

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 27, Year B (track one)

First Reading

Ruth 3:1–5, 4:13–17

Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” And she replied, “All that you say I will do.”

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So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (ESV)

Second Reading

Hebrews 9:24–28

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 12:38–44

And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Because the Sunday after All Saints fell last week, we missed Proper 26. (I’m sure I’ll pick it up at some point.) But as a result, we also missed the only other Sunday on which we hear anything read from the Book of Ruth. So instead of focusing too closely on the portion of the book appointed for this week, I’d like to look at the Book of Ruth as a whole. (As much as I can in this short format.)

The book itself was clearly written during the same post-exilic period during which the book of Nehemiah was written. It is in Nehemiah that we find the demand that Israelite men refrain from marrying foreign women, based first on the Deuteronomic command to exclude Moabites from the assembly of the Lord (because the Moabites had refused hospitality to the Israelites as they passed through the land on the way to the Promised Land, Deut. 23:3) and also on the recognition that it was foreign wives who had caused Solomon to stray from his faith in Yahweh.

Ruth is an exegetical text that argues forcefully that such generalizations about foreign women be rejected in favor of an individual assessment of a woman’s kindness (like that of God) and faithfulness to the God of Israel. As lovely as the story is, it is clearly written in a way that interprets earlier Hebrew Scriptures so as to present Ruth as a character not only worth of acceptance into the assembly of the Lord, but as an *exemplary* character. Upon hearing of Boaz’ intention to marry Ruth, the hearers equate her with Rachel and Leah, some of the matriarchs of the people.

The author's argument for the inclusion of the Moabite woman is carefully built on exegesis of texts about Levirate marriage (when a brother takes his brother's widow to raise up offspring for him) and the familial obligation to be a redeemer (keeping a family member from falling into ruin) in a way that combines those two legal sources as done nowhere else in Scripture. It demonstrates the level of education of the author, an author who is more likely to have been a woman than that of any other text in the Bible.

I read that it is anachronistic to use the word "feminist" to describe this book, and I suppose it is, but Ruth is emblematic of the struggle by women to be seen in their own light, having their own value, from a time millenia before "feminism" was given a name. The two main characters are women. The hero of the story is a woman whose valiant struggle for her own and her mother-in-law's survival frames the whole of the narrative. And as I've noted before, Ruth is mentioned in the same rank with matriarchs like Rachel and Leah. All of this in a book written much later, but meant to be read as a link between Judges and the beginning of the monarchic period in 1 Samuel. She is among the forebears of David.

The article, by Irmtraud Fischer, from which I have drawn most of this, is worth reading if you'd like to look further into Ruth. Here's the [LINK](#).

Second Reading

In this week's reading the author of Hebrews builds upon the foundation he has laid in the last couple of chapters. As the sanctuary of the new covenant is superior to the tabernacle of Moses, and as Jesus is superior to both the orders of priests and to Melchizedek, so also His sacrifice is superior to the sacrifices instituted by Moses, offered once "at the end of the ages." We see again the larger context of this letter, Jesus, the One who brings to a close the sojourn begun by Moses, the One who brings to a close the sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood.

Now I would like to quibble a bit with the translators, who I think have gummed up the meaning of the last sentence of our reading for this week, the last sentence of this chapter of Hebrews. What is missing in our translation is the sense that Jesus' sacrifice is paralleled to Yom Kippur. By rendering the *noun* "salvation" as a verb, "to save," we miss this sentence's continuity with the entire discussion of sacrifice that the author gave us above. For this is how it really reads:

"And just as it is appointed for humans once to die, and after that, judgment, so also Christ, once offered for many to bear sins, a second time, apart from sin, will be seen by those eagerly awaiting Him, for salvation."

I know it's awkward, and so it's easy to see why translators have changed this around to make it read more smoothly, but by changing the passive "will be seen" to the active "will appear" and changing the noun salvation to a verb "to save," we lose the sense that Hebrews wants us to get. Jesus here is seen both as priest and as victim. He has been offered, but only once (as humans die but once) to carry the sins of many, but then we have the image of those eagerly awaiting Him, as the people eagerly awaited the emergence of the High Priest from the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

For it is to those who wait that Jesus' becomes visible as the bearer of salvation. He doesn't come just to save those who wait, but only those who wait will recognize what He carries "in His hurt hands," as the hymn goes. And I don't think that the author of Hebrews only had some future salvation in mind. I think that for the author, as it is for us, salvation is a present reality. Yes, one that carries forward into eternity, but also one that renders present wholeness, present joy, present healing. Those who wait see the High Priest above all High Priests emerge from the heavenly places even today, and enjoy His presence even now.

Gospel Text

This week's text from Mark brings to a close the evangelist's teachings on discipleship. It also concludes another series of controversy stories that follow on the end of Mark 10, the story of Blind Bartimaeus we had two weeks ago. They aren't as clearly structured as the smaller chiasm in chapters 2 and 3, but there does appear to be some thought in how the stories are arranged. I have not read a scholarly account of that arrangement that is convincing, though.

The best that I can determine is that the stories are paired for contrast. Interspersed among these last discipleship teachings come increasingly tense episodes of controversy with the scribes and the Pharisees. This week's reading gives us the contrast between the scribes who devour widows' houses and the widow who gives "her whole life." That phrase is important, for though most translations have "all she had to live on" or something similar, that's not what it says. Many churches will hear a stewardship sermon built on "all she had to live on" this week, but Mark is very clear. Jesus commends this last ideal image of a disciple as one who gives "her whole life."

This is the final question for those preparing to be baptized, those for whom I think this canonical version of Mark was written. It is not only Jesus whose life is spent in service of the Gospel. Those who follow Him do not just choose a new spiritual path, but put their very lives on the line. Given that this teaching comes in the period of highest tension with those who seek to "destroy" Jesus, I think that, while the absolute commitment of the Christian is intended in part, the very real risk to life and limb is also

meant to be heard. The widow puts in “her whole life.” This might still make for an interesting stewardship sermon, but not an easy one.