

Christmas Hope: Ruth

SCOTT HOEZEE

Years ago in New York City, something very interesting happened. New York at the time was known to have problems with major crimes: shootings, armed robberies, murders and the like; but then the leaders decided that they wanted to show they were serious about enforcing the law, and so they started to get more deliberate in issuing tickets for misdemeanors: jaywalking, loitering, littering, and so on. Then something amazing happened. As the city cracked down on small crimes, the major crimes fell dramatically, too. Sometimes, keeping the finer points of the law has wider effects; and today on *Groundwork*, we will see that in a powerful way in the story of Ruth. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now program number three in a five-part Advent and Christmas series from the first seventeen verses of Matthew Chapter 1. Matthew is trying to open up the imagination of his Jewish readers by presenting, not just the standard family tree of Israel, but Matthew tucks some surprises into this family tree.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, for him to have women in the genealogy...I mean, genealogies are not new to Israelites...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

They were always tracing their history back to Abraham and the covenant people, but for Matthew to intentionally pick these four women...and you mentioned in the other episode that he could have picked Rachel, he could have picked Leah, he could have picked anybody like that, but he did not pick Sarah, he picked people who had these “questionable histories” and pasts that were full of drama and challenge.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, these were all non-Israelites. So, we have already looked at Tamar and Rahab, so we have seen kind of Canaanite and Jerichoite...also a Canaanite. Eventually we are going to come to the story of Bathsheba, who is going to be a Hittite. So, these women were from outside of Israel. So, Matthew was already signaling that Jesus the Messiah has come for more than just Israel...that is important. We have also seen, though, in Tamar and Rahab, Darrell, what we have described as difficult, awkward circumstances; some sexual things involved, involving prostitution and some very curious choices, but today, we come to Ruth, whose story is quite different, and she is probably the best known of these four women, partly because she has a whole book of the Bible named after her.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, she probably is the most known...and just to remind people where she comes up in Matthew, let's look at these verses in Chapter 1: ³Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar; Perez the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, ⁴Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Ruth is the great grandmother of King David, okay? She is the great grandmother of David, and that is a wonderful thing, but as we are going to see, Darrell, Ruth's story could have turned out very, very differently. We are in the period of the Judges. So, you know, we know from the book of Judges that it was a time of lawlessness and violence, right? The tagline for Judges is everybody did what was right in their own eyes. There was no king in Israel. Everybody was doing their own thing. They were not paying attention to God's law, they were not living as a distinctive people; so, it was a tough time.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, in that time, they usually had a cycle. The cycle was: We disobey, do whatever we want; and then, the part that comes after that is that God sends this judgment coming through these other countries that are coming in and fighting and conquering [sic] them; and then they ask for help in repentance and God sends a judge; and then, through the life of that judge, they usually live a faithful life until that judge dies. Then Ruth is coming up in this same context, and then we see that there is a famine in Israel going on at this time, so we see Elimelek...and we've got Naomi...who are working to try to go through this famine situation in the country of Moab; and they are in this situation trying to feed themselves. They've got two sons. One of them married Orpah and the other married Ruth; but then they both end up dying.

SCOTT HOEZEE

All the men die. So, they go to Moab to find life because there is no food in Israel. They maybe find food, but they don't find life; because first the husband of Naomi dies, and then both of her sons. So, now we have three widows—we've got Naomi, a widow, Orpah is a widow, Ruth is a widow. So now, there is nothing left for Naomi in Moab, so she decides to go back home to Israel, and specifically to her hometown of Bethlehem; and then we come to this part of Ruth Chapter 1. It is a pretty well-known passage. Naomi is heading home to Israel, and so her daughters-in-law are with her: ^{1:11} [But Naomi said,] "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? ^{13b} No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" ¹⁴ [At this] they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. God back with her." ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from 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. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

DARRELL DELANEY

When people say: May the Lord ever deal with me so severely, they are not playing, Scott...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

They are serious. That is a commitment. Her loyalty shines through in this. Orpah just did what she did, but Ruth clung to her; and that line: Your God will be my God, your people my people; I will be buried where you will be buried...I think that that connection is very powerful, but you can see that that might be risky for Ruth to do seeing that she is not an Israelite.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; she is loyal; she has good character; she is made of good stuff; she is loving. Nobody would have blamed Ruth one bit if she had just high-tailed it back to Moab like Orpah did, but she wasn't going to abandon her mother-in-law; but right, it is a loving choice, it is a lovely choice, but it is a high-risk choice; because in Israel, Ruth is going to be vulnerable on multiple fronts.

