

## **Loving Kindness and Loyalty**

Hebrews 9: 24-28

Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17

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### *Hebrews 9: 24-28*

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the 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.

### *Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17*

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 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.” She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” Then he said, “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. She came to her mother-in-law, who said, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;  
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;  
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side;  
We will work with each other, we will work side by side;  
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride<sup>1</sup>

These lyrics from the familiar and beloved hymn, ‘*They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love,*’ by Peter Scholtes, speak to the wonder, the gift, the power, of covenant; to the

relationship begun with our baptismal promises, our baptismal covenant. Promises to receive the freedom of new life in Christ and then to follow in his ways by resisting oppression and evil, showing love and justice and be living witness to the work and words of Jesus Christ. The promises bind and affirm a covenant between the one being baptized and the community of faith, as they also affirm a covenant between the one being baptized and God as we make a strong and solemn bond together that forever changes our relationship. We promise to lovingly walk together, hand in hand, and to lovingly work together, side by side, to live a life of lovingkindness and loyalty to God and to one another. The covenant we join at baptism we reaffirm each and every time we come to the Communion table. As we share the bread and the cup, we are vowing to faithfully sustain our end of the covenant.

The idea of ‘covenant,’—a voluntary, chosen, and personal relationship between two parties who make binding promises of obligation to follow through---is the backbone of the biblical story. The Old Testament, the old covenant, the New Testament, the new covenant. Most of the biblical story is told through the covenants between God and humanity. The roots of the covenant we live into go back to Abraham and Sarah when God promised offspring, land, and universal blessing for God’s chosen people if they upheld their part of the agreement, and curses if they failed.

Our Old Testament reading today from the book of Ruth is such a covenant story. Ruth, a foreigner, is married to an Israelite man, who dies before they are able to have a child. This leaves Ruth in a precarious, vulnerable, situation as she no rights, no protection, no means of providing for herself. Her mother-in-law, Naomi, encourages her to return to her people, to her gods, yet Ruth chooses to stay. There seems to be no practical reason for Ruth to stay as Naomi, an older widow and now childless herself, faces even more challenges than Ruth. Yet Ruth stays with Naomi. Two widows alone in the world return to Judah, and it is here that Ruth moves from being a liability to Naomi, to instead becoming the means of her redemption.

As Charles Hambrick-Stowe<sup>ii</sup> wrote in an article for the Christian Century, “It was Ruth, the non-Jew, who, insistent on accompanying Naomi, looked forward with hope. Her decision and her vow established her in the covenant, for Ruth’s promise was not only to her mother-in-law but also to her new God and to her new people. The spectacle of the two single, childless women making their way across the desert calls up the image of Naomi’s biological and Ruth’s spiritual ancestors: “So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had.” The women’s journey took an equal amount of courage, or perhaps even more.”

Ruth not only adopted Naomi as her family although the blood that would unite them had died, but she also adopted the faith of her deceased husband, and his family. The covenant God had made with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants had meaning and connection to Ruth. Going back to her pagan gods was not going home. Home was now where God, Yahweh, loved and cared for this chosen people. God’s covenant spoke to her. ‘You will be my people, and I will be your God.’ Ruth freely let go of the privileges of royalty in her homeland to accept a life of poverty among people she admired, and with a God she loved, a God whose promises of lovingkindness and loyalty meant everything to her. Naomi and Ruth lived in a covenantal relationship—Naomi shared her wisdom, and Ruth provided for Naomi through the gleanings off the wheat fields. By covenant loyalty they promised to lovingly walk together, hand in hand, and to lovingly work together, side by side. God’s covenant with Ruth, a woman raised on idol-worship, who was widowed and left destitute and far from home, but whose faith journey brought her to God’s covenant of lovingkindness and loyalty, will reveal itself as with Boaz she will become the great-grandmother of King David, the bloodline of Jesus Christ.

The birth of Jesus begins the new covenant, as the old covenant was not intended to last forever, it was ‘a mere copy of the true one,’ or as the NIV bible says, “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” Jesus, the new covenant, is the culmination of God’s saving work inspired by the Holy Spirit. All the promises made to Abraham and David are fulfilled in this new covenant. The first coming of Jesus was a one-time sacrifice that forever invites us to a “Christ-formed” path of gratitude, love, and humility.

Living in faithful covenant, we live our baptismal promises as we walk and work together, and as we come to the table and reaffirm them in the sharing of the bread and the cup, the body given for us, and the cup, the blood of the new covenant, poured out for us. Living in faithful covenant, we, like Ruth and Naomi, we follow a path that may not always seem to be practical, that may appear to be a liability, yet we follow the covenant promises to redemption through lovingkindness and loyalty. Amen.

