

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Mirrors and Windows ”**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> in the series *The Inspired Text***  
**Ruth 4:13-17; Ezra 9:1-3; 10:1-5; Colossians 1:15-20**

This week more gun violence made the headline news. Besides the shooting in the capitol, this week marked the one-year anniversary of the deadliest mass shooting in US history. You might remember that a year ago 49 people were killed and 58 others were wounded as a single shooter gunned down the crowd at a gay nightclub in Orlando FL.

That single incident embodied our society’s controversies around  
immigrants,  
and tension between Muslims and Christians,  
and tension between religion and the LGBTQ community.

The following Sunday, some of you might recall that I preached on the stories of Ruth and Ezra as a way of reflecting on those events.

Today I’m going to remind us of how those two stories interact with one another again... in part because it is the anniversary of that event.

But even more so... because of where we are in this series on the Bible.

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But before I get there, I want to talk about mirrors and windows... (You probably didn’t see that coming, did you?) Yes, mirrors and windows.

They are both made of glass, aren’t they?  
They feel very similar,  
come in the same shapes,  
have about the same weight.

But imagine for a minute that you got your mirrors and your windows confused along the way.

I mean, what if you had this great big mirror that you loved to look at, but you didn’t know it was a mirror? You thought it was a window. And so, every time you looked at it, you thought you were seeing this really interesting person... *This really good-looking, dashing young man!*  
... *or you saw you.*

And you’d watch this person, have conversations with this person, and be enamored with them,  
but you never realize that what you’re looking at is a mirror, not a window.

That’s how we tend to approach the Bible. For the last few weeks I’ve been trying to suggest that ***the Bible is a mirror, not a window.*** It reflects back to us our own soul’s journey... of our own growing God-consciousness.

Now, let’s turn this example around for a minute. Imagine that you have some cabin that sits up on a cliff or the side of a mountain. And this cabin has a beautiful huge window that looks out into the distance.

But you never actually look through the window. Instead, you’re always fascinated *with the glass* itself.

You notice the water spots and the texture of the glass.

You look closely and can see that it's actually two pieces of glass with a vacuum seal between them...

You spend all kinds of time ***looking at the surface of the glass, but never looking through it... off to the beautiful mystery beyond.***

That's what we are so often doing with Jesus. When we spend all our time dissecting the historical details of what did and didn't happen in the gospels, we're so focused on the glass that we never look through the window. ***Jesus is a window into what God is like.*** That's what our confession of faith from Colossians is suggesting to us.

Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, and the representation of God's being." In other words, when we look deeply through Jesus, we begin to look through the window into the unfathomable mystery of God.

Jesus is the window through which we see God most clearly.

So last week, I talked about the scripture being a forward and backward movement of coming to know who this God is... ***Jesus helps us to recognize the trajectory.***

In other words, Jesus is the primary lens we have for reading scripture, and for recognizing the difference between;

our projections onto God,  
and what God is actually up to, what God is actually like.

Or another way of putting it: Jesus is our interpretative framework.

So if something in the Bible moves us closer to a God-consciousness that looks like Jesus, then we know it is forward movement.

If it is moving us further away from a God-consciousness that looks like Jesus, then we know it is backward movement...

Or to put it another way: ***Jesus is the tangible personal window into the infinite, mysterious, divine life at work in the world.***

This is what the Bible itself is saying.

"Christ is the image of the invisible God. The exact representation of God's being."

The Bible as a whole, on the other hand, ***is not a window as much as it is a mirror.*** It reflects back to us. It reflects back to us the journey and struggle, the forward and backward movement that happens as we grow into a deeper God-consciousness, as we grow into knowing who this God is and what it means to live a God-soaked, God-filled life.

It's really important that we don't get our windows and mirrors mixed up. In fact, we can see just how important that is when we come to the stories of Ruth and Ezra.

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Ruth and Ezra are two ancient stories separated by about 800 years.

Ruth comes from the time of the Judges, when the 12 tribes had settled the Promised Land, but before there were ever any Kings of Israel. It's before the time of Samuel, and Saul, and David. In fact, Ruth becomes the great-grandma of King David. It's part of why her story matters so much.

