

Jeanne Marcus: Salvation History Lessons

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In my Catholic school growing up, one of the subjects we were taught, along with math and English, was Salvation History. Salvation History was, basically, the telling of Bible stories, albeit in tidied-up versions so that we little kids wouldn't have to worry about those troublesome ambiguities. Salvation History was based on the premise that the Bible uniquely tells the story of God's redeeming work in the world, with the strong sense that redemption was something that happened once for all time. The rest of us float along on that achievement, it assured us, as long as we agree to get on board for the ride.

But it'd be more important to know our Salvation History if we believe that God's redemption is something that continues, will continue until the earth's last gasp. About the study of secular history, we say, "Those that do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Maybe a parallel saying for salvation history would be: "Those that do not learn from salvation history are doomed to miss it working in their own lives." And if that is the case, then we would want to look at these stories very closely, and think about them carefully, sifting for clues. Now here, I will make a confession: in a typical week, I don't often do this kind of close reading: in fact, one of the reasons I undertook to do a sermon today was to challenge myself to ferret into a story, to see what I could see.

We all take the central Biblical narratives, the Exodus, the Exile and Return, the Crucifixion and Resurrection, as paradigmatic stories of how God works and has always worked in human history, human lives. But today, I offer a smaller story; the biblical equivalent of the kind of modern social history, which eschews the study of kings, presidents and generals to inquire into the lives of the common people. I bring you the Book of Ruth, parts of which we've read in the lectionary this Sunday and last, and which I know some of us are pretty familiar with.

It's not about priests, patriarchs or prophets. And, more oddly, it isn't even God-ish, if that's a good word. That is, God doesn't make any appearance onstage in this story at all. God doesn't speak to anyone, and no one really speaks to God either: they may address each other in the name of the Lord, or even gripe about the Lord, but none of them address the Lord.

Another intriguing point up front: to me, the story here seems more Naomi's than Ruth's. In terms of narrative sense, this story could be thought of as The Book of Naomi. Just to make the point, jump ahead to the story's end for a second. Ruth marries Boaz, and gives birth to a son. But the strange thing is: from that point on, nothing is seen or heard of either Ruth or Boaz again. They disappear! Instead, everyone turns to Naomi, congratulating her on the baby who restores her to life. About which more later.

So, what can we learn from Naomi's story, about how God works in the world, and in our individual lives, even when God doesn't come onstage?

First:

Salvation History kicks in after we try

doing it our own way first.

With Naomi, it happens like this: Naomi and her husband Elimelech leave Bethlehem with their two sons during a time of famine. This is more problematic than it first seems. It's not like leaving Newark, New Jersey – they're leaving the Promised Land, the land that was at the center of the covenant between God and Israel, the land that was the main point of the Exodus. To walk away from Israel is to walk away from the covenant itself, voluntarily to leave the realm of God. But, wait, isn't there a famine? don't they need to leave to stay alive? The story doesn't say that: it only says they leave during a time of famine. In fact, there's apparently a rabbinical tradition that this family wasn't about to starve at all. That actually Elimelech was rather a wealthy man, who took his family from Bethlehem to avoid the higher taxation that would be imposed so the village could help buy grain for the Judeans who really were starving.

Whether true or not, there's something else fishy about Naomi's and Elimelech's decision: not only are they leaving the covenant land, but they are heading to Moab, a nation that Israel considers a special enemy. This old enmity is left from the time when the exhausted and hungry Israelites, nearing the end of their 40-year desert trek, get to Moab, hoping for some help with food and water. But instead, the Moabites engage the services of Balaam, who they hope will professionally curse the Israelites. This failure of Moabite hospitality has resulted in some deep Israelite hard feelings; in fact, Israelite law provides that no one even remotely related to the Moabites shall ever be allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord. [Deu. 23:3]

The idea here is that Elimelech and his family are trying to make it on their own terms – turning away from their community and from their faith when it seems to serve their interests. Someone recently coined a phrase, “the secession of the

successful” – those who can afford to do so leaving the rest behind, and maybe that applies here. As it turns out, though, the family’s sojourn in Moab proves not to be life-giving. Elimelech dies early on, leaving Naomi alone to raise two sons. When they are grown, they both marry outside the covenant, to Moabite women: one to Ruth and the other to Orpah. But then both sons die without having children.

Which brings us to the second teaching:

Salvation History often begins after we think we’re at the end of the story.

