

SERMON

First Lutheran Church

Aitkin, Minnesota

Ruth 1:1-17

Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

October 18, 2015

### **CHILDREN'S MESSAGE**

Kids, how many of you have had some food to eat this week? Did you have some food last week too? Where'd you get it? **Parents**. Where'd they get it? **Grocery store**. Where'd they get it? **Factory**. Where'd they get it? **Farmer**. Where'd the farmer get the food? From the **earth**. Where'd the earth get the food? From **God**. God is the one who gives us our food and everything else that we need to have good, healthy and joyful lives. Do you believe that?

Your families work awfully hard to make sure that you have enough to eat every day right? Yes. Does every child in the world always have enough to eat? No. Do you think that their parents are working awfully hard to feed them too? Most of them. When some people don't have enough to eat, when some even die from being hungry, is it God's fault? Does God want people to be hungry? No. Jesus was always feeding hungry people when he walked the earth. Does God want people to die? No. Jesus came to give everyone life. Jesus came so when we do die, God can give us new life forever with God and all of God's people in heaven.

Kids, I have a little experiment that I'd like to try. God has provided some nice little snacks for you kids. There is enough for one for everybody. I have them here in this bucket. But, in this experiment, you have to stay where you are. You can't get up and move. Only the kids who can reach the bucket from where they are sitting can get snacks out. Oh, oh, I guess only a couple of kids can get snacks right? Or, maybe the people close to the bucket can pass snacks along to the people farther away until everyone gets a snack. Will that work? Let's do it. Kids, the snacks come from God. So does all the food in the world. God gives enough food for everyone to eat. Some people just live where droughts, or wars, or selfish people keep them from getting enough food. Where we live, the food bucket is very close. Does God want people to die from not having enough food? No. Can we help? Yes. That's how God makes sure everyone gets to eat. We trust God to help us. That sets us free to help others. Amen.

## **ADULT MESSAGE**

A famine hit Israel. In order to survive, **Naomi** and her husband, **Elimelech**, were forced to move to the neighboring country of **Moab**. Their two adult sons went with them. Shortly after getting to Moab, Naomi's husband died. Here is Naomi, living in a foreign land, with foreign gods and no system of social security, food stamps, welfare, etc. She could have been totally destitute. Fortunately, her two sons married Moabite women and also supported their widowed mother, Naomi.

After ten years, disaster struck again. Both of Naomi's sons died leaving mother and wives in another precarious position. Now none of them had any support. Naomi heard that there was food in Israel again and determined that she would go back there. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in their own country and to find new husbands to support them. By now, all three women must have given up on their gods. Naomi told her daughters-in-law, **"No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me."**

A life-changing famine, the death of her husband and then both of her sons – how much worse could life get? Does God cause bad things to happen to people? God had given the Israelite people the Promised Land where they believed God would provide for all of their needs. Then Naomi and her family were faced with a life-threatening famine. They were forced to move to a foreign land with foreign gods. They left behind any hope of family support. As far as Naomi could tell, God didn't help in famine or when she lost husband and sons.

Where is God? Is there a God? Could God somehow be moving to help us even when all the facts seem to say "no?" Are the bad things in the world God's fault or is the world just not the way God would like it to be?

The Apostle Paul, in **Romans 8:28f**, says, **"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."** He goes on to explain how God has moved faithfully to claim us as God's precious and beloved people. Then he says, **"If God is for us, who is against us? He who**

**did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not give us everything else?”** And then Paul adds, **“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

The bad things in our lives, does God cause them? The car accidents, the fires, the heart disease, the wars? Paul is telling us **not that God causes** these things but that **God is surely there for us** when these things happen. Whenever we find ourselves in the midst of trouble or tragedy, we **can count upon God** moving behind the scenes to **bring about the best good possible** for us. God is present to love and care for us no matter how hopeless and helpless things may seem. Paul also said, **“The Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs/groans too deep for human understanding.”** When we don’t know which end is up, God is still helping us. The **undeniable proof of God’s undying love and care** for us is found in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection for our salvation – wholeness and healing.

