

Why do bad things happen to good people? **We know** that people who suffer are not being punished by God any more than people who are rich are being rewarded by God. Another book in the Bible, The book of Job was written to discourage us from thinking that tragedy is a punishment. Remember, the character Job was an affluent , God fearing man. And in the story, Satan went to God and said “Job only loves you because he’s got it good.”. And so, God ALLOWED Satan to bring Job down to the point where Job’s children were dead and his riches gone. And Job’s friends said confess what you’ve done to deserve this! Job said, I have done nothing wrong. I don’t deserve this. And in the end, God appears and reprimands the friends, and says to Job, “you can not understand why pain is part of created matter, you simply don’t have the capacity to absorb that kind of understanding. Just trust me...I’ve got it all in my hands”

The book of Job is a work of instructive fiction. Job is a fictional character, whereas Naomi and Ruth the characters in today’s reading, were real people. Two very real women who had some very real troubled times. Unlike Job, Naomi doesn’t think God is punishing her for something she did, although she does think that God controls what is happening to her. She doesn’t ask why, she just accepts God’s sovereignty and tries to keep going. Naomi doesn’t complain to God, she just bemoans what She believes God has done.

Naomi does not appear to have a personal relationship with the God of Israel. She simply believes in her ancestral diety’s power, and goes about her life, which at this point has taken a tragic turn.

No one in the book of Ruth declares their love for God.

The most powerful display of love in the book of Ruth is the love Ruth has for Naomi. As I said last week, the book of Ruth is a story about survival. To recap from where we left off,

Naomi and her husband Elimilech, were Jewish, they lived in Bethlehem with their two sons until a famine hit. When the famine came, Elimilech and Naomi, moved their family to Moab. In Moab, the sons found wives Oprah and Ruth. The whole family lived in Moab for ten years and then all three of the men died. Leaving Naomi and her two daughters in law Oprah and Ruth. To make a bad situation worse...a famine hits Moab...So Naomi heads back to Bethlehem with Oprah and Ruth...but then she tries to send the young women back...realizing that they would be better off if they went back to their families and got new husbands. Oprah leaves Naomi, but Ruth refuses. Ruth's response to Naomi has been used millions of times in marriage ceremonies as she declares (read quote). So, the two women head to Bethlehem together...Ruth would have been in her twenties, Naomi in her forties. When they get to Bethlehem, the women of the town recognize Naomi and they say "Hey it's Naomi!" And Naomi says (read).

Ruth, as a foreigner, would not have known how to navigate the welfare system in Bethlehem, so Naomi must have taught Ruth that reaping a field in Israel always had to take account of the poor and disadvantaged in the land. Hired hands were to harvest the field of the owner, but any grain that they missed in the first pass through the field had to be left in the field for the strangers, the orphans, the foreigners, and the widows. It was a meager and difficult way to survive, but at least it offered a tiny meal for those who had nothing. And Ruth and Naomi had nothing. Naomi said "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty". Like Job, Naomi had lost everything. And Like Job, Naomi blamed God. PAUSE

But God didn't take everything away from Naomi and Ruth...Patriarchy did. Naomi and Ruth didn't **lose** anything. The death of husbands and sons just **revealed** to them what they never had to begin with. As women, they had very few human rights. I wondered, when I first read what the lectionary suggested for today's scripture, I wondered why the whole bit about how well Boaz behaved was left out, BOAZ OWNED THE FIELD WHERE RUTH ENDED UP GLEANING, and he eventually used his power to provide for Naomi and Ruth...I wondered why that bit got left out. We jump from the beginning of chapter 3 to the end of chapter 4, ignoring all of Boaz's part of the story, how he eventually took Ruth and Naomi into his household. I wondered why his part in this story was left out. And then I realized maybe leaving Boaz out makes the theme of systemic oppression more obvious. I mean, as we read from the book of Ruth these last two weeks, did we notice that Ruth and Naomi's destitution was **created** by an oppressive **system**. Personally, I just accepted it as part of the same old story of overcoming oppression and marginalization that it seems like we talk about week after week...

But it is **systems** that oppress people.

In the fictional story of Job, God did not take anything from Job, but rather God ALLOWED Satan to have his way and so Job suffered. Now remember Job is an instructional work of fiction, not a true story. And if we take a step back and look at the themes of that story we can learn that **evil** has to be **allowed** to be inflicted.

In other words, oppressive systems must be sustained to exist.

There would be no oppression if we human beings did not allow it.

Naomi and Ruth should not have had to go on welfare.

The system was rigged against them from the moment they were born female.

Sometimes bad things happen to good people because death is part of life. But lots of bad things happen to people because we allow systems to exist that create suffering.

Boaz had all the privilege- he was rich, he was a man, and he was on the right side of the holy code. Boaz saved Naomi and Ruth from poverty. But even though he did the right thing within the system, he never stood in the square and shouted “hey everyone! This system that has made me rich is oppressive to women! They shouldn’t need to be connected to a man to survive!” PAUSE

I don’t talk about sin much...I focus on relationship in God.

the reason I don’t focus on sin is because I believe that the more a human being turns inward **toward** his or her... or their, source- God- the more they turn **from** everything that is not a function of their GOD given self, the more sensitive to that God given self they will become. Sin is personal. And personal growth in God changes behavior. And knowing ourselves, in God, and being aware of our behavior as individuals whose source is God is very ,very important because Evil is systemic. Evil is collective. Genocide, racism, systemic poverty-all of the injustices perpetuated by humans onto other humans are done so through a **collective** mindset. Oppressive systems can only exist when we collectively **allow** them to exist.

When Our personal relationship in God informs every thought, word and deed we will as individuals refuse to participate in evil. We will not support any system that oppresses the marginalized, the foreigner, the poor...not only will we not support these evil systems, we will not ALLOW them.

Ruth and Naomi may not have been thinking about God, but God was thinking about them. (READ 4:13-17)

This is the only time in the book of Ruth that the word “love” is used, and it refers to the love Ruth has for Naomi.

Where is God in this story of Ruth and Naomi? Well, the DNA of God incarnate came from a destitute foreign woman who loved another woman. Ruth was King David’s great grandmother. God is in the DNA. So, Apparently, God does not need us to love, like, or even acknowledge Him-Her- to work with us in our lives because we are created by God and God is our source. PAUSE

Death is part of life. Bad things happen to good people. So, No Job, no one is punishing you, just because you have been a good man does not mean you will not suffer in life. Bad things happen to good people. But bad things can be soooo much worse than they have to be when there are systems in place that make it virtually impossible to overcome hardship. So, yes Naomi, you **were** dealt a raw hand. But not by God. There was a system in place that set you up to suffer. PAUSE

Having a personal relationship with Jesus does not mean you get to go to heaven when you die.

It means you are responsible for bringing heaven to earth so that the Ruths and Naomis in the world today will not have to live on the margins of human existence. If you claim to follow Jesus, you are responsible for bringing everyone into the fold the way that Jesus did. **We** are responsible for leveling the playing field. As Isaiah predicted:

Read Isaiah 40

I don’t talk about sin much, I feel more called to talk about our **source** in God and our **responsibility** toward our fellow human beings. **We** are

responsible for leveling the field. That is how the Glory of the Lord, heaven,
is revealed here on earth.