

## God of All Nations

June 30, 2019 (4<sup>th</sup> of July Sunday)

UMCG

I have a number of friends who are in the process of writing their memoirs to pass on to their children and grand-children, including my sister, Dianne. In fact, a few weeks ago she sent me a thumb drive of her manuscript. I found it hard to put down. I learned a lot about my family of origin...things I never knew....for example, things about my grand-parents, on both Mom & Dad's side. Sobering stories.

You may have similar sobering stories in your family history. My mother's parents were immigrants who fled violence in their homelands in search of a safe place to live and build new lives. My Grandpa Koehl fled the specter of war, chaos and violence that was ongoing in his home land, Prussia. As for my Grandma Koehl, she was born into a poor Welsh family in England. As a young teen she was sent by her father to work as a scullery maid on the estate of a wealthy man. That man's son assaulted her. Afterward, when the wealthy land owner found out she was pregnant, he was furious with my Grandmother and demanded that her father come pick her up immediately. Upon returning home, her father beat her for getting pregnant. Two years later, her father was accidentally kicked in the head by a horse and died. As it turns out, the insurance money from that tragedy allowed the family to book passage to America. Grandma's little boy, Robert Arthur, accompanied her to America, but died as a toddler in Philadelphia before her family finally settled in Akron, Ohio.

Perhaps this story resonates with some, if not all, of you. No doubt your ancestors were also immigrants to the United States, seeking safety and economic security in this great and wonderful country we call home. With the 4<sup>th</sup> of July arriving in a few days, I'd like for us to ponder two questions. They're related. 1) What makes a neighborhood great? What are the criteria? Lovely homes surrounded by well-kept lawns, flower gardens and white picket fences? Excellent schools, low crime rates and safe playgrounds for children? Do these make a neighborhood great? 2) Closely related is the question: So what makes a nation great?

In the Old Testament, the book of Ruth offers one answer to those questions. However, Ruth's take on the good neighborhood, the good nation, was not universally accepted in Israelite society. A rival answer throughout ancient Israel's scriptures was the notion that their nation and people were special. Among all the people and nations on earth, they alone were God's chosen people. (Today, we call this perspective *exceptionalism*.) After all, had God not chosen them over the surrounding "pagan" nations? Had God not blessed them with a sacred land, just for them, overflowing with milk and honey? Did not the God of creation personally dwell in their holy temple and nowhere else?

Now...this “exceptionalist” self-understanding was the driving force behind Israel’s violent “holy wars” so vividly described in the book of Joshua. Wars that attempted to dominate non-Israelite, “pagan” tribes, so that Israel could possess the land God intended for them. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah reinforce ancient Israel’s *exceptionalist* view. Written after Israel’s exile in Babylon, these two books tell the story of the exiles’ return to their homeland and capital city, Jerusalem. A land that in their view was now polluted, occupied by strangers, foreigners, including Samaritans. Jewish men who had returned home and had married foreign wives were harshly punished. Their “mixed” marriages were torn apart by forced separation of foreign wives and children from their Israelite husbands and fathers. Indeed, extreme “exceptionalist” nationalism, alive and well in our world today, can end up dividing families, forcibly separating husbands from wives and children from parents.

Thank God for the book of Ruth! In it we find an opposing view to Israelite *exceptionalism*. Ruth offers a radically different perspective, a view expressed in much of the Hebrew scriptures. The view opposing *exceptionalism* was radically different in its expectations of how Israelites were to relate to strangers...widows...and orphans. It was radically different in its approach to Israelite relations with foreigners, including marriage. And it was radically different in the way Israel was to treat its enemies. Thus, the importance of Ruth! Ruth stands in opposition to the *exceptionalism* found elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures.

So, who was this lady? Who was Ruth? Ruth was from Moab, one of Israel’s most hated enemies. Why enemies? Because of the Moabites’ refusal to assist the tribes of Israel when they fled slavery in Egypt. Listen to what the Torah, the law, says about marriage to foreigners and relationships with Moabites in Deuteronomy 23:2,3 (NIV): “No one born of a forbidden marriage nor of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation. No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord, not even to the 10<sup>th</sup> generation.” The story of Ruth directly opposes this exclusivist, *exceptionalist* perspective. How? Listen to a synopsis of the story of Ruth.

