



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

GOD'S SURPRISING WAY TO SAVE THE WORLD

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If you happen to have any kids in elementary school, you're probably already aware that this past Tuesday, March 2nd, was Read Across America Day. Kids and teachers nationwide dressed up as their favorite characters from different stories and spent the day reading books. I had the privilege of getting to go in and read a story for Maria Summerfield's class, and I was met by a sea of students wearing red and white striped Cat in the Hat hats.

Wouldn't it be great if we all got to BE our favorite story character for a day? Who would you want to be? I think I would be Harold from Harold and the Purple Crayon. I love that book. Not only would it be cool to stay in your pajamas all day, but to have the ability to draw anything with that crayon and have it turn into reality would be pretty awesome. I think the author of that story was a genius in having Harold be totally hands-on in the way the plot unfolds. His adventures flow out of that crayon as he draws the places he goes and the challenges he encounters. Like the time he drew one side of a mountain, but fell off the top because he hadn't drawn the other side. So then he quickly draws a hot air balloon as he's falling and that takes him to the next place.

I'd kind of like to adopt Harold as our symbol for the year here at New Day, and I'll tell you why. A couple weeks ago, I had a meeting with Jennie Kind about children's ministry, and she was talking about goals for our Sunday School classes. One of the goals is that by the time kids have made it through fifth grade, if they've been at New Day for any length of time, they will have heard all the major Bible stories. We want them to be familiar with Scripture. But then Jennie said, "What I want the kids to see is that it's not really a bunch of stories – it's all one story. It's all about Jesus."

She's right. The sweep of history recorded in Scripture is all one large unfolding plan as God set about restoring his creation. From the time sin entered the world, God has been working full force to bring redemption, and his rescue efforts came to their crescendo in Jesus. And his presence can be felt on every page of the Bible.

Not only is Scripture one big story – our lives can become part of that same big story. That's the theme we will keep pounding away at this year. When we say we want to be all in, all out and all up for God, that means discovering how more and more we can be about what God is doing. The challenge in front of us is to be like Harold – to pick up that purple crayon and draw ourselves into the plot. We create scenarios that will place

us in the middle of what God is doing. We engage with other people intentionally, always keeping the big story in mind. God is in the business of saving people and he invites us to join him. What an awesome thought.

That is the reason this church exists. But keeping the main thing the main thing takes constant vigilance. There are any number of ways we can get derailed. We can direct all our energies toward our own needs. We can get wrapped up in tasks or topics that are interesting, but off mission. One way to help keep us headed in the right direction is to spend time looking at the lives of other people and how God incorporated them into his story.

In my mind, nothing does that better than the book of Ruth. It's one of the clearest pictures of redemption in the Bible, and the way God weaves the lives of the main characters together shows how beautifully he can write us into his script, and how surprising his storyline can sometimes be.

It's a little bit longer passage, but it has the quick pace of a good novel. So I'd like to read the first chapter all in one chunk.

Ruth 1

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me -- even

if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons -- would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"

At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.

"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

It's called the book of Ruth, but it could just as easily be called the book of Naomi. Here is this woman, living in Bethlehem, in the center of God's people. Life takes her out on this journey to a foreign land where she crosses paths with Ruth. The two form a strong bond, and Naomi brings Ruth back to Bethlehem, where she is enfolded into the community and is given a permanent place in God's family.

That's a really broad way to look at it, but to me this is a picture of the life of a Christ follower as it plays out over and over. We have this home base called the church, the body of Christ as expressed here at New Day. We come together once a week for worship and fellowship. And then we journey out to our various Moabs, the places God takes us in our everyday worlds. God in his amazing way brings each of us into contact with countless Ruths, individuals living in lonely desperation. We then have the opportunity not just to invite them to a Sunday Service, but to walk them to a point where they can find a permanent place in God's family.

It's been said that most people who come to Christ come to him on the arm of a friend. It's not a decision made in isolation. It's shaped by relationship.

A couple weeks ago, I asked everyone to jot down three names of people who as of right now don't know Jesus on a personal level. I threw out the challenge to just begin praying for those individuals, and I hope you'll continue to do so. But some of you may have felt a little overwhelmed by the thought of even doing that, because you worry that if you start praying, God might tell you to talk to them. And that idea scares you to death, because you don't want to have them think you're some kind of religious freak or too pushy or annoying. So you might think this whole sharing your faith thing is for other people.

