

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Ruth 1:15-21

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On June 10, 2020 NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) issued the following statement. “The presence of the confederate flag at NASCAR events runs contrary to our commitment to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for all fans, our competitors and our industry. Bringing people together around a love for racing and the community that it creates is what makes our fans and sport special. The display of the confederate flag will be prohibited from all NASCAR events and properties.” In a related statement this past week they said, “As we have stated unequivocally, there is no place for racism in NASCAR.

NASCAR is working to change the narrative about who they are. Whatever their narrative was in the past, now they want it known, “There is no place for racism in NASCAR.” What is our narrative? I would hope our narrative as a church, as a body of believers, as people who call ourselves brothers and sisters in Christ, I would hope our narrative is one that clearly renounces racism. But just so it is clear, let me state that today, as clearly as NASCAR has stated it. “There is no place for racism in the church.”

And yet simply saying that is not enough, is it. As human beings we all carry with us things from our upbringing, things from our past, personal experiences, indeed prejudices, and these things do shape our view of the world, our view of other people, our view of others who are different from us. We all have a certain narrative, a story we are living. What a powerful opportunity, although it is a painful opportunity, but what a powerful opportunity we have at this particular moment in time for our nation to change the narrative, to create a new narrative.

The bible does not leave us on our own to figure out how to change the narrative. Instead, the bible gives us what I find to be an absolutely amazing example of how a narrative can change. Today we are going to explore a narrative that never mentions the words black, white, or brown, a narrative that never mentions the color of a person’s skin. But this is a narrative about deep seated animosity and prejudice. And this is a narrative that changes, just as I believe we are all called to be part of a changing narrative. The narrative involves two groups of people. One group is the Israelites. You know the Israelites. The other group is the Moabites. You might not know much about the Moabites.

Genesis 19 gives the biblical origin of the Moabites. Their origin is set in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when Lot is left alone with his two daughters. The daughters have no prospect of a husband in the remote place they live, so they scheme up a plan to get their father drunk and lie with him, so he can father a child for each of them. We read these words in Genesis 19:37, “The older daughter had a son, and she named him Moab; he is the father of the Moabites of today.” With roots like that you can see how the Israelites were almost trained to look down on the Moabites. The interactions Israel then has with Moab seem to confirm their suspicions.

According to Judges chapter 11 the kings of Edom and Moab refused to let Israel pass through their lands. In Deuteronomy 23:3-6 we are told, “No Moabite may enter the assembly of the Lord to the tenth generation.” Why? Because they did not meet Israel with bread and water on Israel’s long sojourn in the wilderness. And to top it all, Moab is the nation that hired Balaam to curse Israel. The narrative is clear. Moab is a despised people with a despicable origin and a despicable history that included turning their back on Israel when Israel was in need, and going even further, Moab went out of their way to try to bring a curse on Israel. That was the prevailing narrative. Moab was no good.

But that narrative will change. It is interesting to note, and it is telling of who we are as human beings, that the narrative does not change because some wise, level-headed, mature Israelite proposed that maybe we have treated the Moabites wrong, maybe it is time to forgive and forget, perhaps we should let them out of the box, perhaps we should give them a second change. No, the narrative changes not because some Israelite was level-headed and mature in the face of what truly can be described as a racist attitude. The narrative changes because there is a crisis. Israel is literally forced into the change in their narrative.

The catalyst for change is a famine. The catalyst for change is a crisis. A family living in Bethlehem is caught up in the famine. In desperation they leave Bethlehem and go in search of a place where they can survive, where they can have enough food to sustain their needs, where they can live in safety until the situation in Bethlehem changes and they can make a safe return. The place they go to find refuge in this time of famine, is Moab.

We are not told in a direct way why the family went to Moab. The choice of Moab as a place of refuge is not just surprising, it is startling. We have just heard that the narrative of Moab is they do not provide bread and water, they do not provide safe passage, and their whole intent and purpose is to bring a curse on Israel. And yet the family from Bethlehem goes to Moab to find refuge and relief.

