

HOLD TO GOD'S UNCHANGING HAND –II

Ruth 1: 1-5 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

In these days of uncertainty, we wonder, “Is this pandemic under God’s control?” God answers in His holy Word, “But in putting everything in subjection to Him, He left nothing outside His control.” (That includes this pandemic of Covid-19 Coronavirus) We read in our text of Hebrews 2: 8b-9, “At present, we do not see everything in subjection to Him. But we see Him, who for a little while, was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor, because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God, He might taste death for every man.” Just a few verses later, in Hebrews 2: 14-15, we read, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself partook of the same things, that through death, He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery.” God is certainly going to use this pandemic to show us the power of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the bondage breaker of fear, and to release us from the pandemic of the fear of death, that’s bound us our whole lifetime.

How do we know where to turn and who to go to? Remember what our parents told us as little children, “All that glitters is not gold.” Have you ever looked in a mountain stream in Wyoming and picked up a sparkly rock filled with pyrite or fool’s gold? It looks like gold. It glitters like gold, but it’s not gold. Fool’s gold is so common, but it’s different from real gold. Real gold is malleable. You can dent it with your fingernail. Pyrite is brittle. If you rub pyrite vigorously against another hard object, or strike the pyrite, or heat it up, it will give off a sulphurous smell like a rotten egg. What I want us to think about in this coronavirus today is that we even as believers can be fooled by appearances. I struggled with where to turn to illustrate this important truth today. The Bible is full of man people who were fooled by appearances. Lot was fooled by the mirage he saw, choosing the land of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even Adam and Eve were fooled by appearances, for the forbidden fruit was a delight to their eyes. (Genesis 3: 6)

We read in 1 John 4:1, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Colossians 2:8 adds, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” Romans 16:17-18 states, “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.” II Timothy 3:13 adds, “Evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.” I have

been reading a lot in these last few weeks, and in one book I have enjoyed, “Restored,” by Dan Schaeffer, he reminded me of a text in Scripture that seldom gets preached on, Ruth 1: 1-5. We read here, “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.”

Beloved, I want us to know in our hard times, not a famine, but a pandemic, we too, all of us, are capable of being deceived and fooled by appearances and circumstances. We can be tempted into thinking the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Moab looked good to Elimelech, just like hoarding can look good to us. There was no famine in Moab, when the famine came to Bethlehem, and Elimelech wanted out of the difficulty he faced, just like we would like to escape our crisis. The obvious, logical choice for Elimelech was, “move to Moab.” Moab looked brighter, shinier like fool’s gold, greener, but in the end, it was all a mirage, and even a spiritual forgery. Not all assumptions are true, especially assumptions based on appearances. There are some truths in our text that are hidden as pure gold is hidden in the earth, but let’s dig for it in our text and learn to hold to God’s unchanging hand. I see seven golden truths in this little text that we need to learn as we continue to face our coronavirus pandemic. What are these golden truths?

GOD HAD A PURPOSE IN BETHLEHEM’S FAMINE, EVEN AS HE HAS A PURPOSE IN OUR 2020 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. (I.)

We have-to dig for this gold, but it is here in the Word in verse 1. “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah, went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.” Now where was this land of Bethlehem Ephrata? It was the place where 1300 years later that Jesus would be born. This place was part and parcel of the Promised Land, the place God promised was the land flowing with milk and honey. Twenty two times in Exodus 3:8, 17, 13: 5, 16: 31, and 33: 3, in Leviticus 2: 11, and 20: 24, in Numbers 13: 27, 14: 8, and 16: 13, 14, in Deuteronomy 6: 3, 8: 8, 11: 9, 26: 9, 15, 27: 3, 31: 20, and 32: 13, in Joshua 5: 6, in Ezekiel 20: 6 and 15—twenty two times God promised this land would be flowing with milk and honey. Now in Elimelech’s day, around 1312 BC, Bethlehem was in a famine. Do we have any clue as to why God may have brought a terrible famine to His beloved Promised Land? Had God misled His own people. The answer is found in God’s Word. Leviticus 26: 1-5 declares God’s

covenant with Israel, saying. “You shall not make idols for yourselves or erect an image or pillar, and you shall not set up a figured stone in your land to bow down to it, for I am the LORD your God. You shall keep my Sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the LORD. “If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely.” But, in Leviticus 26: 14-16, and 20, we read, “But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then I will do this to you: I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever that consume the eyes and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it...And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its increase, and the trees of the land shall not yield their fruit.” That’s the reason. There were idols in Bethlehem. Where did they come from? We don’t know all the sources, but in Genesis 31: 30-35, we find that Rachel, Jacob’s beloved wife stole the household gods when she left her father’s house in Haran. One of God’s purposes in difficult times can be judgment on the world, or it can be God’s discipline on His own children for idolatry. God has His own purposes. Secondly,

GOD HAS TESTS TO OBEY FOR BELIEVERS IN THE MIDST OF HARD TIMES, WHETHER IN BETHLEHEM OR TODAY IN OUR PANDEMIC.

