

“Facing a Bitter Harvest”

Ruth 1:6-22

Series: Home for Christmas Week 1. Hope: Looking for Home

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Now that Thanksgiving dinner is a memory and lots of leftovers, the preparation for Christmas can begin. In our house that means we can start watching Christmas movies. Have you ever considered how many classic Christmas movies focus on Home?

It’s a Wonderful Life – an angel reveals how a man transformed his hometown

The Grinch – a sour reclusive cave dweller finds a home in Whoville

Rudolph – a red nosed reindeer and an elf dentist are finally accepted at home and find homes for all the misfit toys

A Christmas Story – Ralphie believes the best way to defend your home is with a Red Ryder BB Gun with a compass in the stock and this thing which tells time.

Home Alone – a child singlehandedly defends his home from bandits. Too bad he didn’t have a Red Ryder BB Gun with a compass in the stock and this thing which tells time.

Miracle on 34th Street – What proves Macy’s Santa is the real thing? He gives little Susie her greatest Christmas wish: a home with a swing in the backyard.

Why is Home the center of nearly every Christmas story? Home is a place of celebrations, memories and dreams, a place to belong. Many Christmas traditions are connected with the way you decorate and celebrate this season at home. Home is more than four walls and a front door. Home is where the essential relationships of your life live. That’s why, for some, home is a place of love, joy and peace. But for others, home is a place of strife, suffering and sadness. It can be a place of painful memories and broken dreams. It might be a place where you feel like a misfit, where you don’t belong.

This Christmas, home will be different. Some of us will be home for Christmas against our wishes. The coronavirus is forcing us to be stuck at home. We can’t celebrate with loved ones at their homes or have them over to ours for fear of spreading the virus. Trapped at home for Christmas may be the last place you want to be.

Yet there is Good News – God’s Good News is all about Home. On Christmas Jesus left His home in eternity and was born homeless on earth so we can be at home with Him now and have a home with Him forever. This Advent we’ll discover how to find our way home, the real meaning of home, through Bible stories which take place in Jesus’ hometown: Bethlehem. God has four gifts waiting for you at home this Christmas: Hope, Love, Peace and Joy. Since the coronavirus and its collateral damage will probably get worse before things get better, we need these gifts now more than ever.

The first gift of Advent is Hope: Looking for Home. Tucked into the Old Testament is a brief tale of heartbreak and hope. Just four chapters long, the book of Ruth is a testament to the power of hope that will not let go. It begins with a bitter harvest.

The sky is cloudless, the sun merciless, the earth fruitless. It is the age when Judges rule Israel. Moses is a memory. Joshua sleeps in his tomb. And God's people are a disorganized, feuding collection of twelve tribes. With no king, no government, no temple, each person does what is right in one's own eyes. They only unite when God raises up a warrior or judge to face an invading army. Yet now they face not foreign enemies but empty fields. The land is dry and cracked. Crops shrivel and die. Wells and springs are drying up. God's people begin to starve. The grim specter of famine spreads its shadow across the land.

In Bethlehem, a man named Elimelech knows the forecast is dire. The prospect of watching his family wither away in hunger is too horrible to imagine. Though he is willing to die to defend his home from an invader, famine is the one enemy that can force him to leave his land. So on a scorching day, Elimelech uproots his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion. They pack their meager possessions and bid a tearful goodbye to their neighbors. As their hometown disappears from view, a trace of bitter irony crosses Elimelech's mind. Bethlehem – the name means "House of Bread." Yet not a scrap or crust is left there.

They ford the Jordan River and ascend to the plateau of Moab on the east bank of the Dead Sea. The nations of Moab and Israel were sometimes allies, sometimes adversaries. Elimelech and Naomi try to make the best of this alien land with its strange language and stranger gods. But just as they begin to feel settled, Elimelech dies. To bury a husband in foreign soil is devastating. Without the comfort of her clan, Naomi feels terribly alone. Yet her husband brought them to Moab, so in Moab they stay. She even permits her sons to do what many Israelites consider blasphemous. Naomi gives her blessing when Mahlon and Kilion marry Moabite wives. Kilion marries Orpah. Mahlon weds Ruth. Despite the scandal, Ruth and Orpah bring new joy to the family.

Ten years roll by and tragedy again visits the house of Elimelech: now Mahlon and Kilion are dead. Naomi has lost her land, her people, her husband and now she must bury her sons. Moab once seemed like a land of plenty and promise. But here Naomi only reaps a bitter harvest. So when she receives news there is food again in Israel, Naomi resolves to leave behind these painful memories and return to her people.

Orpah and Ruth accompany their mother-in-law on the long sojourn home. When they reach the Jordan, the border between Israel and Moab, Naomi turns to her daughter-in-laws. They are the only sweet gifts she received in all those years. Yet she knows there is no future for them in Israel. With great courage she says,

Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May my God show loving kindness to you, as you have shown to your husbands and to me. May my Lord give each of you rest in the home of another husband. Ruth 1:8

She places a parting kiss on their cheeks and all three break down into tears. “We will go back with you to your people,” they reply. But Naomi will have none of this.