In college, I had a professor who always used to say, "You cannot not communicate." Even when you don't want to talk to someone and you give them the silent treatment, that silence is speaking volumes. We can say the same thing about sharing our faith. We cannot not communicate what we believe. Sharing our faith isn't really an option – we're sharing something about it even when we're silent. Which makes you stop and ask, "Am I communicate what I want to about what I believe?"

Here's where Naomi's story is surprising and encouraging. Naomi wasn't always a conscious witness for God. Sometimes she was even unwilling. But she was still a witness. And that's what I want to explore this morning.

When we first meet Naomi, she's living in Bethlehem, which means "House of bread". She's married to a man named Elimelech which means, "My God is King." They've got a good thing going, living there with their two sons, or an heir and a spare as some people call it. Her life is full and she can easily say "My God is King."

Then a famine comes along. Now there is no bread in the House of Bread. So they decide to make a temporary move to Moab. Wouldn't be their first choice, leaving Judah and all, but anything's doable for a short time.

But then it all goes horribly wrong. Elimelech dies there. Her two sons marry foreign women since there are no good Jewish girls around. And then not one but both of her sons die, leaving her with no means, no future and no family, living in a foreign land. And every time she mentions her dead husband's name, she is reminded that "My God is King" and all of this happened with God's full knowledge. If God is King, he must have allowed it to happen. And that tests Naomi's faith to the limits.

Now before we even get to Ruth the person, let me pause and point out a couple of surprising things here. For starters, there's this move the family made to Moab. Historically, Moab has been Israel's enemy. There was some really bad blood between the two nations. Think of someone from modern-day Israel choosing to go live among the Palestinians. It's an unusual choice. You kind of get the feeling from the story that nobody else from Bethlehem was picking up and moving. Did Elimelech sell out? One commentator I read this week said what he did by choosing to take his family there was "shameful and dangerous."

Then, once the family was in the land, the two boys married Moabite women. The author doesn't make any comment, but normally, intermarrying with foreigners was frowned upon for the Jewish people. There was too much potential for them to adopt the gods of their spouses. There was a law on the books that said if someone married a Moabite woman, their children couldn't go into the Temple for 10 generations. Rabbis have conjectured that the reason these boys waited to get married until after their dad died was because he objected to the idea.

So there's a cloud of uncertainty surrounding this family's choices. The Bible doesn't say straight out that what they did was sinful, but it certainly wasn't considered the ideal route for good Jewish folk to go. And Naomi is living with the weight of those choices. If they hadn't moved, Elimelech might not have died. Maybe God was punishing her sons when they died for marrying foreign women. Maybe their sins were why they hadn't been able to have any children. You can imagine the second guessing that would have gone on inside Naomi's head.

And yet...and yet God worked through it all. He brought incredible good out of those circumstances. And the point I'd like us to see here is that **God survives our questionable moves.**

There are all kinds of red flags about whether or not Naomi should have been in Moab. There are lingering doubts about whether or not she ever should have had a daughter-in-law named Ruth. The point is that once she was in Moab, God used her there and made the most of it.

We all have choices we have made that we regret. Some of them have long term repercussions, and we are living with the consequences. We begin to second guess how we got to where we are. And we can't see how God could ever use us in carrying out his plan because we've messed things up.

Fortunately, God is bigger than our mistakes. In fact, he is big enough and creative enough to transform them into a means of rescue. We could debate all day whether or not Elimelech SHOULD have done what he did, but once he made his choice, God used that choice to grab hold of Ruth.

To me, that shows how powerful God's redemption really is. And I hope it is a freeing concept for you. Because you and I don't have to have our act totally together in order for God to reach the world through us. We don't have to wait until we've achieved some unknown level of maturity or perfection before God can use us. One of the devil's favorite ways to prevent us from sharing our faith is to make us think it is all about us. Feeling inadequate or unworthy can easily become an excuse for being inactive. "I'm not in a good place right now to share my faith."

That's why Naomi's story gives so much hope. She is a witness to God's grace – almost in spite of herself. Our mistakes and failures don't eliminate us from participation in

God's plan, because it is about God's saving power – not ours. Just because we have made some questionable moves in our past doesn't mean God's hands are tied.

