

A Sermon  
Rev. W. Kevin Holder  
Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
May 14, 2017

## **Redemption**

Ruth 4:11-17

A few weeks ago, Victoria Atkinson White wrote a piece with a title that immediately grabbed my attention: "Basketball, Redemption, and Resurrection." The article was about my beloved UNC Tar Heels basketball team. After losing the 2016 national championship game on a last second shot by Villanova, the Tar Heels began searching for ways to motivate themselves for another run at the title. One player who had been photographed with a towel over his head following the defeat used the picture as his phone's screen saver during the offseason. The team began a text messaging group chat called "Redemption." In fact, as the team progressed further into the 2017 season, and then deeper into the March Madness tournament, the entire journey became known as the "Redemption Tour."

In early April, the "Redemption Tour" came to a successful end as UNC beat Gonzaga to win its sixth national championship. This time around, instead of sitting in the locker room with towels over their heads, the players were on the court hoisting the trophy as confetti fell from the stadium ceiling. In the span of one year, things had certainly turned around. Now, the last word wasn't defeat, but victory. In fact, the day after the game, one player capped off the experience by tweeting a screenshot of the new group message. It was called "Redeemed."

"Redemption" is one of those big theological words that we use a lot in the church. We speak of God as our Redeemer. We preach and teach about how the death of Jesus redeems us from our sins. In our Scripture passage from 1 Peter earlier in today's service, the writer says, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1:18-19). And so we sing, "Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it! / Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; / Redeemed thro' His infinite mercy, / His child, and forever, I am."

At the beginning of the book of Ruth, Naomi doesn't feel much like singing. To be honest, she feels more rejected than redeemed. Recall that the story begins with Naomi and her husband Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Killion, living in Moab, where the family has gone to find some relief from the famine in Bethlehem. While in Moab, Elimelech dies, and the sons marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. After ten years in Moab, the two sons die as well. Now, all Naomi has are her two daughters-in-law. And we soon learn that she wants them to remarry. At least they're young enough to find new husbands and have children. Naomi's situation, by contrast, looks pretty hopeless. She feels absolutely empty, and blames God for it.

Naomi's name means "pleasant" or "sweet." But at this point in the story she doesn't feel very sweet. And life certainly hasn't been sweet to her. Her devastation and grief are understandable. She's lost her husband and her children. Losing a spouse is hard enough, let alone both of her sons. During this week's worship gathering with our day care children, I shared a message on how God, through Jesus, has adopted us into his family, which included sharing a family photo from a time when I was still a little boy on my mother's lap. One little girl raised her hand and said, "And just remember, Pastor Kevin, no matter how

big you get, you'll always be your mommy's little boy." Both of Naomi's babies, her little boys, are gone, and the husband whose line they would have continued. It's no wonder that when Naomi eventually returns to Bethlehem, she tells the excited townspeople, "It's probably better not to call me by my given name anymore, because it doesn't fit my circumstances. It would be more appropriate for you to call me Mara, which means 'bitter.'" "I went away full," says Naomi, "but the Lord has brought me back empty" (1:21).

But remember that Naomi still has Ruth. When Naomi tried to persuade Orpah and Ruth to return to their own mothers' homes, it looked like things might end with a tearful goodbye. Orpah did choose to go back home. But Ruth clung to Naomi. In fact, Ruth's response to Naomi has some overtones of indignation. Ruth may actually be upset that Naomi wants her just to set aside her loyalty and go back to her family of origin. As one commentator has put it, Ruth, in effect, says, "Your God is my God, and your people are my people; therefore, where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. And it makes me angry when you urge me to abandon these commitments!"<sup>1</sup> Whatever her exact feelings about the situation, Ruth certainly demonstrates faithfulness to the Lord and loving devotion to Naomi. In one sense, Ruth is prepared to surrender her past in order to move forward with Naomi toward the future. And in the rest of the book of Ruth, that future unfolds.

Early on, things still look bleak for Naomi and Ruth. Ruth spends a lot of time in the fields, eking out a living by gathering the leftover crops. That's where she meets Boaz, a successful farmer who's also a relative of Naomi's late husband. This means he may also be a possible "redeemer" who can rescue Ruth and Naomi from their impoverished circumstances and provide a son to carry on Elimelech's name. Ruth catches Boaz's eye, and the two begin to show an interest in each other. Things seem to be moving along slowly, however, and after about two months Naomi hatches a plan to bring Boaz and Ruth together. The encounter between the two, full of sexual innuendo, eventually leads to a further scene where Boaz has to strike a deal with another guy who renounces his claim on Ruth. So now Boaz is free to marry her. Soon the two are united, and together they have a son, baby Obed. The culmination of the story is captured in today's Scripture passage.

