

“FAITH AT THE MARGINS”

LEVITICUS 23:22; RUTH 2
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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I talk to many people, whether in person or on my blog, who have a relationship with the Bible that is... complicated.

They are happy to read about the teachings of Jesus, for the most part. But the Old Testament is another matter entirely.

Many people struggle mightily with the OT. There's so much violence—some of it commanded by God himself— so many odd dreams and visions, so many strange rituals and commands that have no relevance for contemporary life.

It's can be a challenge to embrace *all* of Scripture as inspired by God to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

Just this morning, I read an article suggesting that the decline of the church in Western culture “revolves around losing confidence in the Bible.”¹

Perhaps some of you have felt this way at times. If so, you're hardly alone.

Way back in the second century, there was a early church bishop named Marcion who believed that we should just get rid of the OT with its primitive god, and focus on the full revelation of God in Jesus. Marcion felt that the OT portrayed a tyrant God that he wanted nothing to do with.

So Marcion came up with his own Bible. He rejected the OT entirely. And even the NT had to be accessed selectively, in his view. He kept one gospel (sections of the book of

¹ <http://www.redletterchristians.org/western-christianitys-biggest-problem-the-bible/>

Luke) and ten of Paul's letters to the various churches he founded. That was it. That was Marcion's Bible.

(We might think this ridiculous, but how many of us effectively have a Bible within a Bible ourselves? How many of us read only certain parts of the Bible and pretty much ignore the rest?)

So, we are not the first to struggle with the OT or wonder about its relevance.

One book that probably wouldn't make many people's list if they could choose which books got into the Bible and which didn't, would be Leviticus.

Leviticus is not typically referenced when talk turns to "inspirational passages" or "life verses." There isn't a lot of devotional material based on the third book of the Bible.

There are a number of reasons for Leviticus's lack of popularity.

1. It is spectacularly dull reading
 - a. The other parts of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Bible) contain long sections of narrative and storytelling, or moral exhortation. In Leviticus, we are greeted by vast tracts of legal code and ritual guidelines
2. It contains passages that we find a combination of bizarre, irrelevant, or even offensive by modern sensibilities.

There is much that could be said about how we ought to read this part of the Bible.

We could talk about how its overarching theme is the holiness of God and how the sacrificial rituals and regulations prescribed in Leviticus were meant to form and preserve a people set apart in ways that would have made sense at that time and that place, and simultaneously challenged norms.

We could talk about a number of other things as well. None of them would magically make Leviticus less strange or easier to read, but they *would* help us to read Leviticus *in the context it was written* and for the people and purposes *it was written for*.

But even leaving aside all of this, it is remarkable that in the midst of all these antiquated rules and regulations, all of these tedious details that make us scratch our

heads, there are a few passages in this book that stand as foundational for the entire narrative of Scripture.

Perhaps the most well-known one is Leviticus 19:18:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Obviously, Jesus himself quotes this text when he is asked, which is the greatest commandment.

But we also have a number of passages that discuss how “aliens” or “foreigners” are to be treated.

We have heard one already this morning from Leviticus 23 (also stated in Leviticus 19:9-10).

In both passages, the command to leave the margins of the field for the poor and the alien is followed by: “I am the Lord Your God.”

This links the command to make provision for the marginalized it to the character, purpose, and authority of God himself.

(Which is remarkable—especially when you consider that people often point to the OT as mostly concerned with the people of Israel to the *exclusion* of all other people.)

A few chapters earlier, in Leviticus 19, it is put even more strongly:

*When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you **shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:33-34).***

And this imperative from Leviticus weaves its way into the rest of the biblical narrative.

In a minute, we’re going to hear part of a story where these commandments were obeyed. First, a little background.

The story of Ruth takes place in the period of the Judges. We are pre-monarchy, but post-Exodus and wilderness wandering in the story of Israel.

There is famine in the land of Canaan, so Naomi, Elimelech (from Bethlehem) and their two sons head down to Moab.

Now Moab (which is located in modern day Jordan) has a connection with Israel. The land is named after the son of an incestuous relationship between Abraham's nephew Lot and his eldest daughter (see Genesis 13).

Naomi and Elimelech's sons both marry Moabite women (in violation of commands in Deuteronomy 7 about inter-marriage with other nations!): Orpah and Ruth

Naomi's husband Elimelech dies, as do her two sons, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah alone in in the land of Moab.

Naomi decides to go back across the Jordan to the land of Canaan to be with her people; she tells her Moabite daughters-in-law to stay with their people in Moab; Orpah reluctantly agrees, but Ruth refuses; she insists on staying with Naomi and returning with her back to her own land:

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried" (Ruth 1:16-17).

So, Naomi and Ruth head back to Bethlehem in Judah at the beginning of the barley harvest. This is where our story picks up in Ruth 2

I have asked our volunteers to read this story to us in a kind of reader's theatre based on Eugene Peterson's translation of this passage in *The Message*.