What is the test in our text for Elimelech? Remember that Elimelech lived in the days of the judges, Ruth 1, (when the judges ruled) and what was happening then? Judges 21: 25 is clear. “In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” In these days in America, multiplied millions do not have God as King. Morality and purity and holiness and justice are all a matter of whatever each of us want to do or believe. Today, as in that day in Bethlehem are similar as these days and those were and are times of terrible unfaithfulness to God. In that day, many Israelites worshipped Baal, thought to be the land-owner, the god of ground fertility, and the god said to give children. This famine was no accident to God. His people had forsaken His covenant. We aren’t told anyone else but Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, left Bethlehem and went to Moab. Yet, Elimelech knew the law of God, and his leaving was not an act of faith, but faithlessness. Why? The reason is because God said in the law of Moses in Deuteronomy 23: 6 concerning the Moabites and the Ammonites, “because they did not meet the Israelites on the way to the Promised Land with bread and water, “You shall not seek their peace or their prosperity all your days forever.” God’s Word was clear not to seek the His providing through Moab. Yet Elimelech moved there anyway. Beloved, in a pandemic crisis, if God is speaking

to us to do something or not to do something, and we ignore His leading, that is a test we may have to do a retake on. I believe Elimelech was a good man. He certainly cared for his family, and the worship of God was still in his heart and on Naomi's heart. Beloved, these are testing times. Let's obey the Word, as well as the still small voice of God in our hearts. God forbid that we would let our own understanding or other's understanding win the battle over obeying the Lord. 3rdly,

GOD DESIRES THAT WE WAIT ON HIS PROMISES TO BE FULFILLED AND WAIT ON HIS TIMING. (III.)

We read in Ruth 1: 2, "They went into the country of Moab and remained there." One of my favorite Bible verses in the Old Testament is Psalm 37:25, in which David declares, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread." God will provide if we wait for Him as His children. That's tough to do. I know this to be true, experientially. Millions of us as believers, rather than wait, are tempted to help God out, and fix things for Him. In this pandemic, it's our great temptation to fix things ourselves, forget God's promises. We all want everything delivered now. Looking for short-cuts is not the best answer. That's why we have abortions, fornication, adultery, pornography, and the list of shortcuts go on. Elimelech missed the mark with God, and he missed the opportunity for God to show Him how He would work in his life, through this famine, and turn his trial into a blessing. D. L. Moody once wisely said, "God never made a promise that was too good to be true." Fourthly,

GOD WANTS TO USE OUR FAMINES AND PANDEMICS TO TEACH US THE DISCIPLINE OF TRUSTING HIM. (IV.)

Twice, in Ruth 1: 1 and 1: 2, we are told where Elimelech and his family were from. In verse 1, he is called "a man of Bethlehem in Judah." In verse 2, we read, "They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem. This designation seems to be here to tell us afresh, this family had a godly heritage, and this decision had to have had a profound effect on the community of Bethlehem. In the word community—the last five letters are unity. Everything we do affects others. All our decisions can cost us and others dearly. Elimelech didn't go to Moab alone. Elimelech originally verse 1, went to "sojourn" in Moab. This word sojourn doesn't speak of moving to a new place. The Hebrew word sojourn is **guwr**. It literally means to turn aside from the road. It also means to go and lodge in a strange place temporarily, and it doesn't suggest a permanent place. Elimelech it would seem, meant only to stay in Moab a short time, until the situation got better back home. He didn't expect to be buried in Moab, and then to have this happen to his two sons. Would he have sojourned if he knew it would have been his burial place? We know from Deuteronomy 2: 9 that God forbade Israelites to own a square foot in Moab. We read, "And the Lord said to me (Moses) "Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of

Lot for a possession. So Elimelech was probably living on rented land, but justifying it as better than living on his own land in Bethlehem in the famine.