In a time of terrible famine and political insecurity, an Israelite family—Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons fled Bethlehem and traveled east across the Jordan River to the land of Moab. They spent some ten years there. Their two sons married Moabite women—one named Orpah, the other Ruth. Tragically, within this timespan, Naomi lost her husband and both sons! She, an Israelite woman, was now both a widow and childless, alone in a foreign land! So she decided to return to her native town of Bethlehem in Israel. And lo and behold, Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law, chose to return to Bethlehem with her.

Naomi and Ruth were in the same boat, vulnerable, without male heads of household in a patriarchal culture, without economic or social standing. On top of it all, Ruth was a hated Moabite! How would Naomi’s neighborhood, Bethlehem, treat them? How would Naomi’s

family and old friends and neighbors react? Put another way, what makes a neighborhood great...and a nation great? What attitudes and actions, what beliefs and values make a neighborhood and a nation great in situations like this?

Ruth is a story of displaced people...desperate people. It's a story of food scarcity, of a family fleeing famine and seeking refuge in a foreign land, a land of plenty, even though the people there have been hated enemies in the past. Ruth is a story of risk taking. Of immigration, even illegal immigration in the case of Ruth. It's a story about refugees. Ruth is a story of how we should treat the stranger...the alien...the widow and the orphan. It's a story that demonstrates that God is at work in the most unexpected of places...that God is a *God of all nations*, not just one particular nation.

\*Prof. Amy Merrill Willis, Assistant Prof of Religious Studies at Lynchburg College aptly writes: "The particular neighborhood in this story is that of Bethlehem. But the book is not just about events taking place in that little, dusty, backwater town. The story uses Bethlehem and its individual inhabitants—Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, the townsmen and women—to embody the values and interactions of communal life that should characterize ancient Israel as a whole."

As the widows arrive in Naomi's home town of Bethlehem, their initial reception is cold. At first, Naomi is barely recognized, and Ruth, the stranger, is all but invisible. But soon Bethlehem pulls through. In obedience to the Torah, the community acts justly toward the two. A prominent land owner named Boaz allows Ruth to glean food from his fields and drink clean water from his well. He protects her from harm and eventually ends up marrying Ruth. This alone is stunning! In short, Bethlehem proved to be a great community, embodying what we today call distributive justice in which the most vulnerable are provided basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and safety.

\*Professor Willis claims that "it is important to note that Ruth, the homeless stranger is not simply the passive recipient of what some call entitlements. She actively contributes to the community, providing food as well as companionship for Naomi. The environment in which Ruth receives from and contributes to the community exemplifies contributive justice. Contributive justice demands that all members of society who are able are expected to, and indeed do create the material and non-material goods and values that a society needs. Contributive justice also demands that the obstacles that would keep some from contributing to the well-being of the community be removed. It assumes that members of a good community and nation want to contribute and dislike being dependent upon others."

But Ruth's contribution to Bethlehem and the nation of Israel extends to the whole world, including us! How is that? Well, her genealogy reveals that she gave birth to a son named Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David of Bethlehem who became

Israel's most celebrated King. (Thus, Ruth was King David's Great-grandmother). King David's progeny continued for centuries, on down to Jacob, who was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. And Mary was the mother of...Jesus, our Lord and Savior born in Bethlehem and whose life and teachings we, his disciples, seek to emulate.

So we have a choice. What option should we take as individuals, as a neighborhood, as a nation in light of our current immigration struggle? What will our response be to immigrants and refugees fleeing violence, whether at the family level (thinking of my Grandma Koehl) or fleeing violence at the national level (thinking of my Grandpa Koehl)? Shall we embrace an *exceptionalism* that pulls immigrant and refugee families apart...that separates children from their parents and places them in harm's way? Or shall we follow the compassionate, justice-seeking approach toward the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, the widow and orphan that we find in the book of Ruth? How will the message of Ruth impact our lives? How will it move us...our thoughts and actions, as we prepare to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July? Amen.

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\*Amy Merrill Willis, Ph.D. "Ruth and the Good Neighborhood: The Politics of Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17. *Political Theology Network* – November 8, 2012.