

Is it better to give or to receive at Christmas? You probably know what answer we are supposed to give sitting in a church service. But I am going to ask us to ponder another question this morning. Do we have the power to influence whether or not others want to give or to receive? Do we have the power to influence whether or not others want to give or to receive?

I am going to show a video this morning that addresses that question. This video is a typical scene that we are pretty used to at this time of the year. What you will see are two children standing in front of Santa. This video is done by some researchers who wanted to know if the question that Santa asked would influence the behavior of these children.

In this video there are two children standing side by side. One of the children is working with the researcher. The child that is in on the experiment is the child that will remain silent in the video segments. As you will see in this experiment, Santa will, at first, ask the children what we expect Santa to ask. But then there will be another set of scenes when Santa will ask a question that the children do not expect. Let's see what happens.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywWUDgHdoSk> (2:22 – 5:50)

I share this video to lead us into our biblical story this morning. Earlier in the service, Michael read from the first 6 verses of the gospel of Matthew. If you were here last week and you were paying attention, you know that this is the same set of verses that were read last Sunday.

In the first 17 verses of the gospel of Matthew we are presented with the genealogy of Jesus. It begins with Abraham and goes through David and ends with Joseph, the human father of Jesus. As I shared last week, there are 5 women listed in this genealogy with 4 of the women named. These 4 named women are Rahab, Tamar, Ruth, and Mary.

Over the past few weeks we have heard the stories from two of these women, Rahab and Tamar, and we will hear Mary's story over the next 2 weeks. Today we are going to hear about the third of these women found in the Old Testament and that is Ruth.

The story of Ruth begins with emptiness, famine, loss, and bitterness. Let us hear the beginning of the story.

### **Read Ruth 1:1-5**

The story of Ruth is set during the time that the judges ruled Israel. This period would be about 1300 to 1000 years before the birth of Christ. This period of time was a time of great chaos in Israel. This period is described at the end of the book of Judges as a time when there was no king in Israel and the people did whatever they wanted. The people of Israel had no good leadership. When people do whatever they want that is never a good thing in the Bible.

But in the midst of this time of great national chaos, we have this story about some rather ordinary people and their own family crisis. This is not a story where God appears in burning bushes or where God separates raging rivers. In this story we have God being revealed in rather ordinary and mundane ways.

As we read in the opening to the book, Naomi's husband and 2 sons have died. As I shared last week, a woman without a husband and sons was at the bottom of the economic ladder in this society. Naomi's situation was even worse than that because she also had 2 daughters-in-law to care for.

Naomi is prepared to return to her homeland and she encourages the two daughters-in-law, one named Orpah and the other named Ruth, to return to their homeland. Ruth and Orpah are foreigners from Moab. Orpah accepts Naomi's invitation to return to Moab but Ruth does not. In one of the most famous verses in the Bible, Ruth tells Naomi:

**Read Ruth 1:16-17**

Ruth then informs Naomi that she is willing to go out and get a job to support them. Ruth ends up with a job gleaning barley in a field whose owner just happens to be a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. Coincidence? Maybe. Someone once said that "coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous."

In last week's story about Tamar, we heard about how in the book of Deuteronomy it is the duty of the closest of kin to marry the widow of a deceased male relative. In this case, Boaz turns out to be the closest relative to Naomi and Ruth. As the story then proceeds, Boaz acts as the goel, or the kinsman redeemer, and marries Ruth. Ruth and Boaz have a child who turns out to be the grandfather of King David and an ancestor of Joseph, the human father of Jesus.

The story of Ruth begins with emptiness and famine, and bitterness, and barrenness. This story of Ruth ends in fullness, abundance, love, joy, and new birth. In this story God works through ordinary acts of kindness and devotion to keep covenant with God's people.

God works through a woman named Ruth who remains committed to Naomi. God works through a man named Boaz who notices the generosity of Ruth and acts as a goel or kinsman redeemer to marry her. This marriage pulls both Ruth and Naomi out of poverty and despair and into abundance and hope.

In this story God works through these simple acts of kindness and covenant to impact the people around them. Think back to the opening video. We too have some choices to make this advent season as we prepare to celebrate the birth of a savior.

Do we act in the way that our society tells us to act and to be focused on what we get this Christmas? Or do we act in the way of Ruth and Boaz and seek to be generous as we prepare to welcome the Christ child?

The video gives us some scientific proof that the way we treat others and the way we act can influence how others act. We can't control how others respond to us but we can provide positive models to help folks see that there are alternatives to Christmas greed.

So which of these models are you going to seek to be this Advent and Christmas?

What are people learning from you and me about what Christmas is all about?  
AMEN.

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-Given: December 7, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)