

Sermon Notes: May 23, 2021

Focus: Pentecost and an unlikely Pentecost Scripture, at least for Christians [Lectionary](#)

I want to attempt a different take on Pentecost Sunday by focusing on the book of Ruth. I know that Acts 2 is a celebration of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. I know that the book of Acts has spectacular happenings with people speaking in many tongues. Pentecost is a Christian story about the reversal of the curse of the tower of Babel in Genesis. Christians speak of Pentecost as a kind of birthday of the church.

But then there is Ruth. It is so intimate, particular, rooted in Jewish history and practice. It is a nice balance to the narrative that Christians have adopted. Pentecost started Jewish and remained Jewish. Christians have added meaning to the story, but either way, Pentecost is about God's deep commitment to us. Christians see God committing to all the nations. Reading Ruth on Pentecost is about us deeply committing to each other.

Ruth is **not** part of our Pentecost readings. In contemporary Jewish practice, Ruth was read on May 16th in many synagogues as part of Pentecost / Shavuot. Remember, Pentecost is a Jewish festival – first. It celebrates God who provides plenty. I do **not** share the Jewish/Ruth connection as a sideways attempt to take sides on the violence going on right now in Israel/Palestine. I **do** want to attempt a more intimate Christian view of the Pentecost. Pentecost is about a big tent that God has for all people. Jewish understanding of the book of Ruth is about pitching a tent for each other. Jewish understanding is that in time of trial, we are the redeemers we have been waiting for. Yes, I know that Jesus is our ultimate redeemer.

Here is an article from “Israel Today.” It goes into more detail about Jewish understanding of harvest, redemption, and Torah in light of Pentecost.

[Why Do We Read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot?](#)

May 27, 2020, | David Lazarus

Pentecost for most Christians is the festival recalling the giving of the Holy Spirit as recorded in the New Testament in the Book of Acts. However, in Jewish tradition Shavuot, Hebrew for Pentecost, has many more and crucial meanings which give us a much fuller understanding of why the Holy Spirit was given and what is supposed to happen on this special day.

It's harvest time One of the more beautiful and misunderstood traditions during Shavuot is reading the Scroll of Ruth in synagogue. One reason we read this story is that it takes place during the Spring Harvest, the same season as Shavuot. That's why we also call the holiday “First Fruits” in Israel. It's a time to bring the best of all we have reaped up to the Temple in Jerusalem as a Thanks Offering to the Lord of the Harvest. The Messiah's disciples were themselves a “first fruit” of the Holy Spirit given on Shavuot and they understood that they were to offer up the first and best of themselves, and all they owned, in service of the Lord.

It's Torah time We read the Scroll of Ruth because in the story she took it upon herself to be united with Naomi and the Jewish people. This required her to keep the commandments and traditions as stated in the Torah. And in Jew tradition, Shavuot is also called Hag Matan Torah, the holiday of the Giving of the Torah. We believe that the Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai exactly seven weeks after the Exodus from Egypt and the first Passover. For those who do not know, Shavuot in Hebrew means the seven weeks counted after Passover, and Pentecost of course means 50 which is the day after 7 x 7 weeks.

Many see the giving of the Spirit on Shavuot as a renewing or restoration of the true, even magnified, Torah. Interestingly, this is hinted to in Gematria whereby the name Ruth equals 606, the number of commandments – beyond the 7 Noachide commandments applicable to all people – that Ruth had to accept as part of her conversion becoming a Jew.

It's time for redemption But I want to suggest another reason we read Ruth on Shavuot, perhaps one more significant than those mentioned above.

This Scroll of Ruth is the story par excellence of redemption. Ruth becomes the great grandmother of a shepherd boy named David, who will become the first king of Judah leading ultimately to King Messiah, Son of David culminating in eternal redemption.

Ruth herself is a profound example of this redemptive grace. She cares for and accompanies her adoptive mother Naomi over many years and will redeem her nation of Moav who were ostracized from Israel because of their extreme lack of grace towards the people of Israel.

But perhaps most of all, it is the story of Naomi's redemption that highlights the scroll. She left Israel with her husband Elimelech at a time when they were needed most. She then suffered shame and dis-grace: her husband died; her sons intermarried into idolatrous nations, and then they, too, died. Naomi went from riches to rags and had to literally crawl back, poverty-stricken to Israel where she knew she would be looked down upon by the people she had deserted. Then, when she and her family ancestry is redeemed by Boaz, who marries her adopted daughter Ruth, Naomi regains her sense of pride and self-worth.

In a fascinating way, the Hebrew Scroll of Ruth brings this point home. At a critical place in the story (chapter 3), where Ruth has a rendezvous with Boaz at the threshing floor, the text is written in one form but read in another. This is a not an uncommon practice in public readings of biblical texts of the Hebrew Bible where there is a double or unclear meaning.

The original Hebrew text quotes Naomi as saying, "I will go down there," and "I will lie down" (next to Boaz). And later, when Ruth has a child, the women of the city declare, "A son has been born to Naomi!" We read "she will go down," meaning Ruth as this is the clear intention of the story, but the writers want us to understand something more important. For it is through the redemptive grace of Ruth, that Naomi now regains her place in Israel and in Jewish history. And here we learn that redemption is not only a future experience for individuals, but part of a collective restoration in the here and now, even as we are experiencing redemption on a grand scale in our own generation with Israel re-established and rising to greater and greater heights among the family of nations.

My summary of the Book of Ruth with Bible Project video link and graphic at end

The book of Ruth revolves around a Moabite woman who married the son of a Judaeen couple (Naomi and Elimelek) who were living in Moab. The book is set in the times of the Judges (when Israel was a loose confederation of tribes before the Kings united the land. Remember King Saul, David and Solomon?) During a Moabite famine, Elimelek and his sons Mahlon and Kilion (all Jews) died. The sons had been married to Ruth (a foreigner to them) and another woman named Orpah (another Moabite). Orpah does the "smart" thing and stays in Moab to find another partner during the famine. Ruth absolutely insists on staying with Naomi (her mother-in-law). Once the duo migrate to Bethlehem (Jewish), they are left to grapple with their refugee status.

There is part of Ruth that is often read at modern weddings: “I will go where you go, and your people will be my people.” This text is lifted from Ruth’s insistent speech to stick with Naomi as Naomi (a Jew) goes back to her Jewish homeland. Once in Jewish territory the two women live like beggars picking at the edges of a distant relative’s barley field. Ruth goes to the edge of a field owned by a man named Boaz. Naomi quick to see the signs, nudges her daughter-in-law to be a little more “visible” to Boaz. On the night of the harvest, she literally uncovers Boaz’s feet while he sleeps, she lies on the feet, and waits for him to wake up. Fill in your innuendo.

Boaz is very likely much older than Ruth because he glad that she did not pursue younger men. There is some confusion about kinship relations and if Boaz should be the “guardian redeemer” of this refugee – Ruth and her Jewish family member Naomi. After the guardian redeemer thing is settled, Ruth and Boaz get married (after sandals are exchanged... another long story). Ruth and Boaz live happily ever after, giving birth to a son Obed, the grandfather of King David. Go to Bible Project for the accompanying [video on Ruth](#)

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