

*Texts: Ruth: 4:1-22; Luke 1:46-55*

*Subject: The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth*

*Theme: Restored*

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2022; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I was going through some books in my office this week, I came across this one, *A Caribbean Mission*, a collection of letters from Rev. William G. Arbaugh, who served the church in the Caribbean, and spent much of his ministry in Puerto Rico. The book was edited by his son, William C. Arbaugh, who was the first called pastor of *this* congregation, and served Reformation Lutheran Church in 1956, when the building we worship in was constructed. Most of the letters in the book are correspondence about his work with the church in Caribbean and across the world, some trips back to his home in Goshen, Indiana, and letters to his family. But in one, he congratulated his son and shared his blessing for the mission and ministry that would happen here in the heart of the city. He writes:

*“Your mother and I extend our warmest felicitations to you and your congregation on the occasion of the dedication of the new house of worship. From the plans that I have seen and the information that I have received it is a beautiful and well designed church building, meeting the congregation’s needs splendidly until growth in membership and attendance will require the construction of a large permanent church that is planned for the future.”*

Things were much different here in those early days, as the church in Las Vegas was forming. Some might have found it odd that people were beginning to settle in this unique little desert town. By 1956, the population was growing. This weekend, over 350,000 tourists are expected to spend Labor Day weekend here. Like a popular refrain

from the hip-hop music scene - we “started from the bottom now we’re here.” Workers for the hotels and casinos, the test site, and more people continued to show up from across the nation, and after coming West to find a new life, and some decided to step out on faith and form a Lutheran church. Arbaugh continues:

*“A film titled, “ The Las Vegas Story” (1952, with Jane Russell, Vincent Price, and Victor Mature, produced by Howard Hughes) has been making the rounds but I do not intend to see it...For me, the Las Vegas story is the story of my son and his life and work in that city. It has an exciting plot, replete with a villain and a hard struggle, but with obstacles overcome at last, and a new day clearly dawning as you dedicate to the glory of God this fine first unit for the new church plant.”*

As we head toward 74 years of ministry in this place, and transition to what’s next, we give thanks for God’s grace here and look toward the amazing things the Spirit will do next. It’s not always easy to see the next step, and Ruth’s story has been for so many a great example of how God’s love and loyalty can bring new life even from emptiness.

When Ruth came to Bethlehem, she had no assurance of help, no one to provide for her. She was able to find food by gleaning in the fields behind the workers there. Boaz saw her, and invited her to glean “even among the standing sheaves” to pick from the good stalks of grain. She visited him in the night at the threshing floor, and was bold to ask for him to marry her, and take her permanently under his protection. Boaz knew there was another relative who had the chance to take ownership of the land, and to have Ruth as his wife. Today we heard that the man (he doesn’t have a name, he’s actually called “so-and-so” in the Hebrew text) passes on the right of inheritance, Boaz becomes the family ‘redeemer’ and by marrying Ruth, keeps the legacy and name of the family connected to the community. Ruth is *restored*. And with the birth of their child,

Naomi is no longer barren or bitter, but made whole. Boaz shows a loyalty that mirrors Ruth's, and *both* demonstrate the love of God for all who hear this story.

Remember how the story began, with death and famine, and today we hear it ending with deliverance and family. This becomes the tale of a new beginning for the people, and the power of God to bring newness from struggle. That's our story too. Think of all the times when we have struggled and found ourselves wondering why God has not restored us, or when we questioned why God would cause our neighbors and the people we love to struggle while we were so comfortable. As a church we've faced times of financial strain, and wondered how we would ever be able to cover expenses, or take on needed repairs, or find people to help and carry out our ministry. There were times here when many of you and I prayed that God would provide for us, restore us, and make a way for us to continue to move forward. There have been times in our own lives when we felt barren, like nothing good was over the horizon.

Every action movie, every superhero story, every sports drama follows this example. I was watching *Days of Thunder* (1990, Tom Cruise, Robert DuVall) It's *Top Gun* in a race car. Same thing. The hero starts from humble beginnings, has to scrape their way to the top, and competes against the favored team, or the powerful villain. They get knocked down a few times, and just when all hope is lost, they find they had the power in them all along, they find the strength to overcome, and the hero's victory is won.

Ruth's story is a little like that, but it's not *her* strength or power that win the day. Ruth and Naomi put their trust in the Lord, and work to build each other up, to provide for each other the best they can, and are restored through the love and loyalty of God,

who never abandoned them, even in their most desperate times, in their loss and grief. It's a reminder of how God always has more in store, that we often cannot even imagine, and all these blessings that are not only for us, but for the whole world.

I was talking with a longtime friend of the senior meal program this week. He's not been on the street, but "in the streets" he tells me. He's seen suffering, he's been put out of living situations, and sent away when he had nowhere to go. He's not looking for excuses, but looking to see how God is still at work in the suffering all around. We talked about perspective, and how some of us can get pessimistic, and doubt, and think about only the pain we face, and miss out not he good things. "It's improving." He told me, and I had a hard time then seeing it, but I know he's right. In the long run, God is still at work to restore us and this whole world, and maybe we're too close to it, or too busy to notice it, or too selfish at times to get on board with it, but God's still here. The word is still moving us and the spirit still guiding us to work together, to take care of each other, and serve with joyful hearts here in the time that we have. God has already restored us, redeemed us, freed us and made us whole. Jesus has done it all for us, and given us everything that is his: grace, love, and abundant life here and now.

God's promise was to make Abram a great nation - Abram believed it, as impossible as it might sound. God was loyal and the promise came true. The family line would be passed down through the generations, David would be Israel's greatest King, his father was Jesse, and Obed his grandfather. The family of Jesus could be traced all the way bak to the beginning, because of the inclusion of Ruth the Moabite. She was an outsider who faced tragedy and found herself at the center of the family line - that ran all

the way down through Mary, mother of God, and beyond - even all the way down to us. We are connected - we are blessed because of our Lord Jesus.

God works in surprising ways. When we think things are hopeless, new life is possible. The future for us is open because of God's steadfast love and loyalty, shown to us in Jesus Christ, our redeemer. He gives us his own body and blood, he calls us through the Word, he shows up for us always with his mercy and grace. Because of Him we have been given a family, a future, and more, we are *restored*, made new every day. But it doesn't stop with us either. The promise is for the world - mercy from generation to generation - the powerful thrown down and the empty filled with good things. A world that was barren will be made fruitful and abundant. The promise is for the whole world to be restored, through God's lovingkindness.

We get to be a part of that love and loyalty, we get to share this good news and show up for our neighbors and at times even to be ones who restore others through God's Word and the power of the Holy Spirit in each of us. Amen.