DARRELL DELANEY

Of course, we just mentioned that Ruth is from Moab, so she is a Moabitess. She is going into Israel. I don't think that they have good blood with the Moabites at this point; one of the people they were fighting against. So, they are supposed to treat foreigners well. I think they've got something like that in the law that tells them they need to treat people well, but they are not exactly very good at it. The second thing is that she is a widow attached to another widow. So, the husband or the son...the oldest son is supposed to provide for the family. They have nobody providing for them in this situation. So, there are so many things that are going against Ruth at this point, but she still decides to go with Naomi anyway.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, Darrell, you said I think there is something in the law to protect these people. You are right...all over the law...in Leviticus; and in fact, it is interesting that throughout the law in Israel, God repeatedly...and this comes up in the prophets later, including the minor prophets, but also Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, they will assail Israel for *not* following God's law; and there is always this triplet called the *anawim* in Hebrew: the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. Those were the three categories: the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. Those were the most vulnerable members of society; and guess what? Ruth is all three. She is essentially an orphan, she is definitely a widow, and she is a foreigner. So, she is triply threatened; she is triply vulnerable to abuse in Israel. So, going back to Israel is a loving thing for Ruth to do, but they are going back with not great prospects for success; but in just a moment, we are going to see some glimpses of hope in this story, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are picking up the story of Ruth, because she is a great, great, great...grandmother of Jesus; and therefore, she is in Jesus' family tree in Matthew Chapter 1, which is the basis of this Advent and Christmas series; and we just said, Darrell, that Ruth accompanying Naomi back to Israel is in a bad place. They are poor...they are dirt poor. They are widows, which means they are connected to no men, and in a patriarchal, male-centered society, that is bad. Ruth is a foreigner from a country a lot of Israelites don't like, Moab. So, they are in a tough place, but the very last verse of Ruth 1 tells us something that gives us a glimmer of hope. It was the beginning of the barley harvest.

DARRELL DELANEY

In that particular passage, we are told actually by the law of the Lord, that they are not supposed to go all the way to the corners because they need to leave some for the foreigner, the orphan, the widow. Number one, it keeps greed and gluttony out of their lives, but it also makes provision for those who don't have anyone who could go out and harvest for them; and so, they have this provision that is in their law that they are supposed to do so that people like Naomi and Ruth can come in and have a place to glean. So, they are actually getting set up to do this in Chapter 2.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, farmers are basically ordered by God to be a little inefficient. Don't vacuum up your fields, don't take all the grain, leave a bunch for the poor. Unfortunately, like a lot of things in God's law, as near as we can tell, a lot of farmers didn't do that. They did vacuum up their fields; but Ruth is going to find her way to a field of

somebody we are going to find out later is a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelek. His name is Boaz, and in Ruth 2, Naomi is told by Ruth: My dear mother-in-law, we are going to starve to death. I am going to go out and glean; and then we read in Ruth 2:2b: Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." ³So [she] went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

You gotta love that line: As it turned out...

DARRELL DELANEY

As it turned out, sounds like, oh, a turn of events, and guess who it is connected to? It is like a surprise. It is a twist in the story, because readers know this is the God that we see who is the real main character of the story of the book of Ruth. When we were taught this story as kids, we were told: God is the main character...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

He is just not showing up in his name, but he is showing up by setting up these meetings...these happenstances that he is meeting. So, the place where Ruth was actually going was a field of Boaz's, and that was something that God had set up intentionally...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

He is the main character of this story.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There are no coincidences...there are no random events in this story. The hidden hand of providence. It is sort of like in the other book of the Bible that bears a woman's name, Esther. God is never mentioned once in the book of Esther, and it is all God. It is the hidden hand of God's providence raising up Esther for such a time as this...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And now, God has led Ruth to exactly the right field. Boaz is a good man, and we sense that starting in verse 8 here, Darrell, in Boaz's first interaction with Ruth.

