Gleaning and Hope

# By Glenn Brumbaugh

How do we respond when we reach the end of our rope,

when it seems all hope is lost,

then all the pieces come together at the last minute to move us forward? Do we call it coincidence? Or fate?

I’m sure we’ve all had that experience in some fashion many times in our lives. Events just seem to come about

that provide the solution to the problem we are facing.

And I’m not referring to some earth-shattering event

like winning the lottery

or receiving a big inheritance from a long-lost relative.

I’m thinking more along the lines

of not knowing how you’ll meet your bills

because they’re cutting your hours at work

and your car’s in the shop with a costly repair looming.

You don’t even know if you’ll have rent.

Then business picks up and you have mandatory overtime,

and the car repair turns out to be half what you expected.

Is that truly just coincidence, or is there something more at work there? Likewise in our scripture story today, we start out with Naomi and Ruth

pretty much at the end of their ropes too.

To recap from our scripture last week,

Naomi and Ruth started the story in a good place.

They were married and had good support from their husbands. Naomi had avoided the famine in her home country of Judea

and all indications are that she and her family were doing well

living abroad in Moab.

But then, she lost her husband, then her sons,

one of which was Ruth’s husband,

and now these women found themselves left with nothing, with not much hope on their horizon,

left to return to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem.

Naomi has completely lost hope, and her trust in the goodness of God.

Her name in Hebrew literally means “good” or “pleasant”

yet she is so despondent she changes it to Mara,

which means “bitter” or “sad.”

So today we have these two women arriving in Bethlehem,

with no means of support, literally at the edge of a crisis.

Ruth heads out to do the only thing she can

to help keep them going a little longer, glean the fields.

Now in that culture, gleaning was the food stamps of that time.

After the workers went through cutting the wheat for threshing,

any wheat that fell off was to be left behind to be “gleaned” by those who did not have resources provided for them.

The widows, the orphans, the lepers,

all those who didn’t fit into their economic system

were the ones out there gleaning.

In the normal course of things,

you might get enough wheat to get you through a week or two throughout the entire harvest,

but it certainly wasn’t enough for two people to live on for very long. Yet at the end of the day, she comes back with an ephah,

which works out to be around thirty pounds of wheat,

enough for her and her mother-in-law to last for weeks.

Was that just coincidence?

Was it just by chance that she chose Boaz’s field,

an upstanding well-to-do relation of her father-in-law?

Was it dumb luck that he was a caring, charitable man of faith?

Were his male workers just in a good space with their boss that day

that they headed his warning to leave her alone?

Too often, we can miss the work of God in our lives

by seeing the many small events that come together to help us

as simply coincidence, or our luck turning,

without seeing the hand of God in the small things.

We seem to expect God to turn up in big ways,

and seek in prayer the pie in the sky solution to our problems,

that we then fail to simply seek the modest, simple solution.

Yet often times, all those small actions and decisions on the parts of others

come together to make a huge impact.

That is the case with what happened at the West Side Baptist Church

in Beatrice, Nebraska.

Normally all of the good choir people

came to church on Wednesday night to practice,

and they tended to be early, well before the 7:30 starting time.

But one night, March 1, 1950, one by one, two by two,

they all had excuses for being late.

Marilyn, the church pianist, overslept on her after- dinner nap,

so she and her mother were late.

One girl, a high school student,

was having trouble with her homework.

That delayed her, so she was late.

One couple couldn’t get their car started.

They, and those they were to pick up, ended up being late. All 18 choir members, including the pastor and his wife, were late. In the afternoon the Reverend Walter Klempel

had gone to get things ready for choir practice.

He lit the furnace —

most of the singers were in the habit of arriving around 7:15, and it was chilly in the church –

and then he went home to dinner.

But at 7:10, when it was time for him to go back to the church

with his wife and daughter Marilyn Ruth,

it turned out that Marilyn Ruth’s dress was soiled. They waited while his wife ironed another

and thus were still at home at 7:30.