While the bible does not tell us directly why the family sought refuge in Moab, the preceding story gives us a big hint. When we encounter this tale of a family fleeing Bethlehem because of a famine, we have just finished reading the Book of Judges, which ends with a horrible event. A man and his concubine leave Bethlehem and are looking for a safe place to stop. They stop in another town of Israel. They seek shelter from another tribe of Israel. These are their kinfolk, their relatives, people of their own race and origin. But in that town that was home to their kinfolk, the man and his concubine experience a terrible fate. The concubine is brutally attacked, raped, and killed. That is the story that brings Judges to an end, along with this ominous remark, “Everyone did what was right in their own eyes” in those days.

Now the story we have entered, the story of a family in Bethlehem who are forced by famine to leave and seek refuge, begins with these words that set the stage, “In the days when the judges judged...” They were really saying, “In the days when everyone did what was right in their own eyes...” They were really saying, “In a time of chaos and brutality, where one tribe of Israel brutally raped and murdered the daughter of another tribe of Israel...” a family faced a huge crisis, and they needed somewhere to turn for help. Knowing what had just happened to another family who left Bethlehem and sought help in the town of their fellow Israelites, would you make that same mistake? This family did not. Not the family we find in the Book of Ruth. This family went to Moab to find refuge. The crisis was so severe and the culture of Israel so toxic, this vulnerable family did the unthinkable. They went to Moab to find refuge.

And because they went to Moab, and because of the refuge they not only sought but found in Moab, the narrative changes. Naomi was the matriarch of the family that left Bethlehem in search of refuge. Naomi went to Moab with her husband and two sons. The bible gives Moab a second chance. This time when Israel comes knocking, Moab opens their doors and says, “Come in.” Moab opens their borders and says, “Come in.” Moab provides a place of refuge for Naomi and her family to live. Moab welcomes refugees. Moab not only provides refuge for these refugees Moab shares their daughters with Naomi’s family. Two young Moabite ladies marry into the family of the Israelites, young ladies named Orpah and Ruth. Talk about a change in narrative. Now Moab responds with hospitality, shelter, refuge, and even their own daughters who become part of the family from Israel.

At this point the family from Israel experiences yet another crisis, an even more tragic crisis. Naomi’s husband dies and her two sons die. All she is left with are the two daughters-in-law. Naomi is left empty and defeated, so bitter she wants to adopt bitter as her name, “Don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara.” (Mara means bitter.) Crushed by the cruelty of life Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem.

Naomi's return to Israel provides the Moabites an opportunity to change that old narrative that had marked their existence these many years. In addition, Moab provided the opportunity to set a new narrative, one that thankfully brings help to Naomi in her time of trouble. What happens when Naomi decides to return to Israel creates a narrative that has brought a beautiful blessing for countless people from every corner of the world as they take the words of the Moabites and make it their own. Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law says to Naomi, her mother-in-law, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." (Ruth 1:16, 17) Now Moab has not simply opened their borders. Ruth, a Moabite woman has given her life into the hands of an Israelite. Where you go, I will go, your God will be my God, where you die, I will die...Oh my goodness. Once the narrative was that Israel and Moab were sworn enemies, divided by race and a history of animosity. Now, a new narrative is formed and the Moabite models faithfulness, sacrificial giving, and sacrificial living.

This compelling narrative brings new life to Bethlehem. Now in Bethlehem a person of power steps up and he models righteous living. The man is Boaz. Boaz owns a field. Boaz realizes Ruth as a foreign woman is vulnerable as she works to grab a few heads of grain from his field. Noticing her vulnerability Boaz protects her and provides for her. Now Israel has a new narrative. Before we met Ruth, a family traveling in Israel was liable to be raped and killed. Everyone did what was right in their own eyes. But as the narrative changes, Bethlehem, because of Boaz, becomes a place of refuge and peace and protection. And as Moab gave their daughters in marriage to the Israelites, now Boaz takes the daughter of Moab, the widow named Ruth, and welcomes her as his bride.

