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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 10, 2024

Proper 27, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17](#)

[Psalm 127](#)

[Hebrews 9:24-28](#)

[Mark 12:38-44](#)

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In this tumultuous week, I think these readings are being given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Today our calendar gives us a story of a young woman, an immigrant farmworker, a foreigner who becomes part of the people of God; a story of two poor women whose love for each other helps them make their way in a world where men hold the power. And it gives us a story of Jesus rebuking institutions that serve elites while oppressing the vulnerable. There is a lot for us here in these sacred texts today, texts that are thousands of years old and timeless and absolutely modern. Let's dive in.

The book of Ruth is four short chapters. You can read the whole thing in half an hour. And this is the only week in our whole three-year calendar that we will hear from it on a Sunday morning.¹ Ruth is a young woman from the country of Moab whose Israelite husband has died and who decides to join her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi to live with her in Israel. She loves Naomi and refuses to leave her. She adopts her home country and customs and faith as her own and settles with her in the town of Bethlehem. They are destitute, and Ruth supports them by gleaning the leftover grain from the fields after the harvest, a custom that was protected by law so the poorest of the poor could have some way to find food. She gleans in a field that belongs to Boaz, a man who just happens to be a cousin of Naomi's, and Boaz is kind to Ruth. So shrewd Naomi hatches a plan for Ruth to steal into Boaz's sleeping pallet in the middle of the night. What happens there is delicately left under the euphemism, she "uncovered his feet." And then Boaz marries Ruth; and Ruth and Naomi find security; and Ruth will go on to become not only a part of God's people but the great-grandmother of King David himself and an ancestor of Jesus.

It's a compelling story. It's not a story of big battles or macroeconomics or presidential elections or any of the things we often think of as history. It's a story of little people, people on the margins, getting by with their wits and using what power they have, and of God working through those things. It's a story that says God may not be in the harvest but in the gleaning, in the remnant, in what's left behind.

¹ Last week we would have heard part of Ruth chapter 1, but those readings were displaced—as they almost always are—by the readings for All Saints' Sunday.

And then in our gospel passage today we meet another widow, not Naomi but a woman reminiscent of Naomi centuries later in the time of Jesus, a widow who trusts in God and gives generously from what she has. Often this story gets used as a stewardship story during church fall pledge campaigns. And we are in a pledge campaign, on the last day of it in fact, and of course I want to ask you to give generously from what you have. Yet we miss the point of this story if we treat it just as a celebration of generous giving. Because although I do believe Jesus intends to commend this widow for her generosity I do not believe Jesus is celebrating the system within which she is practicing it. Right in this same passage Jesus has condemned the scribes, the prestigious and educated elite of his time, for devouring widows' houses—for exploiting the poor and vulnerable. And in the verses that follow this passage Jesus will go on to predict rightly that the magnificent stones and buildings of the Temple will soon be thrown to the ground. I don't believe Jesus in this passage is celebrating the system that has produced these scribes and these Temple offerings so much as naming the bankruptcy of human institutions that benefit those with power while extracting resources from the very people at the bottom who are being left behind.

So here we are today, reading these readings against the backdrop of a dramatic election. And they have much to say to us today as they have to our ancestors in faith in every generation, in their own dramatic times.

One thing I hear in them is a rebuke of scribes, of prestigious institutions and cultivated experts. Donald Trump is many things, including a very wealthy and elite man, yet he has somehow created a movement in which many working-class people, rural people, poor white people, and an increasing number of people of color believe they have a chance to push back against an institutional status quo. The president they have helped elect is a chaos agent, and he is part of a worldwide trend in our time in which metaphorical temples are being cast down, to be replaced by who knows what. In this trend, I sense there is something that must be listened to, the suspicion of elites, the rebuke of the scribes, the rejection of credentialed expertise. Perhaps these stories in which God pays special attention to those whose voices are not heard, those without education or power or prestige, hold a note of challenge to those of us today who might prefer to maintain a safe and predictable status quo.

One thing I hear for sure in these stories is the dignity of Ruth as a foreigner who becomes part of God's people and the absolute bankruptcy of any account of identity that is based on the lie of racism. The evil doctrine of white nationalism that has always been a part of this country's story has been amplified and normalized over the past eight years, including by our incoming president himself. It is false and evil and abhorrent to God. And a related thing I hear is the dignity of Ruth as an immigrant. It is not racist to observe that this country's immigration system is broken or to argue that we need a safe, orderly way to welcome people here legally and to make those legal pathways more attractive than underground ones. It is racist to traffic in stereotypes about immigrants, authorized or unauthorized, and it is cruel and inhuman to pretend that a long-broken system can be fixed by abusing and terrorizing people who are already here and who have come here seeking a better life in the ways that were available to them.

A third thing I hear in these stories is that women, who in the ancient world lacked power and independence and status, nonetheless have agency and power, and God sees them and celebrates them. And I take from that the corollary that God is not a man, and I take encouragement for the belief I hold not only from these passages but from the whole preponderance of the story of scripture, that God's vision for our world is one in which people of any gender and any sexual orientation hold absolutely equal dignity and autonomy for their own bodies and their own lives.

And a fourth thing I hear is that God takes a special interest in people who are poor; that we not only as individuals but also as a collective human family are commanded to leave gleanings and commended when we care for the vulnerable and condemned when we enrich ourselves by devouring widows' houses. And I hope that our incoming leaders, if they wish indeed to be an anti-elitist movement, will put that into practice by seeking economic policies that are not handouts for wealthy elites but rather create opportunities for people like Ruth and Naomi and the unnamed widow, for farmworkers, for people who are disabled or bereaved or unemployed.

And finally from these stories I take a commitment to mission: to being the Body of Christ and seeking, as much as we can, to be a living example of how these stories can be true. To have our ingathering today and pool our resources, not for a shrine but for a mission station. To love each other and love our neighbors, to feed and be fed, to shout at the top of our lungs that God is love, and to follow the thread of that love as it carries forward into uncertain times, knowing that God alone is certain.