

## *Always There, Always Loving*

5<sup>th</sup> Weekend of Easter – May 13/14, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

*Proverbs 21:30-31 (NRSV)*

<sup>30</sup>No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel,  
can avail against the LORD.

<sup>31</sup>The horse is made ready for the day of battle,  
but the victory belongs to the LORD.

*Ruth 4:13-17 (NRSV)*

<sup>13</sup>So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.

When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup>Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup>He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” <sup>16</sup>Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup>The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

*Extreme makeovers are hard. Yes, God works in us and with us, but we have our own work to do. This is made all the more difficult if we can't see that God is always working behind the scenes . . . always there, always loving.*

The story of Ruth and Naomi is from the time of the Judges. That is why it is placed between the books of Judges and Samuel. It is not a story about all the big happenings in Israel. It is not about Israel's judges, such as Deborah and Gideon. Nor is it about Israel's wars and her enemies. The book of Ruth is not about most of what we think of as “history,” the big events that we think shape the future.

Instead, the story of Ruth is a small story about a few ordinary people. In it, we find a wonderful story of friendship, love, and redemption. We could even find an inspiring story of Naomi's extreme makeover after her return to Israel. But as we close out this series on transformation, I want to use the story of God's work in the lives of Naomi and Ruth to talk about his work in our own lives, in our own transformations.

*God working?*

Do you believe that God works in your own life? Every day? How about your family's life? In the larger world? How can you tell what is God's work and what is not? . . . These are the sort of questions we need to ask ourselves. Many people, including many Christians, don't see God at work in their lives. How could God hear my prayers, they ask themselves. God doesn't have time to be concerned with me. I hear things like this regularly and it always saddens me.

#### The Story of Ruth and Naomi

The story of Naomi (and it is Naomi's story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth's faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Now, Naomi's sons were dead and the three widows were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman. Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab, among their own families. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own. But this was not the end of their story; it was only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty,” she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant “sweetness,” even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for “bitter.” Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching and somewhat complicated story that consumes much of the book.

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It is so easy to make God into an absentee landlord. Yes, we say, God created everything and got it all going, but now it is just running forward, pushed along by all the natural mechanisms that God put in place. We might use the word “miracle” once in awhile, but only to describe a rare moment when the absentee landlord chooses to do something that science cannot explain. We don’t realize that when we see God at work only in what science cannot explain, then as science explains more and more there is ever less room for God.

In the ancient world, there was no science. Everything was explained by the gods. The gods made the rain fall. Not because the gods created a world with weather systems, but because some god wanted it to rain on that day, in that place. A leaf falls to the ground . . . a god caused it to fall. A man wins the lottery; a god caused it. A man develops a horrible disease; a god caused it. Some god was the first cause, the direct cause, of everything. This perspective was as true for the ancient Israelites as for any other peoples. When the disciples have to replace Judas after Jesus’ death and resurrection, they roll the dice (cast lots), confident that God will cause the dice to come out the way God intends (Acts 1).

So, which is it? God as the absentee landlord or God as the direct cause of all things? The answer is neither – it is a false choice. God is not absent; God is present. God is active and caring and in my life and yours, in things big and small. Sometimes God works in a way that surprises us (we often call this a “miracle”) but also in what seems ordinary and mundane.

But God is also not the direct cause of all things. God’s created universe works according to mechanisms that are often predictable, at least so far as we are able to explain them. If I climb into my 2,000 lb. car and drive it into a concrete abutment at 90 miles an hour, I’m going to die. A physicist or engineer could calculate just how bad it is going to be. Now, I don’t believe that God as revealed in Jesus Christ would ever will such a thing, but it would still happen.

*Continued from the page one  
textbox*

After the marriage, we are told that “when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son” (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth’s son, would be Naomi’s redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that “Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.” This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God’s people, making them (us!) whole.

The story of Ruth is from the time of the judges. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, it was a tragic time in the history of Israel. The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel. Perhaps this is partly why the story of their friendship was cherished and passed on by the people of God.

*Behind the scenes*

God doesn’t will the death of Naomi’s husband nor of Orpah’s nor of Ruth’s. Can anyone really imagine Jesus, who is the full revelation of God, desiring such things? I can’t. But God does work to bring good out of the tragedies. As Paul would write centuries later, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God . . .” (Romans 8:25).

