

As we look behind us. A sermon series on the book of Ruth, preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George on June 12, 2016 by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Scriptures: RUTH 2:17-23
EPHESIANS 1:3-14

Through the loving kindness – *hesed* – of Boaz to Ruth,
Ruth comes back to Naomi that evening with a huge amount of grain from gleaning.
An amount way beyond what even the most efficient gleaner could gather.

At this point. Naomi does not know where Ruth has been gleaning – we as the readers do. And like that stories that engage us we want to cheer Ruth on – tell her, Ruth, tell her about your experiences in the field of Boaz. Ruth does...(vs. 19)

Naomi's response is one of the pivotal verses of the book.
For here Naomi now sees it is not all grim, bitterness and discouragement.
God has revealed his hand through the loving kindness of Elimelech's kinsman.
Naomi's grief to this point has been very real.
Her struggle to this point with God being with her has been all too painful
Remember way back in chapter 1 Naomi declares

**...it has been far more bitter for me than for you,
because the hand of the Lord has turned against
me. (1:13)**

And then as Naomi and Ruth enter Jerusalem

Call me no longer Naomi,^[a]
call me Mara,^[b]
for the Almighty^[c] has dealt bitterly with me.
²¹ I went away full,
but the LORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the LORD has dealt harshly with^[d] me,
and the Almighty^[e] has brought calamity upon me?"
Ruth 1:20-21

Life has dealt a series of hard blows to Naomi. Returning to Jerusalem – her homeland – has not it seems made it easy. For she has returned a widow And probably she cannot work now Ruth will have to be the one to ensure that they both do not starve.

Little wonder is it then when Ruth returns that first evening with a huge amount of grain,
Naomi is forced to acknowledge *the providence of God* for both she and Ruth.

Providence is not a word found in most modern translations of the Bible, yet the idea is pure Bible.
In essence,

Providence refers to God's gracious oversight of the universe.

God is there – here

God cares,

God rules and God provides

God is sovereign and in complete control of all things.

Nothing is able to stand up to him, defy him or do what which would in the end defeat God.

God created the world; it is his and subject to him

God has plan for this world – eternal plan

This plan shall be realized in and through Jesus

Christ – the portion Lynda read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

The whole plan of God remains an ultimate mystery

Pieces of the plan are revealed to us – but not the whole thing

God does this not to frustrate or humiliate us – but to help us remember we are the creation, not the Creator.

We are not God!

As such, we are called to faith and trust in God, whether we discern at the time what God intends or not

Further,

Providence encompasses every aspect of the created order.

What reminders of the providence of God in our lives can we draw from the story of Ruth?

To live consistently, faithfully, and unapologetically in the light of God's providence is one of the hardest things to do as a follower of Jesus.

Why? Because we live in a world that stridently tells us that God is NOT here,

Miracles do not happen

Prayer is not answered and the ways things work out or do not work out is owing to chance, good or bad luck.

The question is often asked – how can evil be compatible with the concept of a good God who is actively ruling this world.

Fires, earthquakes floods – are often referred to as acts of God'

Should we blame God for them?

Isn't it better to imagine that God has simply disengaged with us – because we are no longer exciting or important?

Add to this general sort of feeling God is distance, some more immediate and personal situations that call into question the providence of God.

A loved one who has been faithful to God all their lives, now slowly ebbing away owing to dementia. The death of a child, the death of a spouse after a long and happy marriage.

Those times in our lives as God's people when one tragedy after another attacks people of faith.

When a marriage separates because the couple have fallen out of love with one another.

A dream smashed owing to illness or factors not under the particular individual's control

A too soon, too young death

A diagnosis of a life threatening illness.

Any such like circumstance or situation and it is really, really hard to see the providence of God.

Yes?

Providence of God – really, I mean really?

Well, God certainly has a peculiar way of showing His providence.

I believe in understanding and accepting that sometimes the providence of God is hard to see, we have stepped into Naomi's shoes.

For though Naomi's faithfulness to God carries the weight in her life, there is no doubt she had some issues believing all the time about God's providence – God's immediacy, care, rule and provision.

By the end of chapter 1 and until Ruth returns that first night with an incredible amount of grain from gleaning, (so about half way through the book) Naomi lives in the assumption that she has been abandoned by God.

Touch point for us – IT IS difficult more times than not to hold onto the truth of God's providence in each of our lives.

Things happen all around us, to us, to people we know, love and respect – not nice things – and we wonder – has God left the building?

Words like those of William Cowper's hymn – God moves in a mysterious way – seem like just so many words....

