

A Stirring

Ruth 1:19-22; James 1:2-18

1. Creating a Stir (19)
2. Stirring the Pot (20-21)
3. A Stirring of Hope (22)

19 So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"
20 "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

21 "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

22 So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

INTRO

At the end of Barack Obama's US presidency, someone put two photographs of him right next to each other. One was taken at his inauguration. The second was taken the inauguration, 8 years later, of his successor. He was standing in the same place, on the US Capitol steps. On his first day on the job, he was dead serious. On his last day, he was laughing, smiling, cheerful. The caption under these "before-and-after" photos said "that feeling when you realize it's not your problem anymore."

But the other before-and-after photos of President Obama I saw showed him, first, in 2008 with black hair, looking almost too young, maybe too cool, to be a president; and then second, in 2016, with gray hair, looking like a legitimate middle-aged man. The job makes you age faster.

When I went through a period of sorrow, I changed a lot, too. I became introverted instead of extroverted. Instead of my old levity, there was a heaviness and sadness that I often carried around. My wife often wondered, who IS this guy? I wasn't the same guy she married.

Hold on to these *illustrations* for a second.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, they create a stir. And after they do, Naomi speaks up, and stirs the pot. Then, our narrator gets the last words, which are meant to give us a stirring of hope as we turn the page to chapter 2.

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So let's look at those three things: Ruth and Naomi create a stir. Naomi stirs the pot. The narrator gives us a stirring of hope.

Creating a stir, stirring the pot, a stirring of hope.

First, Creating a stir.

1. Creating a Stir

Verse 19: 'When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"'

Naomi creates a stir because she's almost "unrecognizable." Of course, there's a physical element to this. Time has past. For her, it has been a time of deep sorrow, and so like a president, she's aged -- a lot. Suffering can do that to you.

No *you* is ever the same person from year to year, biologically or psychologically, no matter what life brings you. You change. But boy do you change when you suffer.

But there's an even more profound sense in which Naomi has become "unrecognizable": she is walking into town without her husband and her two sons. Remember, in her culture, a woman's status was tied to the men around her. And just 5 verses into the book of Ruth, all the men around Naomi are dead and gone.

When these women of Bethlehem see her arrive, there's probably a mixture of surprise, of pity, and perhaps especially of revulsion.

Why revulsion? These women can see *themselves* in Naomi. If *she* can end up man-less in a world that depends on men, it could happen to *us*, too. *We* could become unrecognizable as years, loss, sorrow, and death take their toll on us. No one says it, but surely they're thinking it.

When our suffering, or the suffering of another, confronts us with our own mortality, with our own vulnerability, it creates a stir. Hopefully it's more than gossip. Hopefully it stirs our hearts and souls. Hopefully it makes us say "I don't want to waste my breath. I don't want to waste anyone's time with a life that they don't need."

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Life is short, and when the LORD says ours is done; when the LORD says the lives of our loved ones are done; *then they're done*. Are we going to try to see who can die with the most toys? Are we going to ignore death? Are we going to fight death? Or are we going to consecrate ourselves, reserve our short, mortal lives, exclusively, for a cause that has no end? For a movement that has resurrection and immortality at its center?

When God creates a stir in our experience, will we respond to with self-preservation, or with devotion? The clock's ticking for all of us. Let's not waste our time. The only way not to waste your time is to ask Jesus, Lord of Resurrection, to take your life, your moments, your days, and to do something of eternal significance with them. And for now, Ruth is our guide to do this, and do it right.

The LORD is using the experiences you're having, and the teaching of his word, right now, to create a stir in you. What are you going to do about it?

2. Stirring the Pot

Naomi may not hear exactly what these women are saying about her. But she can hear them say her name --- Naomi --- in stunned disbelief.

And she clears up the mystery immediately.

20: I don't want to hear you call me Naomi. That name means "pleasant." And I'm not pleasant. My life isn't pleasant. My relationship with God has not been pleasant. When you greet me in the market, or see me walking along the street, you call me Mara --- Bitter. Why? Because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

21: "I went away full, but the LORD brought me back empty." "The LORD, the Almighty, has afflicted or testified against me ... God has wrecked my life."

Naomi, in her grief, considers her arrival with Ruth by her side to be "emptiness." The women notice Ruth, but they don't direct any questions to her, or about her. Naomi doesn't introduce Ruth or explain who she is.

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“I’m back,” Naomi says. “I’m coming back to church,” she says, in a sense. “But don’t expect me to be the smiley old lady Sunday School teacher telling the children that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives.”

Naomi stirs the pot. She says what she’s thinking. Quite a depressing homecoming parade!

And now, back to our question: how is Ruth our guide? How does Ruth ---in the face of death, in spite of sorrow all around us, and in our own souls---how does Ruth show us how to commit our lives to something that outlasts our sorrows---and even our deaths?

Ruth commits, and stays committed, to a woman who, at least right now, is too depressed to appreciate her. Or even to introduce her to her new neighbors. Ruth commits, and stays committed, to a people---the Bethlehem community---who are too preoccupied with their own interests to take an interest in her, at least right now.

