

WEEK 7

MONDAY, MARCH 30 - SATURDAY, APRIL 4

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A Better Story

LUKE PARKER

Ruth 1; 4:13–22; Matt 1:6–17

The book of Ruth begins a lot like the book of Job. There is political instability, people following their own truth, and the chaos that results. Then a famine, people and animals starving, not enough to go around. A man named Elimelek ("my God is the King") and Naomi ("Sweetheart") take their two boys and leave the country. They become refugees in Moab, a place of God's enemies. Then Elimelek dies.

Naomi manages to raise her two boys in a world where you need a man to survive, to make money, to own land. The boys get married but after ten years there are no grandchildren. Then the boys die (1:5). So Naomi, destitute, refugee, widow, having outlived her sons, staggers back to Jerusalem weeping. Her daughters-in-law follow her. She tells them, "Go back! I'm not worth it." They refuse, she insists. One goes home, but Ruth says, "No. Where you go I go, your people my people, your God my God, and where you die I'll be buried." This isn't just loyalty; it's Ruth stepping into a calling—choosing a life aligned with Naomi's God and Naomi's people.

When Naomi gets back to Israel, people say, "Is this Naomi?" She says, "No. Don't call me Sweet (Naomi) anymore, call me Bitter (Mara), because my story is bitter and the Lord has been bitter, cruel with me. I went away full, and he brought me back empty" (1:19–21). In her grief, she assumes her life is over—that God has nothing left for her. *This is the posture Lent offers us: lamenting the bitter side of our story and waiting for the Lord to give us beauty for ashes.*

We are prepared now for a harsh tale of survival against all odds: two women, refugees, struggling in a man's world against a cruel God. But beneath the Iron Age rom-com that follows is something deeper: God quietly at work, calling people into a life better than they would have chosen for themselves. *In this season we learn to look for the Lord's hand in precisely these hidden places—where nothing looks triumphant, where the tomb is not yet empty.*

Throughout the book, Naomi has the experience of glimpsing God behind the scenes and realizing that while initially she thought her story was a tragic one, she is actually living in someone else's story. At the end of Ruth 4, Naomi has a full-circle moment. She is holding a baby in her arms, a wedding has happened, there is food and a home in which to live. The women from chapter 1 say, "Blessed be the Lord, may everyone know his name! He hasn't abandoned you. He will be the restorer of your life!" The word for "restorer" (4:15) is the same word in Hebrew that Naomi used earlier (1:21) to describe how her bitterness at God brought her back empty. There is ambiguity in these verses. Who is the "he" that redeems, restores, and provides? Is it the Lord or the baby?

What looked like a dead end was actually the doorway back into Naomi's true calling—woven into God's plan in a way no one could have anticipated.

The genealogy at the end of the book is where we learn that this has not been the story of Naomi's hardship, or of Ruth and Boaz coming together, or even the story of Obed. It's been a different story that the Lord has been writing all along. This is the story of God calling his people out of death and into life in Christ! What initially looks like chaos and tragedy ends up showcasing God's faithfulness, his love for his people. *Even when the script seems stalled, even when all we can see is loss, he is writing a better story (Rom 8:28).*

Matthew picks up where Ruth's genealogy ends to tell us that the story is even better than Naomi or Ruth could have imagined. This has actually been the story of Jesus all along, the true king of Israel is headed to the throne! God has a better story for Naomi, for Israel, and for you than we could ever have asked for or imagined! *The Resurrection will declare what Naomi's story already whispers: Christ is with us when we suffer and death does not have the final word!*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LUKE PARKER



Rev. Luke Parker is ECO's Church Planting Director. Luke formerly served as a Church Planter/Pastor in an ECO plant in Phoenix, the student ministries director at a non-denominational church in AZ, and in several other church plants in a variety of roles over the years. Before ministry in the local church he was heavily involved in Young Life. Luke attended Fuller Seminary, where he received an MDiv. He also has a BS in Biochemistry from the University of Arizona (Bear Down). Luke's passion to raise up young leaders and equip them to reach the lost in our time. He lives in Phoenix with his wife, Jessica and their two boys – Matthew and Samuel.

The Courage to Look

L A U R A C R O S B Y

The other day a friend of mine tripped and fell hard at the pool, sustaining a deep, long, **very** bloody gash all the way up her shin (among other less gory injuries). A group of us gathered around to help while her husband went to get the car to take her to the ER, but it was very difficult to look at. We just didn't want to face the wound. It was painful to look at.