Ezra's story on the other hand, comes generations and generations and generations later after the time of the kings, after Israel's heyday, in the time after they've been in exile in Babylon and are now returning home from exile.

Like I said, Ruth and Erza are separated by 800 years chronologically. But theologically, they are separated by two competing ideologies in the Bible. They are pushing against each other. And they are held here in our scriptures so we'll have to wrestle with them too. To do that well, I'm going to have to quickly summarize their stories.

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Ruth is a Moabite woman who marries an Israelite, the son of Naomi. When Naomi's husband and son die, Naomi decides to return to Israel, to Bethlehem, to her home. But she tells her foreign-daughter-in-law to go back to her home of origin.

### **Ruth... refuses.**

And so, Ruth is a foreigner in the Promised Land. She's an immigrant who wasn't invited to come to Israel.... And to top it all off, she wasn't just any foreigner. ***She was a Moabite.***

And to understand what that means, you have to flip back to Genesis 19, where we find that story where Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed. And you might remember that Lot and his family were warned by an angel to flee the city and not look back. And so they fled Sodom and Gomorrah for their lives. But Lot's wife turned and looked back. When she did, she became a pillar of salt.

Do you remember that story?

You probably learned the story in Sunday School along the way. In fact, you probably had a coloring sheet of Lot's family. And you got to color in Lot and his two daughters. But Lot's wife, you had to color in with a glue stick and sprinkle salt on her to remember what she became....

It's just a guess. The one thing I'm sure of is that's the point where you ***stopped*** reading in Sunday School. I mean, you never hear much about the last part of chapter 19... because... well, what happens next... is not children's Sunday School material.

Lot and his two daughters flee to the mountains and live in a cave. His daughters are what you might call, "the young and the restless." There are no men around. There's no one to help them carry on the family line.

And when they look out at the horizon and see Sodom and Gomorra being destroyed... it looks like the whole world has been destroyed. Who knows, maybe humanity is coming to an end.

Lot's daughters come up with a crazy plan to keep humanity going.

They get their father completely drunk. Once he's wasted, they sleep with him in order to get pregnant. It works and they each have a son by their father. The youngest daughter names her boy **Ben-Ammi...** and he becomes the father of the **Ammonites...**

The eldest daughter, who came up with the whole plan, named her son... **Moab...** and he became the father of the **Moabites...** *The Moabites, in other words, are the people born from an incestuous relationship.*

So let's just say Israel didn't have a very high opinion of their neighbors, the Moabites. I imagine they had colorful words for people like Ruth, for the descendants of Moab. Words like: ***Ewww! Gross!***

The fact that Ruth is a Moabite, is no trivial matter. In fact, the narrator keeps reminding us to make sure we get it. Chapter 1 ends, "Naomi returned from **Moab** accompanied by Ruth the Moabite."

Chapter 2 verse 2: "Ruth the Moabite..." ...it becomes her title.

Verse 6, when Boaz asks who she is, he's told, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab."

In other words... don't forget for one minute who she is. She's a Moabite. ***Gross! What's she doing here?***

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Well, the story goes on. Ruth is out harvesting in the field of a man named Boaz and she catches his eye. Then one night during the harvest... ***she catches his breath.*** Ruth and her mother-in-law come up with a plan... a plan that sounds a lot like Genesis 19 with Lot.

Ruth sneaks onto the threshing floor, where women are not allowed. But she waits until all the men are all drunk and falling asleep. (Kind of like Lot's daughters, huh?)

Boaz is one of the men on the threshing floor. He's drunk... and with all kinds of evocative language and Hebrew innuendos, we hear about Ruth uncovering Boaz's "feet" and laying down with him...

***But that's what you should expect from a Moabite woman, isn't it? Taking advantage of Boaz when he's drunk.***

And even convincing him to marry her! Can you imagine? That'd be like a Cardinals fan marrying a Royals fan. Just think, "What kind of half-breed children are they going to have?" (Well, pretty cute ones I'd say).