In the lives of Naomi and Ruth, the good purposes that God brings out of the tragedy includes what we’d probably label as ordinary *and* miraculous, though we shouldn’t label them as either. Sometimes, God’s work is simply more surprising than at other times. But still, the “ordinary” includes the love and friendship that develop between the two women and Naomi’s redemption. The “extraordinary” lies in Ruth’s baby, who will go on to be the grandfather of David, the great king of Israel. Large and small, God works in it all.

So, is God working in our lives every day? Thankfully, yes. My extreme makeover would quickly stall if it depended only upon an occasional “miracle.” But how do we tell what is God’s work in our lives and what is not?

Here is my personal practice: The good in my life I ascribe to God, the bad to myself or to others or to the natural mechanisms of this universe – but *never* to God. That may seem a tad simplistic but I think it gets as close to the truth as I’m going to get. I believe that God brought Patti, my wife, to me. I believe that God has blessed me with three wonderful sons. I believe that God has blessed me in many ways and has brought good out of my mistakes and failings. And, perhaps most importantly, I believe that God has challenged me to make the most of the goodness he has brought me. That is the story of my own extreme makeover.

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

May 14 - 20

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.  
Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Day 1</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>	<p><b>Day 2</b> 1 Samuel 1-3; Proverbs 24:23-34 Samuel's birth and dedication; God calls Samuel while he is still a boy</p>
<p><b>Day 3</b> 1 Samuel 4-6; Proverbs 25:1-14 The Ark of the Covenant is captured but later returned</p>	<p><b>Day 4</b> 1 Samuel 7-9; Proverbs 25:15-28 Samuel warns Israel about their unwise desire for a human king; When the people persist, God chooses Saul</p>
<p><b>Day 5</b> 1 Samuel 10-12; Proverbs 26:1-16 Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel; Samuel "retires" and urges the people to stay true to God despite their demand for a king other than God</p>	<p><b>Day 6</b> 1 Samuel 13-15; Proverbs 26:17-28 Saul disobeys God and sets in motion his own demise; we meet Jonathan, Saul's son, who will become a soul-friend of David</p>
<p><b>Day 7</b> 1 Samuel 16-19; Proverbs 27:1-14 Saul is again disobedient and Samuel knows that another king must be found; Samuel anoints young David as the one who is to replace Saul</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### May Book Recommendation

#### ***Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, by N.T. Wright**

Even a casual reader of these studies has probably noticed how foundational Bishop Wright is to my work and my understanding of God, Jesus, and the Bible. A couple of months ago, Bishop Wright released a new book that I will recommend first to anyone, *Simply Christian: Making Sense of Christianity*. This is an introduction to Christianity unlike any you've read. Wright makes the case for the Christian claims and explains in simple, yet beautiful, prose the story we tell about God and his creation.

I hope you will find time this summer for Bishop Wright's book. It is both an easy and a thought-provoking read. I'm pretty sure that you will never see your faith in quite the same way again.

### Decoding Da Vinci: The Movie!

#### **With Scott Engle at 9:30 in Wesley Hall on Sunday, May 28**

Well, it's here. *The Da Vinci Code* movie opens on May 19. You can bet that it is going to be BIG. More copies of *The Da Vinci Code* were sold in 2004 worldwide than of the Bible. On Sunday, May 28, Scott Engle will discuss some of the many mistakes and misconceptions about Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Constantine, and the New Testament that are key to the book's plot. The Good News is not a secret!

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In *The Grand Sweep*, Ellsworth Kalas sees in the story of Ruth that "God Is Always Behind the Scenes." Naomi and Ruth may not have seen God working to bring good out of their tragedies, but God was doing exactly that. Kalas writes, "And what about today? Is God still at work, beyond our knowing it? Especially - is God as work in your own life, or mine? In many matters, I think we don't know for sure, or in detail, until eternity. But in my own soul, I'm sure it is happening."

Kalas knows that we can't really know always where God is working in our lives and where he is not. It certainly isn't something we could prove to a skeptic. Yet, Kalas knows in his heart that God *does* work in his life. Just as I know that God works in mine. Just as I know that God works in your life. It feels right to me that I should ascribe to God whatever good there is in my life, for I know that God loves me because I know that he gave his son for me. This doesn't mean that God will shield me from the consequences of stupid decisions or an unloving heart or even the actions of others. But it does mean that God is always working to bring goodness out of the mess - and I cannot be too grateful.

So . . . do you see God at work in your own life? How? When? What are some specific examples of how God has brought good out of difficulty and pain? Could you see it at the time or only later? Did others help you to see God at work in your life? How does this understanding of God's work in our lives help to shape and strengthen our extreme makeovers? Does it give us more confidence? Perhaps perseverance through difficulties? Perhaps hope?