I could go on and on about the new narrative for Bethlehem. With this new narrative Bethlehem becomes a place of divine revelation of the deepest order. God says in Bethlehem about the littlest son of Jesse, the shepherd boy named David, "I do not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance. I look at the heart." (I Samuel 16:7) Racism looks at the outward appearance of a person, the color of their skin. But in Bethlehem God says, "I do not look at the outward appearance." Bethlehem now calls us to join the new narrative. We cannot look at the outward appearance of our fellow human beings. That just is not in our narrative, the narrative that grows out of Bethlehem.

Micah the prophet specifically mentions Bethlehem as the place where God will raise up a ruler for Israel. (Micah 5:2) We can rightly take the many promises and prophetic utterances of the prophet Micah and link them to this new narrative. Micah envisioned a mountain of the Lord where God will settle disputes between nations (resolution, forgiveness, reconciliation), disputes settled so firmly and finally that

people will put away their weapons of destruction, they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Joined to that great promise is the prophetic call to live into this new narrative God is giving us, where we do what the Lord requires of his people, we do justice, we love mercy, and we walk humbly with our God.

I could go on and on about the new narrative in Bethlehem but let me just say this. Jesus. Jesus is born in the little town of Bethlehem. In Matthew, the birth of Jesus is linked to the line and lineage of David. Through a long and lengthy genealogy, Matthew carefully and meticulously lists each name in the genealogy of Jesus. And one of those names is of a grandmother way, way back from hundreds of years before. Matthew lists the name of someone who was a great, great, great, great...grandmother of Jesus. Her name is Ruth. I hope you will agree with me. Ruth literally is a great grandmother. Maybe even the best. Matthew could have easily and conveniently skipped over the little town of Bethlehem and especially that little woman who was a Moabite...a dreaded Moabite...a hated Moabite...Matthew could have skipped right over Ruth. He doesn't. Matthew does not skip right over Ruth, the Moabite woman. He names Ruth in the genealogy of Jesus. When God becomes Immanuel, the God who is with us, Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, he had an ancestry that included an intimate link with none other than the Moabites.

On a Sunday when area clergy have been called to preach about racism, I want not only to preach against racism, I want to preach about the new narrative we are called to make our own. Twice this summer I have read books about Winston Churchill, books chronicling the darkest days of WWII. England was standing alone against the Nazi war machine. Churchill and England were desperately hoping the United States would join the battle. FDR's trusted aide Harry Hopkins came to survey the situation in England. He saw the fierce fight and the dogged determination of the Brits. As Harry Hopkins prepared to return to the states with a report that would play a major role in shaping how the US would respond, Hopkins stood up and said words that were beautiful, words that were powerful, and words that were poignant. They were words from a Moabite woman whose name was Ruth. I guess in England it is only fitting to use the King James Version, because Hopkins said, "Whither thou goest, I will go..." Those who were there said Churchill's eyes filled with tears.

When Julie and I were engaged she showed me the wedding invitations she wanted to use. The passage on the front of the invitation came straight from the bible, and more importantly for today, straight from the Book of Ruth, straight from the mouth of a Moabite woman, who said to an Israelite woman, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people will be my people, your God will be my God." With those words our life together was given a new narrative.

Speaking on behalf of our church, because I believe I know the heart of our church, I make this commitment to all people of all colors from all corners and all countries of the world, from all cities and counties near to us or far, that the Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian, has a special fondness for a Moabite woman named Ruth. And I want to say, and I believe we all want to say, as the members and friends of this church, to any person who crosses our path on this way of life, any person of any color, every person of every color, we want to say as followers of Jesus Christ, we are with you. "Where you go, we will go. Where you lodge, we will lodge. Your people are our people. And our God is the same God, the God who does not look at outward appearances. No, our God looks deep within each of his precious children and sees the heart of his children." And if there be any doubt about how our God feels about the people, all the people of this world, let us never forget, "For God so loved the world he gave he gave his Only Begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."