DARRELL DELANEY

So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. ⁹Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." ¹⁰At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you would notice me—a foreigner?" ¹¹Boaz replied, "I have been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Ruth's reputation now precedes her. Boaz has gotten wind of this good, good, faithful Moabite woman. So he is going to be kind to her; but we really need to pay attention to one thing Boaz said: He told his men not to lay a hand on Ruth. Now, why is that important? Because clearly Ruth was in danger of being raped.

She was a foreigner. The people of that day would have regarded her as a throwaway kind of person. If a farmhand attacked her and raped her, he could be well-assured he probably would never, ever get in trouble for it. What; a foreign widow? Who cares! I won't get in trouble for that. So, it is telling, and just a little chilling, that Boaz has to say to her: I have warned my men not to touch you; because without that warning, she might have been molested.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, she is not a slave at this point, so she wouldn't be considered property, right, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

But she is a foreigner; so, because she came from another country, they probably could get away with it, which meant that Boaz was saving her physical life and safety by telling these other men not to touch her, and not to lay hands on her; and then, later on in this story, we see that he continues to heap gifts upon Ruth and Naomi...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And giving them way more than they ask for...more grain than they needed and whatever they could actually produce; and we see this in Chapter 3, and Naomi speaks by saying:

²“Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight, he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.” ⁵“I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered. ⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

So, she sees...Naomi sees an opportunity here...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, she is going to play matchmaker a little bit to see, is Boaz interested in being married? Is he interested in having a relationship? Because this could turn into a situation where the provincial care can continue if they get married.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and so, Naomi is hatching a plot; and you know, basically telling Ruth: Make yourself as attractive as possible; you know, break out your best Estée Lauder, put it on, go down there, and signal to Boaz: I am interested in marriage. That is what she is saying: I am attracted to you. I want to get married to you; but, there is one thing that we are going to find out that is a little bit of a glitch. There is somebody in line ahead of Boaz to inherit Elimelek's estate, and therefore, inherit Ruth, right? I mean, you hate to say it, that women kind of were part of the estate, but they were. Somebody else has a prior claim, and Boaz has to figure out a way to get rid of that guy if he is going to have any chance to marry Ruth himself. So, he hatches a plan and it works. The person in line ahead of him says: I cannot deal with this. I don't want that Ruth person in my life, so you may have her; and Boaz is like, well, okay, if you are sure; and he is actually thrilled, of course. And then the story goes on into Chapter 4.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this is one of the best stories that we see in the Bible that is kind of like, okay, this is Prince Charming who is coming in with the happily ever after, but what is redemptive about this story is that a woman who came from outside Israel has continued to be a part of Jesus' bloodline, but what does that have to do with today? We will take that up in the next segment to wrap up the program. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, at the end of Ruth Chapter 4...it is a four-chapter book:

¹³ So, Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife, and when he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴ The women said to Naomi, "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel!" ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. ¹⁷ The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

So, a happy ending there; but Darrell, we began this program saying that that happy ending came about because someone like Boaz tended to the finer points of the law. We mentioned that in New York City years ago, when they tended to the finer points of the law, not only did small crimes fall, big crimes fell. Sometimes it is really important to do the little things right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And it is interesting because in the New Testament it says if you keep the law at every point, but you break it at just one point, you are guilty of breaking the entire law. So, being able to understand that these finer points are as important as these major points, and that they had a chain reaction in the story you had about New York, but also in the life of Boaz, who took care of the small things to make sure that he obeyed God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; some of us may remember years ago in the 1990s the murder trial of the former football star, O. J. Simpson...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And one of the things that emerged in that trial is that the Los Angeles police broke a bunch of little rules...just little protocols. They mishandled the evidence; they misfiled this; they stuck a vial of blood in their pocket and forgot about it; just a whole bunch of little things; but all those little lapses added up to a huge problem, and the defense was able to drive...you know...an aircraft carrier through it eventually; they were able to raise reasonable doubt because so many little rules got broken. Boaz kept what some might have regarded in Israel as a little rule...the gleaner law: leave enough food for the poor and the widows and the orphans; and Boaz did that, and you know what? It led to something pretty good, like, you know, Jesus.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, Leviticus has a bunch of small laws in it. I was thinking of no man should wear pants or you shouldn't put two different fabrics together in the same stitch of clothing...like, all these little things that God