Jesus is no stranger to our suffering. We’ve got plenty of folks right here at First Lutheran who are dealing with some of the toughest things our world can throw at them. Consider who we are praying for. We have friends fighting **cancer**, awaiting **kidney transplants**, battling **chemical dependency**, trying to provide for families as **single parents**, having spouses **employed in neighboring states**, experiencing dementia, facing **loss of employment or home**. These sisters and brothers in Christ could well be asking, **“Where is God? What have I done to deserve this? Why is there no help for me?”**

We are presently interviewing our **sophomore confirmation students** prior to them standing before this congregation to affirm the faith into which they have been baptized. This year, as in prior years, we are hearing stories of **death** of grandparents, friends, siblings, even parents. We are hearing of going through **divorce of parents**. We are hearing of **life-threatening illnesses**. We are hearing of **tremendous peer pressure** dragging them down. We are hearing of them **wishing to live their lives like Jesus** but of being fearful of being judged, ridiculed

and abandoned by their friendship circle. **And are they questioning the presence of God?** I am hearing these young adults tell stories of how they believe God has faithfully been with them and gotten them through these huge challenges in their lives. Our kids have been **believing, praying and experiencing God's salvation.**

A couple of weeks ago, **Scott and Melissa Magnuson** came home from the charity benefit for Riverwood Hospital to find their house on fire. Twenty volunteer firefighters moved quickly to rescue their possessions and to extinguish the fire. The fire chief emerged from the smoke filled house with their family dog in his arms. **Sophia and Lydia**, their teenage daughters, were safe, babysitting nearby. There was tons of smoke damage and a huge hole burned out of the center of their house, some possessions lost to the fire. But, thankfully, everyone survived and now they are starting to rebuild their house and lives.

In visiting with Melissa, she and her family have been experiencing the normal reactions to the fire. **"Why did this happen? Why did this happen to us? How fortunate the girls weren't home. How amazing to personally know many of the firefighters. How wonderful to have so many people step up to help us."**

Melissa told me that she has been **totally overwhelmed by the power of love** that has flowed to their family. Some examples. She cried upon opening a card with a Subway gift card inside. Her daughters asked her why she was crying. She responded, **"This is so special."** **"Haven't you sent flowers and helped other people when they've had trouble?"** her daughters asked her. **"Yes, but this is different,"** she replied. **"How,"** they said. Melissa never realized the impact of a simple greeting card. She learned in a few short hours how important it is to have someone that you can text in a far distant place to help hold you up. Several folks have shared that they experienced home fires when they were kids. They have talked with the girls with an understanding that an adult wouldn't have. Melissa has experienced the loan of shoes, a cabin to stay in, people they know and trust to do the rebuilding, people she could feel free to break down and cry with.

**So has God abandoned the Magnusons** to some strange and distant land? **Or has God been moving faithfully behind the scenes** to rescue and bear them up. Has God come to them through the Subway cards, the place to stay, the parade of folks who have come up the driveway offering words, hugs and gifts of support and encouragement? I haven't seen too many whiz bang miracles over the years. But I've seen again and again **individuals** in desperate circumstances **embraced and carried in the loving arms of the Body of Christ – God's people.**

Do you know what happened to **Naomi** and her **daughter-in-law Ruth**? They went back to Israel, and again, long story short, were saved by the provision God had given to the Israelites to **care for their own**. According to God's expectation, when a woman's husband died, it was the duty of the next closest family member to marry and care for her. Naomi knew this. She worked to bring Ruth together with Naomi's relative **Boaz**. Naomi needed someone to take care of her. Ruth needed a husband. Boaz needed a wife. God moved through it all to make those things happen. Ruth was faithful to Naomi and she and Boaz cared for Naomi. Ruth and Boaz also parented some children. And down through the generations of God's people, the Spirit of God moved to bring **Jesus** into the world through ordinary **Mary and Joseph**. And this foreign, apparently hopeless woman, Ruth, became the great, great, great... grandmother of Jesus, the Savior of the world. It sounds like God was moving behind the scenes to me.

I don't know why there is evil and death in this world. But I do know that God is faithfully working to bring the best good out of every circumstance in the lives of the people of God. And God uses human prayers, cards and hospital visits to do it. And God uses firemen and coworkers and mother-in-laws to do it. And God uses you and me to do it. And God does it. For you. For me. God help us all. God help us to trust you. God help us to help each other. Thanks be to God. Amen.