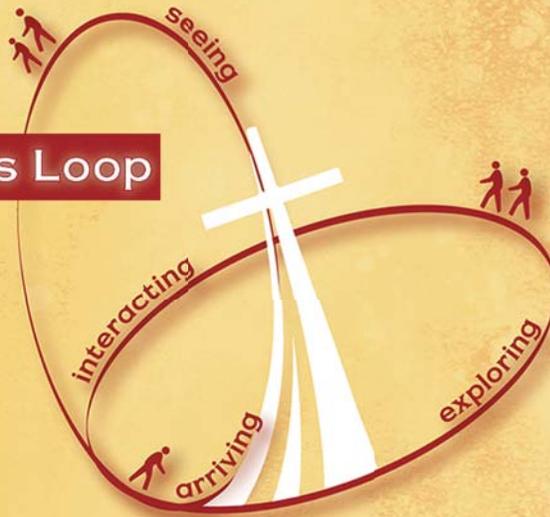


Devotional Week Two

The Jesus Loop



Sunday
September
16

*Today's key
verse*

Ruth 1:15

There is always someone who will tell you to go back. Someone, often times someone very close to you, will tell you to go back to your previous way of life before you arrived at a decision to change and go in a new, positive direction with your life. This is a common problem for anyone trying to change.

In our text today, Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, is discouraging Ruth's commitment to a new way of life. The irony is painful: one of God's chosen people, an Israelite, is discouraging a pagan Moabite woman from journeying to the land of promise and hope. Naomi, filled with her own bitterness (see Ruth 1:13 and 20), doesn't see any hope for herself and so can't see any hope for another either. "Go back," she says. But Ruth does not go back and her refusal to turn back makes all the difference.

I wonder what new direction you could take today that would make all the difference. I wonder who in your life keeps trying to push you back into hopelessness. Ruth is not going to be held back. She has arrived at the right decision and no one is going to compel her otherwise.

Dear God, thank you for being a Lord of new direction. Release me from powers that would hold me back. I'm coming to you. Amen.

Monday
September
17

*Today's key
verses*

Ruth 1:16-18

Sometimes people take dramatic actions that are so far outside of the box that one has to wonder why. Why? Why does Ruth leave everything—home, country, traditions and all her gods—to follow the mother of her dead husband to a strange country with strange customs and a different God? Not even Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, thinks this makes any sense. The Bible itself never gives us any insight into what Ruth is thinking or feeling or expecting to happen as she leaves everything she has known to go to Israel. Why?

I think that the only credible explanation for Ruth's decision is God. God is clearly at work to bring Ruth to Israel. He will work through her to restore hope and vitality to broken-down, bitter Naomi. He will work through Boaz and Ruth's union to bring about a son, the grandfather of the great King David, a forerunner of Christ. And God begins it all through a Gentile woman who arrives at a stunning commitment. It's all God.

For her part, Naomi begrudgingly lets Ruth tag along once she realizes that she can't get rid of her. Naomi surely doesn't see anything good coming about due to Ruth's decision, but, as Ruth and Naomi trudge toward Israel, God has already arrived at his gracious plan for them. Naomi and Ruth have arrived even before they know it.

Dear God, I thank you for arriving in my life at just the right time. I thank you for motivating me to make a decision for you. Amen.

Tuesday
September
18

*Today's key
verses*

Ruth 1:16-18

When Ruth speaks the powerful words of these verses she is making a clear relational commitment to Naomi. The connection is so strong and impressive that these words are often used in wedding ceremonies. Sometimes these words are even enfolded into the wedding vows that husband and wife speak to each other. In a wedding context, the words are deeply romantic. But there is really nothing romantic about the original context. In fact, there is almost something desperate about the words as they were first spoken by Ruth. Ruth, like Naomi, is broken by the death of her husband and the loss of her brother-in-law and father-in-law. Now she is desperate not to be turned away from her mother-in-law. She is determined not to remain in Moab. She is decisive in her commitment to a new God—the God of Naomi. Somehow, and in some way, she knows that she needs the true God. She is desperate.

Ruth's commitment to God must not be overlooked. Yes, she is committed to Naomi and she must have built a strong relationship with her. Let's not minimize that. But human relationships simply don't have the everlasting significance of a divine relationship. Both Naomi and Ruth have already experienced this with the death of their spouses and loss of family support. What Ruth desperately wants now is to be united with Naomi's God. She has arrived at the place in her life where she chooses to be on God's side. Have you made that choice?

Dear Jesus, I am desperately devoted to you—at least, I want to be. Make my commitment to you just as strong as your commitment to me. Amen.

Wednesday
September
19

*Today's key
verse*

Ruth 1:19

We love stories of rags to riches. Rags to riches stories always begin the same way. Someone has nothing—they are in rags. Then fortunes change, sometimes by romance, sometimes by hard work, sometimes just by luck. Rags turn into riches.