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1. Copyright: *They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love*, written by Peter Scholtes

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<sup>ii</sup> Rev. Dr. Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *Ruth and the New Abraham, Esther the New Moses*, Christian Century, December 7, 1983, pp. 1130-1134. Copyright by The Christian Century Foundation; used by permission.

### **Prayer for Veterans Day**

One: God of peace and love, on this 11th day of the 11th month we once again gather to remember. We remember that in Jesus of Nazareth you have called us to be people of peace saying, “Blessed are the peacemakers” and reminding us that we are to love our neighbor and our enemy as we love ourselves.

**All: But we also acknowledge that there are times when we as a global community fail to live out those words, times when young men and women hear the call to don the uniforms of their country and serve under their flag.**

Two: Today we give thanks for all who have chosen to serve their country. We give thanks for their bravery, their commitment, and their love.

**All: But we know that when armies meet on the field there are always some who don’t come home. And so we pause in the memory of those who went and did not return to mothers and wives and children left behind.**

One: We remember battles at Ypres, and Passchendale, and Vimy Ridge in the war we were told would end all wars, battles where the blood of enemies mingled in the mud and water of France and Belgium.

**All: And we remember those who fell in the war that came a scarce generation later. And again young men died in places like Hong Kong, and Ortona, and Dieppe, and Juno Beach, and in the Netherlands.**

Two: We remember all who fell and were buried far from home, or who sank to a watery grave in the cold Atlantic.

**All: Then as the years past the roles changed and we sent our best to help keep the peace in places like Cyprus, and the Golan Heights, and Cambodia. And still some died and were buried.**

One: And now, in these last years we find that our young have returned to the battlefield, only to have some of them return in a coffin carried solemnly to a waiting aircraft.

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Two: God, whose hope for the world is peace, on this day we not only remember the fallen who lie buried under a military tombstone. We remember also the fallen of Germany, and Japan, and France, and Australia. Or Italians, and native Afghanis, and English. This day we honor all who die as a result of humanity's common failing to live in the peace you have hoped for all these millennia.

**All: God, we pray too for those who returned from battle forever changed by what they had seen. For those who bore, and still bear, wounds of body and soul.**

One: And now, God of love, as we have remembered and honored, we prepare to go back into our everyday lives. May the remembering we have done here today reawaken and strengthen our commitment to work for peace, true peace. Help us to remember that peace will never truly come from a gun barrel but from the depths of our hearts. Help us remember our calling to be peacemakers at home and abroad, in the big things and in the small. And may we never forget the cost that has already been paid.

**All: God of peace that surpasses all understanding, we pray our remembrances and our hopes in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace.**

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Holy One, you have built this house, this foundation, you watch over us as we come to worship you and to listen to the stories of people who throughout the generations have shown us the way by their trust in your promises. We celebrate this gathering which can bind us together as we give thanks for your gift and grace of covenant, of care, guidance and promises.

God of Wisdom and Love, a powerless but faithful widow, Naomi saw your hand in all things, in all the good as well as in times of loss and despair. Trusting in you, confident in her wisdom, she brought together the bloodline for Jesus, our Redeemer, our New Covenant. A foreigner raised on idol worship, Ruth openly gave her life and her heart to you in openness and assurance when she could not see that she was following your call. Naomi and Ruth, lifelong companions for each other remind us of the risks we are free to take with confidence that you are present through times of plenty and times of want, all along our journey through life.

God of Redemption and New Life, we gather for worship, we prepare to come to the table, living out our faith, our hope, our trust, in Jesus, the new covenant. We remember with gratitude and praise that he suffered to bear the sins of many and has now entered into heaven itself to appear in you on our behalf. O God, teach us to not lose sight of the loving grace and mercy of the new covenant, and our promises to keep it. Teach us the joy of giving ourselves to you, so that we yearn for your presence, long for your salvation, and so find you living in us.

God of Covenant, as we remember and honor all who have served our country, who have protected us and fought for freedom and justice, we offer prayers of thanksgiving for the covenant of commitment that calls them to risk their lives, to all too often lay down their lives, for those they will never even know, and we bless the covenant of camaraderie that binds those who serve.

God of Mercy and Grace, covenant binds us together as humanity and as your beloved; it holds us in your lovingkindness and loyalty, and so we raise our prayers this day for all those who are in need of healing and wholeness, in need of food and shelter, in need of relief and comfort, in need of hope and peace.

All this we pray in the name and the words of the One reigns in heaven with you, and who we eagerly await.....