“Return home, my daughters,” she insists, “Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? Ruth 1:11-13

Naomi believes the only hope for her daughters-in-law is remarriage. Widows depend mainly on charity. Though God commands His people to protect and care for widows¹, these women are often neglected or oppressed. Since Naomi cannot offer any more sons to these two young women, there is no reason for them to return to Israel and share her fate. There is no hope ahead for her.

Her next words reveal the full depth of her grief. “No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord’s hand has gone out against me!” (Ruth 1:13). Naomi totals up all her losses and arrives at a single conclusion: the Lord has done this to me. The Lord is against me. And like so many bitter people, Naomi pushes away the very ones who offer her comfort and love. She prefers to go on suffering alone.

Do you know someone who has lost all hope? Are bitterness and resentment in you? The symptoms come out in a variety of ways

- A deep depression
- A sour attitude
- A sharp response to a simple request
- Frequent use of sarcasm
- A low tolerance for frustration
- A lower level of energy
- A desire to be left alone in self pity

Hopelessness is a poison in the soul, a virus as contagious as Covid. Once this weed takes root, it is difficult to purge. Left untended, it spreads rapidly. And it fools us into taking two harmful steps. First, hopelessness and bitterness convince us it feels good to wallow in self-pity. We go over again and again all the ways we have been wronged by others, all the trials we must endure, all the burdens we bear. There is a perverse pleasure in feeling sorry for yourself, in proving everyone else is wrong. But self-pity is pitiful and useless. It does no one any good, least of all yourself. Second, hopelessness and bitterness make us push everyone, including God, away. At the moment when we most need help, we sever all ties. We accuse, blame, attack and drive others away. The great missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones once remarked,

¹ Deut. 14:29; Jer. 49:11; Pss. 68:5; 146:9; Ps. 94:1-7; Job 22:9-11, 29-30; Isa. 1:16-17; 21-25; Deut. 10:14-19; 24:17-22; 27:19.

A rattlesnake, if cornered, will sometimes become so angry it will bite itself. That is exactly what the harboring of hate and resentment against others is--a biting of oneself. We think that we are harming others in holding these spites and hates, but the deeper harm is to ourselves.

I have heard Naomi's complaint a dozen different ways. "Why is God doing this to me? What have I done wrong? Am I being punished for some sin?" Often, there is little I can do to convince someone otherwise.

Naomi's mind is made up. Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and returns to Moab. But Ruth clings to Naomi. She refuses to release her hold on her mother-in-law. For the fourth time, Naomi says, "Go back to your people. Your sister is returning to her people and her gods. Go with her." Still Ruth holds on. And weeping upon the neck of her mother-in-law she speaks some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture

Do not force me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, If anything but death separates you and me. Ruth 1:16-17

This is a love that will not let go. Ruth is willing to sacrifice her home, her land, her people, her future and even her gods. So Naomi gives in and they go to Bethlehem. When they finally reach the city gates, the whole town is buzzing. "Naomi has returned! Where are Elimelech and the boys? Who's that foreign girl?" They look at her weathered, care-worn face and ask, "Can this be Naomi?" She corrects them,

"Don't call me Naomi," (which means Pleasant) she told them. "Call me Mara, (Bitter) because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 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." Ruth 1:20-21

Are there any Naomis out there? Naomi thought the Lord was slapping her down with the back of His hand. What she did not see, is the Lord clinging to her through Ruth. The Lord holds on to her with hope. Through this outsider, God banishes Naomi's bitterness and brings hope back to her heart. It turns out Naomi does have a husband for Ruth in Bethlehem – a relative named Boaz who is kind and compassionate to these two widows. He eventually marries Ruth and together they place their newborn son Obed in the lap of Naomi. The women of Bethlehem say to Naomi:

"Your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4:15-17

In the pit of her self-pity, Naomi wants to send Ruth home. Yet Ruth becomes the way Naomi finally finds a home and hope. God is working in a way Naomi can't see because her vision is blocked by bitterness. And God brings hope not only to Naomi but to all of Israel through Ruth's great grandson King David. More than this, God, through Ruth, brings hope to all of us through another descendant born in Bethlehem: Jesus.

When you are down that low, when you carry a burden of resentment, when the weed of bitterness sinks its roots deep down in your soul and you're tempted to blame it all on God – remember – He clings to you with a hope that will never, ever let go. He is working with you, beside you, for you in a way you may not be able to see, through people He places nearby. Don't push them away. Reach out and hold on to hope.

And you can be that hope for someone else – you can be a Ruth for another Naomi. This Advent season you can give hope to Stacey who is looking for a home. This Advent, our Home for Christmas offering seeks to provide a Habitat for Humanity House in Bristol for Stacey Coleman. Habitat is not a handout, it's a hand up. It asks future homeowners to save, work, and pay down their debt. Yet many, like Naomi and Ruth, need the partnership of compassionate and caring people like you. Stacey is working hard to get out of a cramped apartment and provide her family with a home of their own where they can enjoy what each of us holds sacred – a place to share family meals, celebrate holidays, learn and play, make memories, and dream dreams. And for all this Stacey first and foremost thanks God – the giver of all hope.

This Christmas, grab hold of God's hope and pass it on.