Right now, as they return to Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth's lives are in tatters. We know this is a set up for a rags to riches story, but they don't know it. Ruth and Naomi have arrived with nothing and they have come from a place that is worse than nothing (Moab was despised by Israel). It is safe to say expectations are very low. Yet the whole town is stirred.

There may just be rags at the moment, but these words about a "stirring" town foreshadow what is to come. The Holy Spirit is reminding us that something is happening. God himself is stirring. It will not be hard work, chance, or even romance that brings about the riches for Naomi and Ruth, but the mighty hand of God. Yes, there is perhaps some romance in this story (if you can call a threshing floor and uncovered feet romantic), and Boaz is a type of hero, but the center of the story is how God is at work. Not all of us have a rags to riches story to tell. Some of us may even have gone from riches to rags. The real question is, how is God at work in our rags and riches to bring about our salvation?

Lord, I desire the fullness of your riches in Christ. Whether I find myself in earthly rags or extravagant riches, may I know the richness of your salvation in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Thursday
September
20

*Today's key
verse*

Ruth 1:20

Naomi wasn't always bitter, after all her name means pleasant. Presumably her life was filled with pleasant things when she first got married and settled down in Israel with her husband. Then things got tough. Famine came to the land. In response, Naomi and her husband left the promised land for the supposed greener pastures of Moab. I suppose they had sweet dreams of the milk and honey of a new land. As they say, "the grass is always greener on the other side." But, once they got to the other side, things really got tough. Naomi's husband and both of her sons die. She is a widow away from her homeland with no immediate family. Therefore, it is no wonder she slinks into Bethlehem filled with bitterness.

Simply put, there is no pleasantness left in Naomi. She refuses the name Naomi and embraces the bitterness. She wants to be called Mara, a name that means bitterness. How fitting, and yet, how tragic. It has been said that it is not how one handles success that defines a person, it is how one handles failure. Naomi is not handling failure well.

Graciously, God is in the business of turning around human tragedy and bitterness. He brings renewed life and vitality. Naomi thinks she is arriving in Bethlehem with nothing but bitterness, but God has other plans—pleasant plans for her. Your plans may fail and you may be overcome by bitterness, but God's plans do not fail and he can overcome your bitterness.

Thank you, God, for having a plan for me. Any failure and bitterness that comes my way is not the end of the world. Open my eyes to the pleasant pastures you still have reserved for me. In Jesus name, Amen.

Friday
September
21

*Today's key
verse*

Ruth 3:21

One sure way to remain bitter is to dwell on past and present difficulties. At the same time, think of yourself as a victim—always find someone or something else to blame as the source of your trouble. Refuse to be consoled. This attitude will ensure your status as a bitter victim. Naomi has arrived in this place—but God has other arrival plans for her.

Three times in just one verse, Naomi blames God for all her trouble. It is God who has brought her back empty. It is God who has afflicted her. It is God who has caused her misfortune. Her husband and sons have died. It is all God's fault. There is nothing left but bitterness.

Now too be sure, God is sovereign and, as the Psalms and other Scripture make clear, it is appropriate to lament and question him. Naomi goes beyond mere lament and questioning, however. In her bitterness, she holds out no possibility of God's restoration, healing and renewal. Blessedly, God doesn't wait for humans to get their acts' together before he begins to work. In Naomi's case, we know that God is already at work. He has brought Naomi, and the overlooked blessing of her daughter-in-law, back to the place of healing and hope. Without realizing it, and while still only seeing herself as a victim, Naomi has arrived in God's presence. This arrival makes all the difference.

Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing me to the right place. I have arrived, even though I may not know it yet. Show me your hope and healing. In Jesus name, Amen.

Saturday
September
22

*Today's key
verse*

Ruth 1:22

In spite of it of all, Naomi and Ruth have arrived. They have arrived in Bethlehem. Bethlehem means the house of bread. Moreover, it is the time of the barley harvest. Once again, we find these subtle observations in Holy Scripture—from the Holy Spirit—guiding us into a state of anticipation. The setting is ripe for God to do good things.

In those days Bethlehem was just a small town with a nifty name alluding to bread. However, with our New Testament ears, we immediately think of it as the birth place of Jesus. Moreover, if we remember how the book of Ruth ends, we know that Ruth has a distinct, albeit distant, role in bringing about that birth. Naomi and Ruth are in Bethlehem—the birth place of the Messiah, the Savior, the hope of the world.

Notwithstanding our bitterness and emptiness, God is at work whenever we arrive at a place of dependence on him. Ruth does not know it and could not possibly understand it. Naomi, in her bitterness, cannot yet grasp it. But we, the modern reader with the full story in front of us, through the pages of Scripture and with the help of the Holy Spirit, know that God is on the move. Naomi and Ruth have arrived at the right place, for this is the future birth place of Jesus! Without knowing it, they have arrived at Jesus. How about you?

Jesus, thanks for arriving in Bethlehem on my behalf. Give me a complete sense of dependence on your gracious work, so that I may arrive in you. Amen.