When her sons died leaving no children of their own, all meaning drained from Naomi’s life. Hers was a culture in which all sense of leaving something for posterity, of having created something lasting and important out of one’s life was expressed only through leaving living heirs, keepers of the family’s name, memory and traditions. Now Naomi had lost that, and lost the sense that her life had purpose or meaning. It was all over, and it had been for nothing. We don’t have just that one channel for expressing our creativity or generatively anymore, but the possibility of losing that which we have spent a lifetime creating and which has given our life its purpose always remains. That’s part of the sense of fragility that haunts being human. There are stories of an individual’s life work – manuscripts, collections or laboratories being destroyed by fire, say; or politicians or diplomats who have spent their careers building public institutions that are destroyed in times of war, persecution or political hysteria.

That’s the kind of sense that Naomi has of her own life. She has lost everything that mattered. And, at the end of her resources, it becomes clear to her that although she has lived among the Moabites for decades, she is still a stranger among them – they owe her no assistance, and she is unlikely to get any. “Don’t call me Naomi,” she says, since her name means

“pleasant” in Hebrew. “Instead, call me Mara, bitter, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty.”

It is often only when we have experienced our own schemes and maneuverings coming to nothing, and ourselves coming away empty, that we are willing to turn, or return, to God. It is now, when she has lost everything, that Naomi chooses to return to the community, to the covenant, to the land, to God.

The third lesson might be this:

Salvation is relational: we can't be healed on our own.

Naomi could have made the trip back to Bethlehem on her own; she could have been received back into the village, and have made some arrangements for her food and shelter on her own. But she couldn't have had her sense of life and purpose restored without what Ruth was willing to be to her, and give to her. Ruth is the catalyst, so to speak, that makes the redemption of Naomi's life possible. So, here I want to shift the focus for awhile, and ask the question, How was it that Ruth was catalyst for Naomi's life? And then what does it take for us to be salvation for each other?

But to really see Ruth, we first have to think a minute about Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law, who decides to stay in Moab. There is a tendency to judge her harshly – she's the one that went nowhere, who somehow didn't have the right stuff to make the tough decision, who turned tail and went home when things got too rough. I think of her as a much more interesting case than that. For one thing, her life had already taken decidedly unconventional turns – she had not made a conventional marriage, but one that was outside the norm – with a foreigner whose family's customs and traditions were distinctly different than those of her own people.

And as for her decision to stay in Moab, and not go with Naomi – Naomi’s advice to her is right: she tells Orpah to go back, because her best chance for marriage and family – for all that represented the Good Life then – is to stay in Moab. In fact, if Orpah were living today, and reviewing her decision with us in group therapy, say, we might approve her decision: “I’ve always cared for Naomi, it’s not that,” she might say, “ But I have a life too. It’s time for me to claim my own goals and plans, to follow what seems right for me, instead of sacrificing myself to what I think others want from me.” Orpah is logical, practical, pragmatically analyzing the situation, not getting carried away. She’s making the kind of choice many of us make much of the time. Why not wish her well, and imagine her marrying again and having the family she deserved.

To look at and maybe somehow approve Orpah’s decision is to position ourselves to see how amazing Ruth’s different decision is. Ruth says:

*Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge’
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God
Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried.*

She is leaving all that is closest to her – her own family, her people, her country, her religion, – her identity, really, since this was a time when one’s whole sense of self was so tightly interwoven with these other things. She’s leaving all this to take a journey to a land she had never seen, and to embrace a people, a God, and a way of life not her own.

And why is she doing it? Unlike Abraham, who also steps out on a path away from family and country, she hasn’t received any message from God to do so. And nothing has been promised – no land stretching as far as she can see or descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

And notice that she doesn't say that she is choosing the Israelite people and the Israelite God – it's not that after living 10 years in Naomi's household she has become convinced that Naomi's God is the true God, so she is converting. Rather, she is clear that she is choosing Naomi's people and Naomi's God.

The text says that as Ruth said these words of commitment, she "clung" to Naomi. The phrase that comes to mind for me is "fierce loyalty." It is her fierce loyalty to Naomi – to this specific person who Ruth has lived with through good times and bad, whom she has seen early in the morning, seen late at night, seen cooking, seen eating, seen sleeping, seen sweating, likely seen sick, seen angry, seen joyful, and recently seen in mourning and in despair. It's this loyalty to and love of the specific person, Naomi, that leads Ruth to choose this path that she would not even have considered otherwise. By choosing this path, she not only changes her own life, but she makes it possible for Naomi's life to be transformed.