did to make sure that people knew that he had a specific way he wanted the relationship to go, because he was holy and he wanted his people to know how he wanted them to live; and Boaz is paying attention to these rules; and how to treat foreigners and immigrants and people who are widows...the three things, the widows, the orphans, and the foreigners...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The *anawim*, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; the *anawim*. That is something that he took very special care to make sure that he did, because mostly Israel really got this wrong.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; they got very, very sloppy; and if Boaz had been sloppy like that, Ruth probably would have been killed, or she would have died of starvation or she would have been raped, and we never would have heard of her; and she never would have become a great, great, great...grandmother of Jesus, and the great grandmother of King David; but, she did. It reminds you of what Jesus said in Luke 16:

¹⁰“Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.”

So, Boaz was trustworthy with the little things, but you know, the little things add up to big things, and in this case, it not only saved Ruth's life, but contributed to the family line that led, first to King David immediately, just in a couple of generations; and then many generations later, to Jesus. Again, when we allow God's Spirit to fill us up, and we live into the creation patterns that God has established as reflected in God's law, good things can and will happen.

DARRELL DELANEY

In this situation, the little things were the gleanings...making sure that that wasn't going all the way to the corners; but the thing that was much happened to be Jesus Christ himself. There is no better gift than the one at Advent, where we are talking about the anticipation of the birth of our savior. He is the gift that God has given to the world, to us; and thank God for the fact that Ruth was able to live faithfully in order for that to happen. We see that God is blessing that effort; and so, I think that it is important for us to know that when the scripture says that whoever can be trusted with little can also be trusted with much, that we need to continue to be faithful in the little things that God has asked us to do. Maybe we need to show respect and love to those, and maybe we need to help those who have no voice to advocate, and speak for them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And those people who have less material things that we have an abundance of, we can share with people, because being in the situation where we are showing those kindnesses, you never know what God will do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you know, we have mentioned, Darrell, that in the story of Tamar in the first program in this series, and the story of Rahab in the second program, and then the next episode about Bathsheba, we have mentioned that these are stories that are kind of saturated with some sinfulness, and we have said that reminds us that you cannot even tell Jesus' story without stumbling across all this sin, and that is a reminder that Jesus came to save us while we were yet sinners. We said that in the last program, as well.

Ruth's story is a little different. Ruth's story is a reminder that when we lean into God's good patterns, like Boaz did; when we notice the people whom others don't notice...and right, the immigrants...immigrants to this day are often invisible people. They are just a category too often. You know, it is like years ago there was this refugee crisis going on, and then there was this little boy...this little Turkish boy who drown, and there were pictures of him all over the world laying on this beach with his little tennis shoes, you know; and

he had a name. Now all of a sudden, these immigrants...these refugees...had a name; and they became more real. Well, Ruth had a name, and Boaz did not let her just be a generic foreigner—the other. He saw her, and just did the right thing by God’s law. In so doing, you know, he contributed to the story of the Messiah.

DARRELL DELANEY

And it is interesting that we see all over the Bible these requirements that God gives for how to live in a way that is just, and live in a way that is righteous, and to follow the laws that he has given; and those laws are grace to us because God didn’t have to show us how we should live, but in order to be his representatives on earth, we get these examples all over. There is one here in Micah Chapter 6:8. It says: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

I mean, A-B-C. That is exactly what we need to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is just simple faithfulness over the long haul. It is love and mercy and humility; and at Christmas, we celebrate what such basic things can bring about; and you know what it brings about, Darrell? It brings about nothing less than joy to the world, thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your host, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of the women in Jesus’ genealogy by looking at Bathsheba’s story.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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