am I drawn into this story and other passages from scripture? What do I find most compelling?

*08-26*

“Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’ Naomi also said to her, ‘The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.’”

— Ruth 2:20

Bum bum BUUUUUMM!!! So dramatic! Ruth comes home with barley and a story and Naomi gets to drop the big bomb: Boaz is my relative! Now I don’t know all that much about Jewish tradition, but I do remember that if a man dies, his brother marries the widow to provide for her protection and care. Does that mean Boaz has some obligation here?

From what happens next, it’s clear that it’s not nearly that simple. But in the mean time, Naomi’s faith in God’s care is suddenly restored. She sees this coincidence as not-a-coincidence and knows God has a hand in it. That being said, as we’ll soon see, she doesn’t leave the outcome up to God, but instead takes the lead in making absolutely certain this story has a happy ending.

God calls us to do this, too. We can see where God is active in our lives and the world, but we’re also invited to have a part in bringing about God’s reign every day. If we keep our eyes open, we’ll find lots of opportunities to show love and service to our neighbors so that all might flourish.

When have I taken the initiative to let God use me for the good of others?

*08-27*

“Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, ‘It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.’”

— Ruth 2:22

“Bothered” is a euphemism, I think. In the midst of this touching and engaging story, it’s a sobering reminder of the reality of Ruth’s world. As a widow she had no place in society. As a widow she could not support herself financially. As a woman, she was a second-class citizen, subject to the whims of those with power—men. A single woman, alone, gleaning in a field, would have been subject to harassment or even rape. Possibly it wasn’t even out of the ordinary. So maybe this brief reminder is intentional, lest we get too caught up in the romance of it all. The truth is that the stakes are high—Ruth and Naomi’s very survival is entirely dependent upon the goodwill of other people, and the divine intervention of a God who so recently had abandoned them both to their tragedies.

Let it be a reminder to us in our own realities, too. There are people in our lives—maybe it’s even us—whose circumstances are precarious, and who lack the power to guarantee positive outcomes. We can ask God to help us be aware of these realities, and to spur us to action on behalf of those who need help.

What things serve as stark reminders to me of the challenges of life?

*08-28*

“She came to her mother-in-law, who said, ‘How did things go with you, my daughter?’ Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, ‘He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, “Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’ She replied, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.’”

— Ruth 3:16-18

Main Idea: Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz worked together to provide things none of them could have attained alone.

You’re thinking this is a story of a woman using her feminine wiles to lure a man to his doom. Stop it.

This is a story of two women who could see the pathway that would provide for them for years to come, and the boldness to walk that pathway. It’s also a story of a man who believed he would remain single and childless, and took the opportunity to raise a family.

Naomi could see that Ruth and Boaz were forming a bond—the kind that could sustain a marriage and a family. She instructed Ruth how to approach Boaz so that this union could be solidified. Ruth would get clean and pretty and then wait for Boaz to get drunk. She would then sneak down to the threshing floor where the women could not go and the men could let loose after a long harvest. She would uncover Boaz’ “feet” (not his feet) and then… she. would. wait. When Boaz realized there was a woman lying next to him, and when he realized it was Ruth, he had a choice. He could send her away, and Ruth would have left. Or he could let her stay, which he did. He praised her for her willingness to be with a man who was passing (even past) the age of marriage. He could see that this union was not only for Ruth, but for Naomi, too. Boaz recognized the fullness of this commitment, and he accepted it willingly. He would need to deal with the small matter of another man who had a higher claim to Naomi’s land, and subsequently Ruth’s hand. Next week we will learn how that exchange went. For now, we will celebrate that Ruth’s and Boaz’s union would provide food, shelter, and clothing for Ruth and Naomi, and would provide a namesake for Boaz. Everybody wins.

*08-29*

“Ruth said to Naomi, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’”

— Ruth 3:5

Talk about trust. Because what Naomi has told Ruth to do is…well, to our modern ideas…weird. And if you do know a little about the context and culture it actually feels dangerous. Ruth is supposed to go where women aren’t allowed, make a sexual advance on a man she’s not married to, and hope it appeals to his sense of duty. It sounds not just dangerous, but bordering on ridiculous.

Yet throughout this story, we have seen the character of Ruth and we have learned anything about her, it’s that she is strong and she is faithful. She will trust Naomi and she will gather her strength and do what she is told is needed. I don’t know that I would have the courage to take such a bold action—not specifically this one, as it still doesn’t make much sense to me, but anything that requires this amount of trust. I wanna be like Ruth when I grow up.

Who is the most courageous person you know? The most faithful? Is there a correlation between courage and faith?

*08-30*

“So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down.”

— Ruth 3:6-7

Cue the “Mission Impossible” theme song. Can you just imagine Stealth Ruth sneaking into the threshing floor? I can’t imagine Boaz was the only person passed out in this “men only” club. I mean, did he (and others) always sleep there during the harvest since they were threshing day and night? How dark was it? Was there a risk of tripping on someone or something? If it was dark, how did she figure out which pile of barley he was napping next to? I don’t mean to make too much light of it, but it makes me happy to think of this being just one more layer of Ruth’s character.

And then this whole business of uncovering the man’s feet—we all know it’s not his actual feet she uncovered. It’s a euphemism. So, like, what was the guy wearing that she could just pull it aside and leave him vulnerable like that?

And what on earth must have been going through her mind at that point? I mean this was crazy, right? She had no idea what was going to happen. Or maybe she did—maybe the absolute worst that could happen was that he sent her away or risk ruining both their reputations. But maybe not. It’s hard not to run this situation through the lens of modern sexual norms and come up with WHAT?!?

Once again: Ruth=Strong and faithful. Badass even.

What’s the craziest thing I’ve ever done for all the right reasons?

*08-31*

“At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’”

— Ruth 3:8-9

So this just proves my point about Stealth Ruth (yesterday). It was so dark on the threshing floor that Boaz didn’t recognize her. He could only make out the shape of a woman. It also makes me think maybe he was the only guy sleeping on the threshing floor, unless he was keeping his voice low. And I wonder how long it took him to realize that his “feet” were uncovered? What did that signify to him? The story never actually addresses it. It’s done and forgotten. All that matters at this point is that she says he is next-of-kin. That’s definitely significant, of course, and so we have finally come to that moment when Ruth’s actions have run their course and she has left everything in Boaz’s hands.

This is not an end to her strength and faithfulness, however, but another extension of them. It takes an incredible amount of strength and faith to turn over the end result of a given situation to another, whether it’s an actual human being or to God. Time and again in my own life I have had to let go of results, having the humility to realize those things that are beyond my control. It’s scary. Being scared doesn’t mean I’m not strong and faithful, of course. It just means I’m human. So I imagine Ruth was scared, too. That just makes me love her more.

What is the scariest thing I have had to let go of in my life? Where was God in my decision?