And like I said earlier, their children are part of the point. This is King David's heritage. King David's great grandma is

an uninvited immigrant,  
with a sexually deviant heritage,  
who seduced an upstanding citizen of Bethlehem.

That's not exactly how they taught you the story in VBS is it? But it's true.

In fact, the more you think about it, it's surprising that they didn't kick Ruth out of Dodge. She was defiling God's people. Seems like it would be pretty easy to come to ***the conclusion that the best thing to do would have been to either lock her up or kick her out of the Promised Land.*** Don't you think?

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That's exactly the conclusion that Ezra comes to in his day.

800 years later, generations and generations later,

Ezra and the people of God have been in exile in Babylon and they are finally allowed to return home to the Promised Land.

Ezra though, is maybe the second or third generation to come back. And when Ezra gets back and looks around, he sees that the people of God have intermarried with all these foreign women... and they have these mixed up families... with half-breed children... (Sound familiar?)

You see, a lot of the exiles have been back for some time now, but things aren't what they hoped they would be, and they really want to "Make Israel Great Again..."

According to Ezra, the only way to do that is to purify the people,  
to get rid of all these foreigners.

So that's what they decide to do. In fact, everyone *has to* get rid of them. It doesn't matter if you've been married to your wife for five months or fifty years. If she's a foreigner, she's got to go... and so do all those little half-breeds of hers.

"I know it sounds harsh," Ezra says. "But it's really the only way. Get rid of them, and life will be good again. I promise!"

It's the oldest tendency in the book, you know. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. Scapegoat someone else, especially the minority. "It was this woman you gave me," Adam tells God. She's the problem.

It's so easy. It's as ancient and commonplace as it gets. Make someone else the problem... and you never have to deal with your own darkness.

**The Bible is a mirror... showing us what we tend to do.**

In fact, it's a very simple pattern that's still happening over and over again today.

1. Make "them/those people" that are different from you, the problem.
2. Wrap your solution up in religious justification: "God is telling us to do this."
3. And you can pretty much get away with murder.

That's exactly what Ezra does. To send these women and children away, out of the protection of their families and community, *was a death sentence*.

**But according to the book of Ezra, it's what must be done, if they want God's blessing.**

Truth be told, this is nothing less than ethnic cleansing... and it's right here, justified in our scriptures. So what do you do with a text like this?

Well, I guess you have a few options.

- You could say that maybe... maybe there are times when God would call us to do something that seems really awful, but God has a bigger plan. We just have to blindly trust it.
- When I was a child, I once heard this text used to explain to me why God wouldn't want me to marry someone... who wasn't also white... like me.

The problem is, we're getting our mirrors and windows confused.

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There's this story that comes from Nazi Germany... where a Jewish fugitive was on the run. He came to a small village and thought that surely the safest place to go would be the home of the Christian pastor. So, he knocked on the door, and asked, "Can you just put me up for one night? And I'll be on my way in the morning."

The pastor, with great nervousness, knowing he needed to do the right thing, ran to go open his Bible, seeking wisdom from his Bible. And wouldn't you know it, he opened his Bible to that one verse in John's Gospel that says, "It is better that one man die than that the whole people perish."

And he came to his certain clear answer and went back to the Jewish man and told him, "No, I'm sorry. I can't help you. It's better that you die than our whole village perish and be slaughtered."

The story goes on and says that very night an angel visited the pastor and asked him where the Jewish refugee was.

The Pastor told him, "I read your holy scripture and discerned rightly what the word of God says that it's better for one man to die than the whole people perish. I've protected your village, O God."

And the angel said to him, "Did you not know that man was in fact the Christ? If you had looked into his eyes instead of the book you would have known the difference."

"If you had looked into his eyes..."

Jesus is our window into the mystery of God... not the Bible.

The Bible isn't a window; it's a mirror... a mirror of our own God-consciousness...

It's a mirror of our own developing and growing,  
shifting and diminishing,  
opening and closing, capacity for God.