(Who better to read a story about aliens and foreigners than some aliens and foreigners, right? 😊)

I also want us to listen to this story with an eye on both the past and the present:

1. Listen with our passage from Leviticus in mind
2. Listen with our own 21st century context in mind – we will be getting to what this text asks of us today

Volunteers tell the story of Ruth: Readers Theater (*Approximately 4 min, 30 secs*)

Ruth is an alien. And remember, she's not just any alien—she is from Moab, one of Israel's most hated enemies. Deuteronomy 23:3:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt.

So, what we have here is the Bible—the OT, specifically—actually *contradicting* or *superseding* an earlier command from Deuteronomy!

The people of Israel were to be set apart, pure, undefiled by the nations around them. This was the reason for all the laws of Leviticus.

And yet, we have these other voices, from *within the same Old Testament* that urge care for the alien.

We have stories like Ruth, who demonstrates an unwavering commitment to her Israelite mother-in-law, despite being offered the chance to return to her land...

Ruth, who finds favour with the Israelite Boaz, who was committed to applying the law from Leviticus about aliens and the poor...

Ruth, who eventually ends up marrying Boaz and producing a son, Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, the greatest king of Israel.

And of course, if we trace the line far enough, we see that out of Ruth and Boaz's line would come Jesus, the Messiah, the savior not only of Israel, but of the whole world!

Ruth is mentioned explicitly in the genealogy that begins the gospel of Matthew—along with Rahab, another foreign woman who probably wouldn't have been looked upon too favourably!

These are important themes and stories to remember when we are sorting out our relationship with the Bible and with the Old Testament in particular.

Yes, there is plenty that isn't always easy to read. But there is redemption in there as well. There is faith operating at the margins of the dominant narrative. There are unlikely characters—a foreign woman, for example—characters who weren't supposed to be part of the story, who are playing crucial roles in God's story of salvation.

We've come to the "so what?" part of the sermon.

Two lessons.

First, and perhaps most obviously, we are called to care for the poor and the alien.

It will look different for us than it did all those thousands of years ago.

We live in a modern nation state where the government, in theory, provides for the poor and the marginalized.

We harvest our fields with massive machinery. We don't tend to see the poor and the alien huddled on the margins of Alberta farmland.

But there are other ways that we can follow the principles outlined in Leviticus and embodied in the story of Ruth.

We can enthusiastically support organizations like The Canadian Foodgrains Bank (the local growing project's harvest is on Tuesday, incidentally!).

We can volunteer at the soup kitchen this fall. Our church has a regular rotation over there... they could always use more volunteers.

We can support organizations like MEDA and MCC in the good work that they do around the world with people on the margins.

We could volunteer with local immigration services to assist the "aliens" that come into our community each year, or take in a student from another country.

Yes, the whole idea of *how* to help is complicated. I know that there are plenty of good arguments that charity can perpetuate unjust systems and reinforce our categories of “objects” of charity and “dispensers” of charity.

But the imperative remains.

We are not allowed to ignore or forget those on the margins. We are to love them as we love ourselves, just like it says in the book of Leviticus.

Second, and perhaps less obviously, I think the story of Ruth challenges us to reconsider some of our cherished conceptions.

We tend to think of ourselves as the ones who allow those at the margins to eat from our table. I think the story of Ruth subtly inverts this expectation in us as modern readers.

Last week we discussed metaphors for humanity and how some of these metaphors highlight the fact that we are prone to wander, prone to idolatry, prone to improperly channeling our desires and convictions.

In the story of Ruth, we have a foreigner—someone **outside of the covenant of God’s people—teaching the “insiders” a lesson about faithfulness and fidelity.**

“Where you go, I will go,” Ruth says to Naomi. “Your God will be my God.” “I’m in this with you together, for life.”

Ruth’s commitment doesn’t go unnoticed. Boaz goes far beyond the call of duty in honouring and protecting this Moabite woman. Why? Because all that Ruth had done for her mother-in-law had been told to him. He was moved by Ruth’s commitment to Naomi.

In the story of Ruth, we see an **outsider** unexpectedly entering Israel’s story and taking her place in God’s larger purposes.

Where do we see this in our own context? Who are the “outsiders” that we need to be listening to and learning from—not just “helping” or “fixing” or viewing as the “objects of our charity?”

Which marginal voices ought we to be tuning our ears to in order to perhaps hear an unexpected word from an unpredictable God?

I will leave that question for you to ponder.

In October, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be hosting hearings right here in Lethbridge where our First Nations neighbours will be able to tell their stories; perhaps this would be a good opportunity to listen and to learn from a community that often *has* found and *continues* to find itself on the margins.

Whoever the voices might be and wherever they might come from, I think there is plenty of material in our Scriptures—OT and NT—to give evidence of a God who delights in surprising his people and working in unexpected ways.

May God direct our faith to the margins, to the poor, to the stranger, to the unexpected, “undesirable,” the “unworthy.”

And may God keep our eyes and ears open for how the voices we find at the margins might educate and inspire us to greater service of our God of surprises.

For Christ’s sake.

Amen.