Trusting God without fear in uncertain times is no easy lesson, but God wants to do that in your life and mine right now. How do you and I approach the promises of God for us—is it with fear, or is it with confidence? It reminds me of a weary traveler over 100 years ago who came to the banks of the Mississippi River in the winter. The river, where he came, was covered with ice, but was it strong enough to hold him. He had no way of knowing without testing it, so with night falling, he got down on his hands and knees and crawled cautiously out onto the ice, until he was halfway across the mighty Mississippi. Scared to death, he was startled by the sound of singing behind him. Coming in the dusk was a horse drawn wagon loaded heavily. The driver was singing merrily at the top of his lungs. What relief! The man stood up and ran the rest of the way across the ice. I tell you, beloved. I have no idea when the coronavirus will peak and ebb, but I beg us all to quit being scared to death. Let's stop worrying. None of us can add a hair to our head or a day to our lives. Jesus said, "Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" (Matthew 6:27) There is a place for being wise, washing our hands and following medical advice. Nevertheless, I can't make you and you can't make me live longer. Psalm 31: 15 is in the Book. "My times are in Your hand." These are days to sing at home, to read the Word at home, to pray together and alone at home, to laugh at home, to love at home, to praise Jesus at home, and to never sojourn into the enemy's camp and warm ourselves by his fire. Fear will make us deny the Lord. That's what it did to Peter. Trust Jesus today. Fifthly,

GOD WANTS TO USE FAMINES AND PANDEMICS TO HELP US OVERCOME THE DEVIL'S TEMPTATIONS QUICKLY.(V.) Go back to verse 2, where we read again, "They went into the country of **Moab and remained there.**" One of the greatest temptations that gets us all from time to time is, "Just this once, you won't keep this up; it's only temporary." This is a charming temptation that leads us to adultery, dishonesty, bitterness, and anything but holiness. Dan Schaeffer says it well, "Elimelech's actions give us a warning we should heed: temporary deviations from God's plan can easily lead to permanent migrations." He's right. Alcoholics only began with one drink. Drug addicts only began with one high. The enemy only wants us to try it once. That's the road to pornography addiction. Years ago, that's how treasure in our district 25+ years ago, started pilfering from the general fund, because his family had an immediate need, and he meant to repay it. Elimelech's final stop with his sons was Moab, though it was not his intent. All three died there. Yes, God redeemed this choice and brought good out of it, but not within Elimelech's lifetime or his son's lifetimes. What are you getting into during this pandemic with extra time at home? If it's your own trip to Moab, spiritually speaking, and you are under conviction, it

isn't too late to turn around, repent and start obeying the Lord. Tomorrow may be too late. May God turn us around today, and may He end our sojourning where He forbids. I'm sure Elimelech had no idea the effect this temporary sojourn would have on him and his sons. Remaining in sin and disobedience is deadly. Sixthly,

GOD WANTS US TO NEVER BELIEVE ANY FAMINE OR ANY PANDEMIC IS TOO GREAT FOR HIM TO OVERCOME. (VI.)

Notice verses 3-5. "But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon, (the husband of Ruth) and Chilion, (the husband of Orpah) died, so that the woman, Naomi, was left without her two sons and her husband." Sometimes, beloved, our actions speak louder than our words. To the lost unbelievers of Moab, this family staying in Moab sent a loud message, "The God of Israel can't provide for His people anymore." This pandemic tries to place us all on opposite sides of the problem we are facing. It wants to divide us. Each of us must follow the Lordship of Christ in our decisions, but never must we ever follow the worldly wisdom that God cannot be trusted with this issue, that God doesn't know what He is doing, or that God cannot abate the pandemic, or any other God limiting view. I call each of us to remember our children and our neighbors are watching us. What we do sends a message loud and clear. May our children, our neighbors, and all our fellow-believers know that our greatest fear in this pandemic is the fear of the Lord. 7thly,

GOD IS CALLING US TO PRAY AND TO RELY ON HIS PLANS FOR US IN THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES. (VII.)

Only once is prayer mentioned in the book of Ruth in Ruth 2: 7, when Boaz asked his reapers who this lady gleaner in his field was, this lady obeying her mother in law and going to glean in the barley harvest. They said, "She is the young woman or damsel who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said to us, "I pray you, please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers." Where did Ruth learn of the Lord God of Israel? Where did she learn the Word of God? Where did she learn to pray? It was in the home of Elimelech, and later, perhaps, as a husband of Mahlon. Did Elimelech do everything wrong? No; he did go against God's prohibition, but like righteous Lot, living in Sodom and Gomorrah, Elimelech never abandoned God. I believe I will see Elimelech and his sons in Glory. His faith and Naomi's faith was so vibrant, that Ruth couldn't leave Naomi's side—and it was all about Naomi's God. Look at Ruth 1: 15-17. Wow! What a faith Ruth had already begun in the extended family of Elimelech and Mahlon. Never think God abandons His own. When I read the last chapter of Ruth, I see God saying, "I haven't forgotten you, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion." I am your Redeemer. Listen as I close with Ruth 4: 9-17. There are hard lessons for all of us to learn in this pandemic, but God never abandons His own. Hold to God's unchanging hand. Amen.