So to hold to a belief and conviction of the providence of God in each of our lives is difficult to maintain all the time.

I believe another reminder about the providence of God from Naomi's declaration in verse 20 is that *the providence of God must never been seen as akin to a fairy godmother, showing up from time to time to wave a sparkling wand and bring a little magic into our lives.*

The providence of God does not make God like some Marvel Comics superhero waiting in the wings for just the right moment to step in and rescue us from disaster.

Such a view does not begin to come to terms with how complex and mysterious God actually is.

Such views make a mockery of God's overarching agenda for a broken world and for our individual lives.

As well, I believe Naomi's vs 20 statement reminds us that in the matter of the providence of God, *it is most clearly seen as we look behind us.*

Grief, suffering, pain – physical and emotional, high stress troubles cloud the reality that God is here, cares, rules, provides.

Leaving Moab – Naomi cannot see the providence of God – her grief is so overwhelming.

Entering Jerusalem – grief is still predominant
Ruth going out to glean brings to her only worry and fear, for Ruth and for their future.

For if Ruth does not bring back enough food for them – they will eventually starve.

There is no social agency to offer aid to a widow – not in the Biblical times world.

But with the lavish provision by Boaz, suddenly Naomi sees God's providential hand as she LOOKS BACK –

-provision during a famine in Israel

-supportive daughters in law after death takes her husband and two sons

-Ruth's choice of glean in a field owned by

Naomi's husband's kinsman.

Touch point for us – God's providence is there – but when we are in life's whirlwinds, it is almost impossible to see

It is only as we look back,

See from where we have come, where we have been that a degree of understanding comes – now I am beginning to understand

Now I see why this happened or that did not happen.

Now I see the Lord's hand in this matter or that event.

Hear me,

Not all our questions will be answered this side of heaven

Sometimes the existence of God's providence will seem hidden to our eyes for years

For remember, the purposes of God work on God's time – Kairos – not our 24 hour, 12 month, 365 days a year – chronos time.

This is especially the case when pain, suffering, disappointment and discouragement happen in our lives.

But remember, just because we may not be able to see' the providence of God, does not mean it does not exist.

The providence of God is always in play – ALWAYS – in each of our lives.

As we read and consider Naomi's statement here in vs 20

Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.

And also the Book in general, we see that the providence of God is not about being passive, sitting around 'waiting for God to act.'

One of the central tenets of providence is *concurrency*.

God's preferred method of getting things done is to work through us.

We are never meant as God's people to be mere spectators to what God is doing in this world, but *participants*.

The people in the Book of Ruth are people who pray.

Though God is not as evident in the Book of Ruth as say Exodus, the Samuels or the Kings, the prayers in the Book of Ruth clearly acknowledge that God is with them.

Almost instinctively, the principals in Ruth seem to end their sentences by appealing to God to come to their aid,

And the characters do not stop with prayer. They get up off their knees to participate energetically in the answers to their own prayers.

Look again at Naomi – she prays that God will bless her daughters in law with new husbands (1:9)

Then, as we will see next week, Naomi takes the initiative in finding a husband for Ruth. She prays to God to bless Boaz for his generosity to two widows in dire straits, and then acts in such a way that God's blessings upon Boaz are great and many. Boaz prays God will reward Ruth for her kindness to Naomi – last week's reading. Immediately after that prayer, Boaz takes action to ensure Ruth's gleaning is lavishly rewarded.

Providence at work through the actions of those created in the image of God.

A final reminder about God's providence – at least for this morning is that God's providence is *purposive*.

Nothing God does is accidental

Nothing God does is merely a bit of whimsy.

History is going somewhere

God's providential care is the direct opposite to the world of the Judges and in so many incidents and occasions an accurate description of our world – **all the people did what was right in their own eyes (Judges 21:25)**

The flow of human events is not merely static and without meaning.

We shall see this most clearly in the last message of the series – I will tell you now the purposiveness centres on genealogy.

The providence of God invites us to see God's work in each and all of our lives on a bigger scale, a wider canvas, a longer view.

It invites us to look beyond the tyranny of the immediate which afflicts all of us some of the time and some of us all of the time.

The providence of God does not dismiss or treat cavalierly or lightly the sufferings of our lives or those times when one tragedy after another slams into our lives.

The providence of God does though look with expectancy and hope in this life.

To wait, to see that 'God does indeed move in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.

As God's people, that is an important part of living in the light of following Jesus.

And as with so much in the Christian life, that is the call and that is the challenge