All had good excuses.

At 7:30, the time the choir rehearsal was to begin,

not one soul was in the choir loft. This had never happened before. That night, the only night in the history of the church

that the choir wasn’t starting to practice at 7:30,

was the night that there was a gas leak

in the basement of the West Side Baptist Church.

At precisely the time at which the choir would have been singing,

the gas leak was ignited by the church furnace

and the whole building blew up.

Was this just a fluke that no one was injured or killed?

Was it just coincidence that made everyone late

for choir practice that night?

As we reflect on our story in Ruth,

one could make the point

that this concept of God working behind the scenes

is what this story is truly getting at.

We get so used to hearing and experiencing God

as an active character in the plots of the many stories in scripture that we begin to expect the Divine to always act

in grand and sweeping actions in our lives.

And that certainly is always a possibility, but much more frequently, it’s the little decisions and actions of the many people we interact with in our day-to-day lives

that are the true workings of God.

The more I reflect on all the millions and billions of interactions

people have with each other everyday,

and all the decisions each of us make,

I am more amazed at the coordinated dance

that makes those good things and blessings occur

much more than the rare grand actions and miracles. Though sometimes what may seem as minor actions on the parts of a few, can have huge effects for future generations.

For example, there’s the story in the late 1800’s

of a member of Britain’s Parliament

who went to Scotland to make a speech.

He got off the train in Edinburgh,

and then took a carriage south toward his destination. Unfortunately, the carriage became stuck in deep mud.

A local farm boy came to the rescue with his team of work horses. In his gratitude, the politician offered a reward,

but the boy refused, saying he wanted nothing.

"Well,” persisted the legislator, "Is there anything I can do for you?

What would you like to do with yourself when you grow up?"

"I’d like to become a doctor" the young man replied.

The Member of Parliament promised to do what he could,

and in fact secured admission to the university for the young man.

During World War II more than 50 years later,

Winston Churchill lay dangerously ill in Morocco,

suffering from pneumonia.

A new wonder drug was administered to him, penicillin,

which had been discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming,

the Scottish farm boy of so long before.

And the politician who had sponsored him to the university?

He was Randolph Churchill, the father of Winston.

Life is full of what we refer to as coincidence, yet is it really?

And you may ask yourself, well how does free will play into all this?

After all, one of the hallmarks of our relationship with God

is that we are given free will,

the option to make choices to follow

and be in relationship with God,

or to walk another path.

That just adds yet one more dimension to this elaborate web that God weaves. Naomi chose to return to Bethlehem, where her husband’s kinfolk lived. Ruth chose to go out to glean,

and chose to seek a field belonging to someone

in whose eyes she found favor.

God led her to the field of her kinsman through marriage, Boaz.

Boaz chose to live a faith-based life, one of kindness and charity,

and blessed Ruth greatly in her efforts

through the guidance of his faith and his devotion to God. He seems to choose to treat his employees well

and they respect his wishes to treat Ruth with respect.

And all of these choices and divine interventions lift the spirit of Naomi, and restore her faith in the actions of God through Boaz.

When we find ourselves in the struggles of life,

it can be all too easy to get bogged down, and feel abandoned by God,

so that when blessings come our way,

we see them as lucky breaks, or good fortune,

and miss the delicate weaving hand of our Creator

in the background.

The story of Ruth shows that God doesn’t always come into our lives

with a booming voice or grand displays of power,

but more often than not, like the still small voice in the storm.

God quietly orders the people and events of our lives

to work with the choices people make,

to eventually lead us to redemption.

As we go about our normal lives this week,

let’s take time to reflect on how God has worked

in the background of our lives,

and make an effort to see the Divine at work in the little things of life,

in those seemingly minor events

that accumulate to make a real impact on our lives.

And like Boaz, make we seek to live lives of faith

that guide our choices

and allow us to be the tools of God in a world

so in need of redemption. Amen.