Part of the evidence that a real experience of God’s grace has happened in Ruth’s life is this: she still has needs. Spiritual needs. Social needs. Physical needs. Psychological needs. But whether those needs are being fully met, and in pleasant ways, she knows she has her LORD and his covenant love, his *hesed*.

She can put up with being ignored. She can tolerate not being introduced. She can deal with the grumblings and even the depression and anxiety of the people in her community. She is willing to commit to people who are, let’s face it, kind of a mess.

When you have a real experience of God’s grace, you no longer expect the people in your church to be the best possible versions of themselves all the time. Instead, you begin to trust that the same God who has shown you grace and patience is at work in other people’s lives, patiently and graciously. God’s grace makes you patient and gracious with difficult, messy people.

Who are your Naomis in our fellowship? How are you going to “Ruth” them? How are you going to mirror the committed grace and patience of Jesus Christ to them, with the confidence that, if they are in Christ, they won’t always be bitter; with the confidence that, if they are in Christ, their most pleasant days are *always* ahead of them?

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If I see you at the train station or at Migros in a couple of weeks, and I ask you, “do you have your ‘Naomi?’, and are you ‘Ruthing’ them?,” will you be able to say, “yes, and yes, by God’s grace”?

3. A Stirring of Hope

Last, then, a stirring of hope.

You may be wondering, “where is this stirring of hope? In this sad passage?”

Let me give you two:

Number 1:

As soon as Naomi begins to talk about “Mara,” her bitterness, our hopes should be stirred. The first readers of this story would have had their hopes stirred? Why?

Because we’ve seen “Mara” in our Bibles before. Mara is the name that (Ex 15) When the discouraged, suffering Israelites were on their way from Egypt toward their new home, they came to a place where they found bitter, undrinkable water. They grumbled and complained that --- because this water was Mara --- the LORD was against them, instead of *for* them.

And instead of sending them back to Egypt, instead of judging them for their grumbling and complaining, the LORD was patient. And out of pure, undeserved grace, the LORD turned that bitter water into sweet, pleasant (Naomi, if you like) water. And then, just up the road from there, he provided 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees.

Naomi can’t yet see that Ruth is her sweet gift from her God. Naomi can’t see yet that something more pleasant even than 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees are just up her road. But it's there.

When you are a child of God, the time of bitterness and dryness will not last forever. There’s sweet, holy water up the road. There’s times of refreshment, there’s a pleasant shade, there’s a breeze from God’s Spirit, sooner or later, if we keep walking in faith.

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And we don't deserve that refreshment, that sweetness, that rest---whether its a bit of it here on earth or the fullness of it in glo ry. We're bitter. We grumble. In our bitterness we think and often say all kinds about our LORD that aren't true.

But if he's determined to refresh us with himself, it's ours. It's a gift!

Julian of Norwich---the 14th Century English Christian mystic, whom I just learned this week was a woman and not a man, famously declared, what every Christian believer knows is true: "all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Do you believe, that, despite your sin, by God's grace, all shall be well? Amd do you believe that every bit of God's grace comes through Jesus' blood? Then you believe the gospel!

Second: The Return of the King

The Hebrew word for "return" shows up 12 times in the beginning of this book. 6X about a return to Moab. 6X about a return to Bethlehem.

And then finally in verse 22, Naomi and Ruth "return" just at the beginning of the harvest. It's as if the narrator sticks this note in here just to keep us turning the pages. So we don't think "this is too depressing; I'm not reading any more."
Barley harvest begins. Just as they return.

Look: no matter how much it *seems* at times like the Lord's hand is against us, we can look at what the LORD has done --- for us! --- in Christ, and say with confidence: Oh, he will return. The beginning of the harvest has already begun. There will be a big feast once this difficult work is through.

So however much of a stir it might create when someone has an awful experience,
... however much someone might stir the pot with their bitter words...

However often someone says "where is your God? Why such foolish hope? Where is this Jesus of yours?" ...

Remember that there was, at the time of Ruth and Naomi's return, "a stirring of hope." The promise of the Lord's return.

In the days of famine, there was a beginning of a barley harvest.

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In the days when the judges ruled and everyone did what was right in their own eyes, the seeds of an eternal kingdom were planted, and a first fruits sprung up through the once dry ground.

So when, like Naomi, you can't see the harvest, when you can't see the feast at the end, when you can barely see growth, much less the first fruits of a harvest, keep your eyes on Jesus, the Lord of the Harvest.

Remember that *he* has walked the same dusty road as Naomi, that he got the same Judean dirt in his sandals, that he suffered losses greater than hers, and that he himself went all the way to the grave.

But he returned: first to life. And then he returned again to Heaven. And he shall return again.

The first fruits of his final return are so astounding that they should fill us with unquenchable hope.

Hope that won't disappoint. The joy of the harvest will be so great, that it won't be able to be compared with the tears and sorrows we'll experience between now and then.

In Christ, we may sow in sorrow. But we shall reap in joy (Psalm 127). Is Jesus, for you, the Lord of the joyful harvest?