Another surprise in this story is in the way Naomi talked to Ruth about God. She wasn't exactly following traditional evangelism strategies. She didn't have any little tracts to walk through. She wasn't consciously "recruiting" Ruth to the faith at all. It actually seems like the opposite. Look what she said:

Your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.

Telling people to go back to idol worship is not typically considered a great way to encourage them to believe in God. But Naomi doesn't seem all that interested in painting God in a really favorable light. She talks about how his hand is against her and he has brought her suffering on her. Again – not your usual approach to sway people toward God.

And yet, what does Ruth tell Naomi?

Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Ruth specifically says, "I am choosing this God – the one that you have told me is against you right now. I want to follow him and not go back to the gods I grew up with."

It's remarkable. Why would she do that?

At this point in the story, Ruth has known Naomi for over ten years. She has seen this woman's faith in daily life and knows that it is real. She doesn't need Naomi to try and sugar coat everything and try to make life seem better than it is. Ruth needs the authenticity and honesty that she sees in Naomi. There is a different quality to Naomi's relationship with God than Ruth had seen between her family and their idols.

As for Naomi, her way of talking about God sounds harsh, but it really points to the strength of her faith, rather than the lack of it. Because she's seeing everything as being from God. She's still saying "My God is King" even when things are so bad. Her understanding and interpretation of why he's allowing her to suffer may be skewed, but she's still saying, "Look. God is my God and he's in charge. He is letting me go through this right now, and I hate it. It stinks. But he's God and I'm not."

Naomi even goes so far as to ask for God's blessing on Ruth and Orpah. So you know she has not turned her back on God even while she feels he is responsible for what she's going through.

In other words, she is not trying to package life in a neat little pill for Ruth to swallow. And here's the surprising truth I think we can take from this: **God doesn't need our spin.**

There was a contestant this week on American Idol who went on and on talking about how he knew God and God wasn't going to let him get voted off because God wanted him there. Guess who got voted off?

There was no reality in the way he was talking about God. It was just wishful thinking. When we go to share our faith with someone, what they want is not a list of airtight answers to all their questions or a "God's gonna make it all work out" message. What they're really needing is to see someone living in authentic faith, wrestling through the same struggles as they are with honesty. Our job is not to say we understand God perfectly, our job is to stay engaged with him while we go through all the difficulties and hardships of life. Our job is to point to a Jesus who wept and suffered and wrestled in prayer – not a God who just does our bidding and make us feel good.

It's okay to not like what God is allowing you to go through. You don't have to love pain to be a good Christian. And you certainly don't have to doctor up God's image for other people who are experiencing grief and heartache. Some things are just too hurtful to ever wrap our minds around. And we do a disservice to God when we massage the truth.

Sharing your faith is not explaining the world – it's demonstrating how to live like "My God is King" when we can't make sense of what's happening. Do you know what is much more compelling than having pat answers to deep questions? It's being able to ask for the Lord's blessing in the lives of others even when we ourselves are feeling burdened. It's having co-workers watch you forgive a legitimate grievance. It's being the student who doesn't gossip. It's the daily display of what a relationship with God looks like in street clothes. Nothing speaks as loudly as the visible choices made day after day because we believe. That's what Ruth saw in Naomi and that's what people around us notice all the time.

God survives our questionable moves and can still use us. He doesn't need us to put any spin on his image when we talk about him. Another surprising truth we can also count on is the fact that **God turns dead ends into freeways.**

Naomi was in the worst possible place you could be. It was terrible to be a widowed woman in those days. There wasn't a safety net for you. But to be a widow in a foreign country with no family around was even worse. She had no way to provide for herself, no companionship, no grandchildren or future. She was at the end of her rope. When she returned to Jerusalem, she told people,

I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty.

What she couldn't see at the time was that our emptiness can make space for God to do something incredibly amazing. Because Naomi's return with Ruth ended up leading to a whole chain of events that would establish the family line not only of King David, but also Jesus himself. God was building a highway far beyond what Naomi could see.

I often quote Oswald Chambers in my sermons. Did you know that he died at the age of 43, and that he hadn't even written a book before he died? He spent his life preaching in relatively obscure, small places. When he died so young, it was a tragedy for his wife, Bidy and their daughter.