Lent is the part of the story that is ugly and messy and requires humility and self-examination and I'd really rather avoid both thank you very much. I like to think I'm a "pretty good" person.

I have "acceptable sins" that I unconsciously sort of think God can **overlook** instead of actually having to **die** for. Come to think of it, I prefer "occasional weaknesses" to "sin". The problem is that sin is sin and any sin separates us from God. **When I get sucked into thinking there's anything "acceptable" about my sin, I'm living out of a works mentality instead of acknowledging my complete dependence on God's grace.** I pray, "Open my eyes to my blind spots." but it's a half-hearted prayer if I'm honest. I'd much rather close my eyes, stick my fingers in my ears and loudly sing "LALALALA" to drown out the truth. But lately I can't escape it.

I keep being brought smack up against my true sinfulness. I'm in situations where I'm horrified with my impatience, and sharp words, and critical spirit and selfishness, and pride and intolerance... I think, "Holy buckets, I really **DO** need a savior!" "Duh", you say. But here's the uncomfortable truth. "The heart is deceitful above all things." Jeremiah 18:9 and all of us (yes, even you) are prone to rationalizing.

The reason Lent is so long is that the path to the truth of oneself is long and snagged with thorns – Edna Hong

I don't like Lent because it's all about sin that when exposed is like my friend's terrible leg gash, and I want to avert my eyes and pretend such ugliness doesn't exist, at least not in me.

The good news is, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) That's the Easter part I'd like to skip to! But I can't live Easter until I truly experience Lent. There can't be forgiveness without repentance. There can't be resurrection without death.

Prayer: Lord, give me the courage to face the sin I'd rather rationalize or ignore, knowing that the many things I do, words I say, thoughts I think...all the things that separate me from you are forgiven because Jesus died for me. You wrap me in the arms of your infinite love and I am grateful. Amen

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LAURA CROSBY



Laura Crosby is an enthusiastic follower of Jesus, who loves to help people connect to God and each other by creating a welcoming space around her dinner table, walking alongside young leaders, traveling to encourage Christians around the world, and telling stories of God's faithfulness through speaking and writing. She got her Masters of Theology while her kids were in high school and has partnered with her husband in pastoral ministry for 43 years.

Obedience Without Immediate Reward

L A U R E N W A R M A N

Hebrews Chapter 11, emphasis on v. 13: *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting they were foreigners and strangers on earth.*

The 21st century has produced incredible advancements in research, technology, and connection, but we have also been presented with the double-edged sword of instant gratification. The immediate “reward” or sense of accomplishment that we get when we click “Buy Now.” Or, conversely, the frustration we feel when our Keurig pods are not eligible for two-day shipping. Or maybe you’ve heard the phrase westernized by many from eastern world religions as “instant karma.” Like when someone is rude to their Starbucks barista and then on their way to their car, they drop their full iced latte on the ground, and you feel that justice has been served (you can admit it!).

Phrases like instant gratification and instant karma have been giving me pause lately. When I make the time, these phrases make me think about the way that the world works, and the way that our God works. We see throughout the Bible that God is not often in the business of instant gratification, and the Hall of Faith in Hebrews chapter 11 is a great place to be reminded of this. We see what actions were taken (or not taken) *by the faith* of these Old Testament believers.

I want to focus on verse 13, where we are reminded that “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance... (v. 13).” I cannot think of anything further from instant gratification than what we read here. These heroes of the faith accepted the possibility, likelihood, or promise, depending on their story, that they would not receive the reward for their often costly obedience to God during their earthly lives. To us, if we’re honest, does that feel fair? Does that feel like an outcome worth the sacrifices or effort we make to obey the Lord?

The Lord always calls us to obedience. Often that obedience is costly. Sometimes that obedience will not bear the fruit we expect in our lifetime. Almost always, that obedience will not result in a neatly packaged reward delivered to your front step in two business days. But holy obedience is eternity-minded obedience. It’s obedience that is willing to accept earthly incompleteness. It’s obedience that is not validated by visible, immediate outcomes, but by faithful perseverance. It’s obedience that honors God and brings us into deeper dependence on and relationship with him.

