

Luke 6:36-38; Ruth 2:1-12
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; July 22, 2018
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One of the things I love most about Milestones Ministry is the way it helps us connect God to our everyday lives. Through the process of conversation and reflection, bible reading, prayer and blessing, milestone gatherings point to the ways God is present in the important events of our lives.

Take, for example, getting a driver's license, graduating from high school or retiring from full-time work.

There's even a broken bone milestone, created by a couple for their young granddaughter to remind her that God's healing power was present in her body, that it was a gift to be cherished, and a source of hope for a brighter tomorrow. They wanted to acknowledge how God was working, even in this unexpected and unwanted milestone in her life.

Last Sunday we marked the milestone of becoming caregivers for aging parents or ill loved ones. Often, it is in the midst of life's more sobering moments, like these, when we have the most difficulty seeing God at work. Maybe we were taught that God is found only in miraculous events, like the burning bush or the parting of the Red Sea. Maybe we learned how to claim God's presence only when things go our way.

But here's the thing. God doesn't always come to us on our terms or our schedule and God doesn't always give us what we want. The absence of miracles or unanswered prayers doesn't mean God is not actively involved in our lives. It just means we have to learn how to recognize what God is up to.

As Christians, we are guided not by some vague notion of how God ought to work in the world, but by the biblical account of God's interactions with God's people throughout the ages. We learn to see how God is at work in our own lives by discovering how God has been at work in the lives of ordinary characters like Naomi and Ruth.

In the first chapter of the story, which we read last week, God's intervention is noted only once, when the narrator reports the end of the famine in Bethlehem, noting that Naomi "had heard that the Lord had considered his people and given them food."

For Naomi, in the midst of her grief and loss, this sign is a source of hope that perhaps something better is coming. But until today's scene, she has only been able to see that God is the source of her misery.

Ruth, on the other hand, seems undeterred, venturing out to do the only thing she can to provide for her mother-in-law. Hoping to take advantage of the right of the poor to collect the

crops leftover from the harvest, Ruth sets out to find a farmer who will let her glean in his fields.

As it happened, the narrator tells us, Naomi has a rich relative on her husband's side of the family. And as it happened, Ruth finds herself gleaning on this relative's land, completely unaware of the connection.

"As it happened" is code language for "pay attention. God is up to something here." This is the narrator's way of making sure we know that God is at work in the story, long before any of the characters see for themselves.

As it happened, Naomi has a rich relative who owns a farm. As it happened, Ruth chooses to glean in his field. As it happened, Boaz shows up while Ruth is there. When his field managers identify her as Naomi's daughter-in-law, as it happened, Boaz has already heard what Ruth has done for her mother-in-law, to whom he just happens to be related.

As the old saying goes, "A coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous." Ruth does not yet know about the significance of this coincidence, only that she has met a generous man who has offered her a way to provide for her mother-in-law and herself. God never speaks and none of the characters reports an encounter with God, but the narrator has clued us in that indeed, God is up to something in their lives.

Just like that, Ruth and Naomi's story take another hopeful turn. The famine is over. They have arrived back in Bethlehem just in time for the harvest. And Ruth has located not only a source of food but a relative of her mother-in-law who has singled her out for special treatment. Where this is all leading is yet to be revealed.

In the meantime, the harvest was only expected to last a number of weeks. Ruth and her mother-in-law will have enough to eat for the next couple of months, but beyond that there are no guarantees.

As it happens, we know there is yet hope for their future.

Anne Lamott writes about an event in her life she draws on to give her hope for the future, but she could just as easily have been describing Naomi and Ruth's situation. She writes,

When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility.¹

Naomi's story begins with hardship, when a famine comes to Bethlehem and her family is forced to migrate to a foreign country in order to survive. Hardship continues when her husband and sons die there, leaving her to face a future emptied of all possibility.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2005), p. 33-34.

As it happens, God has a history of working with hardship and impossibility. It's a story that's repeated over and over in the biblical narrative. From death to new life; from famine to plenty. God makes a way out of no way.

Think of Abraham and Sarah: They are way beyond the age of having children and, against all odds, they are blessed with the birth of a son who will carry on their family.

Think of Jacob: He is sold into slavery by his brothers and, against all odds, he grows up to become the most powerful official in Pharaoh's house.

Think of the widow of Zarephath: She has only a handful of flour and a little olive oil for food during a famine and, against all odds, her meager supplies never run out.

Think of Mary: She is a young, unwed girl who, against all odds, God chooses to bear God's own son.

As it happens, God is working in each of our lives as well, through the everyday circumstances and the faithfulness of ordinary human beings, like us.

We each have our own story – of a time when we were lost and couldn't find our way forward, when our life lacked meaning and purpose or when we felt abandoned by God. If that's not our story, we've heard the stories of others.

Now it's our turn to be the narrator and tell the story.

It's our turn to point out where we see God at work and to alert others to pay attention.

It's our turn to notice how God works through the faithfulness of those around us,

and offer hope to those in despair,

comfort to those who are distressed and

peace to those whose lives have been turned upside down.

As it happens, we are planning a communion milestone event two Sundays from today.

Won't you come?

Come and claim, for yourself, the ultimate sign of God's presence with us: Christ's body and blood, offered to us in the holy meal of bread and cup.

Amen.