Bidy was incredibly talented at shorthand, and when Oswald preached, she had taken verbatim notes for years. Upon his death, she immediately began transcribing all those notes into books and articles.

If Oswald and Bidy had lived into old age together, she never would have accomplished that massive project and most likely those sermon notes would have been forgotten in some dusty attic and no one would remember who that Rev. Chambers guy was. Out of what looked like a dead end to Oswald's ministry, God made a way for it to continue to impact the world nearly 100 years later.

Do you feel like you're at a dead end? Are you stuck and discouraged that there's no way out? Time and time again, God has shown that he can take the very thing you feel is your emptiness – your grief, your heartache, your loneliness – he can take it all and make it into a freeway for his glory, for victory over sin, for healing, for the Good News. It is backwards and counterintuitive. But it is a source of incredible hope, because it means no situation we find ourselves in is beyond him.

To take that thought further, I would say that one last surprise we find in this story is that **God reaches us in our reaching out.**

When you read through the whole book of Ruth, you can get done and say, "Wow. God went to such amazing lengths to pull this one woman into his family." And it's true. He did. God arranged a fantastic way to give Ruth a place in Israel and in history.

He used Naomi to accomplish that. But as he was using Naomi, he was doing an equally impressive work inside Naomi. She was in a bad place at the beginning of the book – desperate, alone, and in her own words, bitter. There was a huge void in her heart. But as she connected with Ruth, God began to fill her tank. This story is as much about her restoration as it is about Ruths. It's no coincidence that chapter one ends with these words:

So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Our story started with a famine, and now there's actually a harvest. God is replenishing and restoring. And it's only the beginning of the harvest. More is still to come.

The point is this: God isn't just interested in what he can do through you. He's interested in what he can do in you. You're not just a means to an end, a vehicle for getting his message to people who don't know him. Reaching out with the message of

Christ brings growth and joy for us as we do it. God's good news is as much for the messenger as it is for the person hearing it for the first time.

Naomi was the least likely person to be involved in God's plan to save the world. She was broken, she had no influence in society and she couldn't even take care of herself. But God chose her anyway.

I mentioned Oswald Chambers earlier. One of his good friends and personal heroes was the Rev. Duncan MacGregor. He was this good-natured Scotsman who had a big heart. Chambers especially liked to watch him with people who were down and out, because he was so incredibly kind. Chambers wrote,

"Children were always very fond of the Rev. MacGregor and he never refused anything they offered him. I remember once a dirty little urchin, sprawling in the puddles on the sidewalk, scrambled to her feet when she saw him coming, and held up her grimy little hand with a piece of half-sucked candy in it, which he took and put in his mouth with a most gracious, "Thank you."

What a wonderful picture of how God the Father is with us. What we have to hand him is small and grimy at best. Nothing of great value. But he graciously accepts our gifts and chooses to turn them into something beautiful.

That's the theme through all of this. Sharing is never about what we bring to the table – it's about him. It's about the fact that My God is King no matter how questionable my moves. My God is King, and he doesn't need me to improve upon his image. My God is King over all dead ends and he blasts them open into freeways. My God is King, and as I reach out to others, he reaches into my heart and rescues me, too.

It all contradicts everything we would think should be true about sharing our faith. But it shouldn't surprise us. Because this is the same God who came for us in the most unconventional way. Giving up his own power and becoming human. Dying like a criminal when he hadn't done anything wrong. Offering us forgiveness by carrying our punishment. Bringing us healing in his wounds. Kierkegaard called it the ultimate paradox. So it's fitting that God would use us to carry the message of his love to the world in the same way.

As you prepare to come to take the Lord's Supper this morning, I encourage you to stop and try to answer: The questionable move I've been worrying about is... the negative thing I've been trying to put a spin on is...the dead end I'm facing is...Bring those thoughts with you as you come to communion. And leave them all with Jesus. He will gladly take them from your hands and do what he does best. He'll redeem them and transform them into something glorious. He'll put a purple crayon in your hand and say, "Come be part of my story. Forget your weaknesses and your excuses. Join me in reaching the person who is crossing your path today."

He did it with Naomi. He can do it with us, too. My God is King.