Prayer: *Lord, teach me to find joy in the waiting; in the anticipation of your promises fulfilled, maybe not in my lifetime, but on your timeline. Help me to embrace the call to obedience and strengthen in me the trust it takes to follow where you are leading. Shape my heart, mind, and soul to see holy obedience as a joy, not a burden. In the mighty name of Jesus, Amen.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LAUREN WARMAN



Lauren Warman is the Leadership Formation Administrator for ECO. She is married to Phil and together they share 1-year-old daughter Mallory (who is more occupied by camera lenses than smiling for photos!) and dog Remy. Lauren is a graduate of Taylor University and spent 4 years in vocational ministry in Dallas, TX before working for ECO's National Office.

The Pleasant Place of Boundaries

L A U R A M U R R A Y

Psalm 16

A few summers ago, I had the opportunity to walk a portion of the Camino de Santiago. Each day we walked anywhere from 10-18 miles. The last day into Santiago, we were told our walk was going to be about 16 miles. That estimate was off - and it actually ended up being about 19 miles.

That day I decided to walk with someone in our group for most of the day (rather than walk in solitude as I had the days before). This was our sixth straight day of walking, and the false summits of thinking we were close to the end were disheartening. I was grateful to be walking and talking with someone rather than walking on my own, but that meant that I didn't pause and take breaks when I needed them. I wanted to keep going and just get to the end. And I also didn't want to hold her back or show that I couldn't keep up, so I kept walking even though the pain in my hips was excruciating. We would stop for stretches, but they were about one minute long. Another person in the group walked up behind and asked me if I was okay because of the way I was walking...she could tell I was clearly in pain. My pride, my ambition, my desire to "just get it done" blew past the limits my body was communicating to me.

Throughout Psalm 16, the Psalmist, David, shares about the boundary lines God has given him. As he shares the gift and joy of them, he also goes back and forth in the Psalm regarding the claims he makes about God and the choices he lives out. Back and forth between claim and choice.

And as we backtrack in the choices David makes in verses 3-5 we see that he:

1. Delighted in good people.
2. Recognized idols and choice to not serve them
3. Chose to receive God's boundary lines and welcome what God gives.

We all have limitations. These limitations can serve as boundary markers that not only protect and care for us but make way for joy and delight. David is no stranger to public service and obedience. Yet he is also no stranger to the pull and draw and living outside of obedience and the boundary lines God gives us as his followers.

1. I wonder for you, as you make claims and choices and live a public ministry, what are the boundary lines God has given to you?
2. Do you welcome these lines within your calling?
3. And how might welcoming God's boundaries and limitations be an act of obedience?

Prayer: God we thank you that you are a giver of good gifts. That your boundaries and limitations on us are not to frustrate nor are they futile. That you purpose for us good work to do and you purpose the boundaries of that good work. Help us to see and honor what you have called us to and choose to live knowing your security and love for us. Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REV. DR. LAURA BAGHDASSARIAN MURRAY



Laura is the Director of Spiritual Engagement and Innovation at Fuller Seminary's Center for Spiritual Formation. She is also a spiritual director, retreat leader, writer, and an ECO pastor serving in the Validated Ministry of Spiritual Direction. Laura has spent over 20 years in ministry in spiritual formation, pastoring, writing, and developing leaders. She holds a Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Seminary and a Master's in Theology. Laura lives with her family in the Dallas area. She believes dessert is only dessert if it involves chocolate.

Called to Build Bigger Tables

K A I T L Y N W O O D

Luke 14:15–24

In seminary, a professor asked our class what it would look like to “end well” in ministry — that is, with our spirit, soul, mind, and community intact. It wasn’t a question about success, it was a question about faithfulness and living with purpose. Not long after, I was at a restaurant and noticed a woman celebrating her 65th birthday with her grown children and husband. They were laughing loudly, leaning across the table, telling stories only they understood. There was no hurry, no performance, just joy and presence.

And I thought: *That’s it.* If I get to the end of my leadership season still gathered around a table with the people I love, who love me, still sharing life, that will be enough. There is something sacred about a table. Meals slow us down and put us face to face with each other. An invitation into someone’s home is more than an event; it is an opening of your life. It should not surprise us, then, that Jesus spent much of His ministry around tables. He ate with tax collectors and sinners, he accepted invitations from Pharisees, he healed and taught and disrupted expectations between bites of bread.

In Luke 14, Jesus tells a story about a great banquet. The invitations go out and one by one, people decline. The invited guests decline, distracted by land, by work, by ordinary responsibilities. Their excuses are not scandalous, these people are simply busy. So the host sends his servants back out into the streets and lanes to bring in those who would never expect an invitation. And when there is still room, he sends them out again. “Go out to the highways and hedges... that my house may be filled.”