***And recognizing the difference between mirrors and windows can make all the difference.***

And when you start recognizing that Ezra is a mirror, you'd never use it to justify ethnic cleansing... You start to see that maybe this story has been saved, not to tell us what God is like, but to help us see how dangerous our God-talk can be and how easily we confuse what God would actually have us do.

Maybe this is here to help us recognize this same tendency in us... to help us see that ***our own beloved faith in God has also been twisted to enact great violence on the foreigner and on any group we've decided, "defiles" us.***

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Well... thanks be to God there were a few in Ezra's day that tried to protest. There were four men who tried to stand against the tide. But no one listened. They lost the argument.

But I wondered if these four men sat around the campfire at night with their neighbors, and their children, and their grandchildren, and told them the ancient story of Ruth, the Moabite... the foreign woman... who seduced Boaz and became his wife.

And every time they told that story, they made sure to end the same way we hear its ending today...

by reminding them that Ruth also had a half-breed child...  
and that this child was the redemption of her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Did you notice that in the story when Naomi's grandson is born, the people of their village say, "Naomi has a son again!" Naomi is finally redeemed.

Not only that, but that half-breed child grew and became the grandpa of King David, the greatest king in all of Israel... King David, whose line will reign on the throne forever.

Of course, none of that would have happened if Boaz had kicked Ruth, the Moabite, out of his field... or if Boaz hadn't chosen to marry and redeem Ruth the Moabite after that night on the threshing floor.

But thanks be to God, he did.  
He embraced her...  
He made her part of his family.  
Because by doing so, ***Ruth became the womb of Israel's redemption.***

That Moabite woman, she became the womb of our salvation.  
That ***Moabite*** woman became the great-great-great-grandma...  
of Jesus...  
the one who reveals to us the very nature of God.

Jesus, the one who says, "The first will be last and the last will be first."  
Jesus, the one who says that the tax collectors and the prostitutes will enter the Kingdom of God before the religious elite.

Jesus, the one whose great themes are centered on forgiveness and inclusion.

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Do you see how there is a trajectory?  
And a struggle in the Bible?  
And a forward and backward movement? But a movement that's going somewhere.

And how that movement is a mirror to our struggles today? And our own God-consciousness?  
It helps us to see and recognize our own growing... and diminishing... forward and backward awareness of God.

You see, ultimately the Bible isn't there to give us a set of answers  
so we can be sure we've got it all nailed down.  
The Bible is there ***to facilitate an encounter between the soul and God.***  
And we're going to talk about that more next week.

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For now, let's simply remember that Jesus came and gave us the truest glimpse into the heart of God we've ever known. And in that glimpse, our own darkness was exposed.

But we couldn't handle that. And so we projected all our darkness back onto Jesus. We made Jesus the problem.  
We made Jesus the scapegoat that needed to be gotten rid of.  
And so we crucified him.  
**The same pattern continued.**

But God's love and redemption broke the pattern... and showed the world just how bankrupt it is. God raised him from the dead, revealing just how wrong we can be... even in our religious convictions.

Thanks be to God. Even after we crucified him, Jesus offers us forgiveness for our sins and invites us still into his kingdom.... a kingdom of love and radical grace.

You and I...

we have been, and truth be told, often still are,  
the defiling foreigners in the Kingdom of God.

But there is good news. Jesus, the Moabite woman's great-great-great grandson, has become our redeemer.

He welcomes all of us...

no matter who we are,  
no matter how defiled we've felt,  
no matter how dead wrong and hard hearted we have been...  
He invites all of us into the beloved community... of God's healing grace.

And if we come, then Jesus calls us to invite, to welcome, to embrace... everyone else into this beloved community as well.

This is where the Bible is taking us.  
This is the glorious,  
upside-down,  
beautiful, expansive,  
Kingdom of God.

Amen.

### ***Silent Reflection***

*"Stay with the text and with your inner life with God, and your capacity for God will increase and deepen... The genius of the biblical revelation is that it doesn't just give us the conclusions; it gives us the process of getting there." ~Richard Rohr*