When God Seems Absent

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ruth 1:1-17

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I talk plenty about God’s presence and far less about God’s absence. How do we go on believing when God seems absent? If you are struggling today with God’s absence, this sermon has you in mind.

If you’ve been reading The Story with us, Ruth comes at just the right time. Some of you are fed up with all the bloodshed in Joshua and Judges. Ruth is a wonderfully redemptive story, both at the human and cosmic levels.

At the outset of our story, Elimelek and Naomi live with their two sons in Bethlehem during a severe famine. How ironic that Bethlehem means “house of bread.” The family migrates to Moab to find food. Their two sons marry Moabite woman; one is named Orpah and the other is named Ruth.

Naomi’s husband dies, as do her two sons. Naomi is now a widow living in a foreign land with two bereft daughters-in-law. Naomi might be called the female counterpart to Job in the Bible.

Naomi resolves to go home to Bethlehem and instructs her two daughters-in-law to find husbands in Moab. In those days, jobs were scarce for women and the best chance for stability was to be married.

Orpah does as she is told but Ruth clings to Naomi. Ruth speaks one of the most memorable acts of loyalty found anywhere in ancient literature. It’s often read at weddings: “Do not entreat me to leave you. Where you go, I will go. 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 deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (1:16-17).

How can you argue with that! So, these two widows return to Bethlehem. When the women of the town lay eyes on Naomi after a ten-year hiatus they ask, “Is that Naomi?” Naomi responds, “Don’t call me Naomi any longer (her name means sweetness). Call me Mara, for the Lord has dealt bitterly with me. I left full but the Lord has brought me back empty” (1:20-21). This is one bitter woman.
Ruth resolves to make the most of a difficult situation by gleaning. Farmers were instructed, in the Torah, not to harvest the edges of their fields, thereby leaving a remnant for the poor (Deuteronomy 24:19). Ruth picks a field, seemingly at random, to find food for her and Naomi.

The owner of the field, Boaz, asks about this young foreigner gleaning in his field. His servants identify her as Ruth, the Moabite. Her reputation for showing loyalty to Naomi already precedes her. Boaz instructs his servants not to harm or abuse her. He prays that God will repay Ruth for her uncommon loyalty to Naomi.

Ruth returns home with a hefty haul of wheat. When Ruth announces that she has been gleaning at Boaz’ field, Naomi is ecstatic. Boaz is related to her deceased husband. Naomi calls him one of their kinsman-redeemers (2:20).

According to Jewish law, a kinsman-redeemer is the closest male relative who is obligated to provide for a widow in the family if she is in distress. If such a widow is forced to sell her land for financial reasons, the next of kin serves as a redeemer by buying the land to insure that it remains in the family (Leviticus 25:25).

Gleaning will provide them with daily subsistence but Naomi proposes a risky plan to secure their future. She directs Ruth to look her best and go down to the threshing floor where Boaz is working. After Boaz has drunk his fill of wine and nods off to sleep, Ruth is told to lie down next to him and “he will tell you what to do.” (3:4) What exactly does Naomi have in mind here at the threshing floor?

Boaz awakens to find Ruth sleeping next to him. Ruth doesn’t wait for Boaz to tell her what to do; she tells Boaz what to do: “Spread your cloak over your servant for you are our kinsman-redeemer” (3:9). It sounds cryptic, I know, but it amounts to a marriage proposal. She implores Boaz to fulfill the demands of a kinsman-redeemer.

Boaz is flattered that Ruth is interested in marrying him rather than a younger suitor. There’s only one sticking point. Someone else is actually
next of kin. Boaz promises to do the right thing and take up the matter tomorrow at the city gate.

The elders in the town gather daily at the city gate to conduct business. Boaz recruits ten elders to serve as judge and jury. When he tells the next of kin that Naomi wants to sell her share of the property, the man says, “I’ll redeem it.” And we were hoping Boaz would do it.

But Boaz has another card up his sleeve. “You know, don’t you, that Naomi has a widowed daughter-in-law, a Moabite, who comes with the deal. If you play the role of the kinsman-redeemer, you must take her as your wife and rise up offspring in the name of her deceased husband.” Suddenly, the next of kin is not so interested. The way is now clear for Boaz to buy the land and marry Ruth.