Jesus spent His ministry around tables not just because He loved dinner parties, but because He was announcing a kingdom that looks like a bigger table and a wider invitation.

And Lent reminds us that we are not only recipients of this invitation, we are participants in it. We have been welcomed into a feast we did not earn and now we are called back out with the same invitation to those around us. **Because tables do not fill themselves.**

Somewhere along the way, many of us have outsourced hospitality to the church building or the church calendar. We attend events rather than extend invitations. We protect our evenings and guard our homes. We assume someone else will widen the table.

The question for us this Lent is not whether God is inviting, He always is. The question is whether we will join Him in extending the invitation to others. Perhaps ending well is not about building impressive ministries, but about the call to faithful obedience in ordinary spaces by making room in our homes and schedules as we hear the call to be people who invite others to the table. Who is God calling you to invite to the table? What would it look like to widen your table this season?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, You welcomed us before we knew how to ask. Give us courage to open our doors, loosen our schedules, and trust that Your kingdom grows one ordinary invitation at a time. Amen.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - KAITLYN WOOD



Rev. Kaitlyn Wood was born and raised in upstate New York. She earned a BS in Communication Theory at Eastern University and an MA studying Religion, Media, & Culture at RPI (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute). In 2015 she discerned the call to vocational ministry and entered Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, NY. As a pastor, she worked with her congregation to bring about transformation, a renewed vision, and a heart for the region. Kaitlyn is passionate about equipping pastors and churches for holistic revitalization, which is the focus of her current DMin project at Northeastern. When she isn’t working with churches, you can usually find Kaitlyn at the baseball fields with her husband Matthew and three boys – Levi, Jonah, and Aaron.

Called, Set Apart, Sent

REV. SAONA JACKSON

Romans 1:1

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God."

When I have doubted God's call upon my life, or when I am discerning which direction God is calling me next, I usually overthink and overanalyze everything. To counter my overthinking, I turn to the apostle Paul (who was also a recovering overthinker, I think). I'm especially drawn to Romans 1:1. In today's world, this would probably be Paul's Instagram bio or LinkedIn headline, right? Paul is so simple, so clear, so bold about his identity, his calling, and his purpose. If only our callings were that clear, that easy to articulate!

Perhaps I turn to Paul's greeting with the hope that the same God that called Paul to be an apostle, has called you and me into simple, obedient, specific service. Perhaps Paul can teach us something about discerning our call. Perhaps we don't have to overthink or overanalyze our calling, but rather boldly and obediently live it out.

Paul is not casting a grand vision of his abilities or leadership. He is a servant under the authority of King Jesus. It is enough for us to stop here. What if today in this Lent journey we are on, or in our doubt or discernment of calling, we simply live into this identity: I am a servant of Christ Jesus. Then it is Jesus' voice we are listening to, it is his command we follow, and it is by his authority that we step into our calling. For me, when I want a "big and awesome" calling, but struggle to do dishes and laundry, respond to emails joyfully, and be content with my life, this identity grounds me.

Paul is not giving us a resume, listing his credentials, or identifying his many gifts. He has a specific calling: apostle. He is separated for one thing: the gospel of God. It doesn't always seem as easy for us to discern or declare our calling. However, Paul's specificity and clarity can help guide us into a place of simple obedience and confidence in the One who calls us and sets us apart. What if Romans 1:1 becomes a guide for your calling, identity and life purpose? Lent is a time to do some deep work with God, but don't overthink it: You are a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be a _____ (you can fill that blank in with God), set apart for the gospel of God.

A Prayer for Those Doubting or Discerning:

God, settle my scattered, proud thoughts in your presence. Help me to remember your grace and goodness. Help me to remember the joy of my salvation. Help me to remember your sacrifice and forgiveness. I rejoice and I give you my life in return, Lord. I am your servant, wholly yours. As my thoughts settle, I want to hear your voice, only yours. I remember that you have put a clear call upon my life, you have set me apart for your gospel. Thank you, Lord.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - REV. SAONA JACKSON



Saona Jackson was born in Hawaii and grew up in Southeastern Connecticut. She has a BA in Religion and Leadership Studies from the University of Richmond and an MDiv from Harvard Divinity School. She has served in churches and ministries across six states (VA, MO, TX, MA, OR, CA). Before joining ECO staff, Saona most recently served as Pastor of Discipleship at Malibu Pacific Church in Malibu, California. She currently lives in Agoura Hills, California with her husband, Drew, and their four children Scarlet, Naomi, and Thomas and Phoebe.