Though it's a text from what we call the book of Ruth, this closing scene, like so much of the narrative, is more about Naomi. The story began with her and ends with her. At this point, Naomi is surrounded by the women of Bethlehem, who rejoice that the Lord has provided for her. So somehow, all along, Naomi's life and her future have been in the hands of God, who cares for the marginalized, who sees society's invisible ones, and who takes up the cause of the oppressed. Remember that Naomi and Ruth have demonstrated great resourcefulness in the midst of a patriarchal system where women without husbands or male relatives were extremely vulnerable. It's true that neither of them, nor anyone else in the story, has been a model of absolute faithfulness. The book of Ruth has plenty of moments of misbehavior and maneuvering. But that only goes to show that the joyful conclusion is due more to a faithful God than to fickle human beings.

And now, the infant that a redeeming God had formed in the womb of Ruth is placed in the hands of Naomi, who lays little Obed in her lap and cares for him. And the women of the town announce, "Naomi has a son" (v. 17). Really? I thought this was Ruth's baby boy. Why is grandma getting so much of the attention? Especially on a day like today. Shouldn't Ruth, as the birth mother, be the one getting most of the recognition, including the flowers and gifts and dinner at Bethlehem's nicest restaurant? Not when we take into account the full story, which, as I said, is more about the faithfulness of the God who redeems, and how his redemption is worked out in the life of Naomi.

By the time we reach the end of the story, God has certainly turned things around for Naomi. Just ask the women of Bethlehem. At the beginning they were the ones absorbing

Naomi's bereavement and bitterness. Now they're the ones assuring Naomi that the Lord has not abandoned her. In fact, he hasn't just not abandoned her. The Lord has actually reversed her circumstances. Naomi has gone from fullness to emptiness and back to fullness again.

Christian recording artist Carolyn Arends writes about insight she gained through some inspiring words from her pastor one Easter. During the service, he said, "The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise." Arends writes:

Empty cross, empty tomb, empty grave-clothes . . . all full of promise . . .

What is it about God that makes him so favor this kind of paradox? I guess this is what we should expect from the Servant King—the God who decided that the best way to save the world was to let it kill him. I don't understand the way God thinks. But on those days when I feel hollowed out and broken—half-dead, even—it makes me glad to remember that for Easter people, even death is full of promise.

The world makes a lot of promises. Smoke and mirrors, mostly. Frantic, cartoonish attempts to distract us from the gaping holes in the middle of our souls (or to sell us the latest product in order to fill them). There's no life in those promises.

So I'm hoping that . . . I'll be a little more willing to die to that stuff. I'm praying I'll become more aware of the empty space within, and that I'll resist the urge to fill it with any old thing I can find. I'm going to wait, carved out, vulnerable, a cracked and crumbling jar of clay, on a life God's offered to deposit anywhere there's room. I'm going to believe that if I'll just leave my empty spaces empty, he'll fill them. That, I'm convinced, is a reasonable expectation.<sup>2</sup>

Naomi had plenty of empty spaces in her life and experience. Remember that she lived in a context where to be childless, whether because of your inability to conceive or because your offspring were deceased, wasn't just a form of sorrow. It was also a form of death. Having children meant the continuation of your name, the continuation of your bloodline, the continuation of life. But in Naomi's situation, both her husband and her sons were gone. So in her case it looked like the last word was death. And yet, the book of Ruth is the story of how the Lord, who reverses the seemingly irreversible, is the one who has the last word. And it's a word of redemption. And redemption means that God raises up what is dead, giving victory instead of defeat. In the face of what looks completely hopeless, God renews, God restores, God redeems.

God not only wants to fill the spaces of emptiness in our personal lives, but in our life together as his people. In the book of Ruth, Naomi's situation isn't just personal. She's also a symbol of Israel, God's people, who often find themselves without any prospect of a future. But redemption means that what looks like an end may actually be a new beginning, or at least the first step toward a very different future. So it is that Ruth's (and yes, Naomi's) son Obed becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David, Israel's greatest king and redeemer. And from the line of David eventually comes the one by whom we're redeemed, renewed, raised from the dead. You see, by turning things around for Naomi, God kept his promises to his people, and took a crucial step toward eventually turning things around for all of us, through Christ. So wherever there's emptiness, and the absence of life, in us and among us, may it be filled by the Lord's presence and power.

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 907.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Arends, "What's So Good About Good Friday?" Kyria.com (April 10, 2009).