You’re thinking this is a happy love story yet the final few verses hint at a deeper meaning. Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, the grandmother of Jesse and the great-grandmother of King David, the greatest monarch Israel has ever known.

The book of Ruth serves as an oasis in an otherwise sober account of inhumanity in this section of Scripture. Boaz and Ruth are exemplary people. Their generosity and loyalty becomes wonderfully redemptive in salvation history.

I’ll say more about generosity and loyalty on Sunday, November 23rd, what we are calling Vision Sunday in our church. Make every effort to join us that Sunday.

I sympathize with Naomi. Losing everyone important leaves her feeling empty and bitter. In the end, her bitterness is replaced with sweetness and her emptiness gives way to fullness. She has gone from full to empty to full again.

We are never told, in so many words, what God is doing in this story. God is off stage in our story, working behind the scenes. God never speaks. Nothing is attributable to God until our story reaches its conclusion.
I entitled this sermon “When God Seems Absent.” God seems absent from the story, but it’s a seeming absence rather than a real absence. There are times when God feels more absent than present. There are seasons in our lives when God seems more like an imaginary friend than a real, living presence. If you have followed Jesus for any length of time, you know of what I speak. Some Christians have given up on church and the life of faith because no one forewarned them about times when God seems absent.

Why doesn’t God more directly intervene when we are feeling this divine absence? Perhaps God graciously withdraws from us so that we will come to recognize our deep need for Him.

The 16th century monk, St. John of the Cross, wrote a classic work entitled *Dark Night of the Soul*. His reference to “dark night of the soul” is a metaphor for God’s absence. Yet this darkness or absence comes with a silver-lining. This seeming absence leads us to deeper faith and a renewed desire to seek him.

God’s apparent absence has a hidden benefit. It can clarify our desire for God. Don’t we say that absence makes the heart grow fonder? Deprivation draws out desire.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn was a writer and revolutionary during the days of communism in the former Soviet Union. As a result of his outspoken beliefs, he was sentenced to eight years in a Soviet labor camp. His experience in prison changed him in remarkable ways. Solzhenitsyn admitted to being arrogant and self-righteous. His labor camp experience brought him to a place of deep humility. He looks back on prison experiences in his book *Gulag Archipelago*, “Bless you, prison. I’ve nourished my soul there. I can say without hesitation, ‘Bless you, prison, for having you in my life.’”

The technology used in raising children today fascinates me. Our daughter, Emily, and son-in-law, Mike, installed a video monitoring device near the crib of their one-year-old son, Michael. When Michael is in the crib, his parents seem absent to him. But with the marvels of
technology, Emily and Mike can be sitting downstairs in the dining room watching him in his crib.

You could say God has His own version of surveillance trained on us. Keep in mind that His surveillance is not primarily punitive and judgmental; it is redemptive and restorative. Even when God seems absent, God is present.

Was Ruth’s gleaning in Boaz’ field the result of dumb luck or providence? We read in our story, “As it happens, Ruth came to the field belonging to Boaz” (2:3). Was it happenstance that Ruth chose to glean in Boaz’ field or was God superintending all these happenings? Naomi’s friends certainly think God has been orchestrating the events that lead Ruth to Boaz: “Praise be to the Lord, who has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer” (4:14).

I count ten references to this kinsman-redeemer in our story. Since God is guiding these events, we could say, in a very real sense, God is Naomi’s kinsman-redeemer. God is orchestrating these events to lead Ruth to Boaz. God is the one who inspires Ruth and Boaz to do the right thing.

Let me bring this message all the way down to the sacrament of Holy Communion we’re observing today. In Matthew’s gospel, there are four women identified in Jesus’ genealogy. One of them is Ruth. This foreigner Ruth is the foremother to Jesus, our kinsman redeemer. He is our kinsman through his incarnation. He takes on real flesh and blood to rescue us by his saving death. He has purchased our redemption as our kinsman-redeemer by his sacrifice on the cross.