The fourth salvation lesson is:

You still have to do what you have to do.

The compelling moment of grace, of Ruth's moving statement of commitment to Naomi, passes; and now the two must take the hard trek back to Bethlehem. And once there, life is precarious. Israel's way of providing for widows, orphans and strangers is to command that growers not reap to the edges of their fields, so that there will be something left for the poor to glean after the reapers have passed by. And this is what Ruth must do to keep them alive – she gleans in the fields for herself and for Naomi. It happens that she has wandered in her gleaming into the fields of Boaz, whose attention she attracts by her industriousness. He invites her to remain in his fields, and offers protection from the reapers, who prey on unprotected women gleaning. When Ruth

reports on her day, and tells Naomi about Boaz, Naomi's hope is rekindled, for Boaz is a relative of Elimelech, closely enough related to be under some possible obligation toward Ruth as a kinsman's widow.

A possible alternate title for this lesson could be, "Naomi may be on the way to salvation, but she ain't no saint." Today's reading begins with the account of Naomi's activism, I would say plotting, in the service of her new cause – to get Ruth well-situated with Boaz. Put baldly, Naomi suggests that Ruth in essence seduce Boaz – Naomi is to dress and perfume herself, to lie in wait near where Boaz sleeps, and to be there at his feet in the night when he awakens.

Now this is incredibly risky, to send a young woman into a situation where she will be alone with a man at night. It trespasses all the boundaries of acceptable behavior, it is in defiance of all taboo; to be caught by others, or taken or exposed by Boaz will be the end of Ruth's acceptance in the community. The plot is Naomi's but the risk is Ruth's. Ruth goes. At midnight, Boaz awakens, and as the passage puts it, "behold, a woman lay at his feet!" "Who are you?" he asks, and Ruth, in essence answers, "I'm Ruth, marry me."

And he does, fortunately. Naomi has taken her destiny and Ruth's into her own hands, has outwitted circumstance, and her activism is rewarded, they have succeeded in their goal. Trespassing boundaries and defying limits can sometimes be a prerequisite to redemption.

The next lesson:

Where I finally get around to saying what Salvation is: salvation is about new life, and second chances.

Not only does Boaz marry Ruth, which provides the security that Naomi has wanted for Ruth and thus for herself. But

there's something more, something maybe not even dared hoped for: Ruth gives birth to a son. As I touched on earlier, everyone recognized this as joyful redemption – for Naomi. “A son has been born to Naomi,” the neighborhood women exclaim. They congratulate her on the baby who will restore her life, and enrich her aging. And Naomi herself nurses the baby.

With the death of her sons, Naomi had lost what had given her the sense that she had created something lasting and important in her life. After their death, her life felt blighted: she hadn't produced lasting good, only death. But the birth of the baby Obed gives Naomi new life, returns her to the community of the living, of those who leave a lasting legacy. Naomi has survived, and now more than survived – she has lived to get a second chance, to ride a new wave of generativity, to live again into a present and future that has purpose and meaning. It is Ruth's last best gift of love, replacing the purpose that Naomi has lost with a new opportunity to nurture growth and leave something lasting and good behind.

And the final lesson is:

It is through our passionate commitments to specific others that the larger community's salvation is worked out as well.

This final lesson is what is embodied in the very last line of today's lectionary reading. Obed, the baby born to Ruth and Boaz, turns out to become the father of Jesse, who in turn is the father of David. This is the great David, the David who slew Goliath, David the best and most beloved of Israel's kings, to whom God made a promise to uphold his descendents forever.

This story, then, isn't just about these few everyday people, but about the makings of a major salvation event on a national

level, for the whole Israelite people. We're back to Salvation History writ large, back to kings and dynasties. The ancestry of Israel's beloved King David rests on these small things: an ill-fated sojourn in an enemy land; the extraordinary commitment of one who was a stranger to the Jewish people; the successful plotting to get a young woman married to a man of substance; and the birth of a baby who redeems a life that felt wasted.

So there is the story of Naomi, and of Ruth – our Salvation History lesson for the day. If it is a successful lesson, then I hope we come away with the sense that spending time with this story has helped us to see more deeply in thinking about our own individual lives, and our life together.

May the Book of Ruth lead us to see and to be grateful for the second chances and times of new life that we have experienced; and lead us to hope during the times we are limping back from some Moab of our own.