The Holy Gospel according to St Mark, the Third Chapter. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

Jesus said, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

The Gospel of Our Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ!**

**In the days when the judges ruled** - what was there a Supreme Court back then, too? – let’s see, last week, we were with Moses as he said goodbye to the Children of Israel as they stood ready to cross over Jordan into the Promised Land, ready to enjoy some of that milk and honey flowing everywhere.

And Joshua, Moses’ lieutenant, was ready to lead them across the river right up to the walls of Jericho. After a lot of marching and blowing and shouting, down came the walls and Jericho was theirs! The Israelites had adventures and mishaps, but in the end, either destroyed the inhabitants of the Land, or drove them out. Joshua settled all the twelve tribes into the land, and then like Moses, he gave a big retirement speech about being diligent, serving God and not mixing with the neighbors.

So after Joshua comes the exciting book of Judges. It’s exciting because it’s full of action and battles and heroes and fun. Samson and Gideon, and Deborah, the first Super Woman of the Bible!

Now, with all these kinds of judges come all kinds of enemies,– they’re all THEM, if you know what I mean. Us, and THEM. Outsiders, foreigners, rival neighbors, Yankees, you know what I mean. Folks that don’t belong here, coming here and making changes and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Look, I wasn’t born in the south, okay, but I got here as fast as I could. Slight detour through North Dakota, but still.

The solution seems to have been the old proverb, “Kill ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out!” You may have heard that before. Joshua commanded that everyone in Jericho be killed. Everyone in the next town was to be killed. Even later, when Israel finally had a king, Saul was doing great until the day he FAILED to clean house on the Amalekites, and Samuel the Old Prophet got on his case about not killing every last living thing. Everything went south after that for King Saul – even to the point when, on the eve of Saul’s last battle, when he sought ought the Witch of Endor and had her conjure up Samuel’s Ghost, the old Spirit came forth! Was Samuel ready to let bygones be bygones, had he forgiven Saul for not killing every man, woman and child? NO! Samuel’s old Ghost was still holding that grudge against the king, years later! That’s righteous outrage that lasts! Yikes.

So in the book of Judges, there’s this angry fear and hatred of all things foreign, from their gods to their ways to their loose women, and God’s answer seems to just go and kill them all. Wipe the slate clean, erase all memory of those who dwelt in the Promised Land before them. And then live in peace and harmony with your own kin in the Land God gave you.

So: As the book of Judges closes, there is violence all around. A good bit of anarchy, as no king rules Israel, and dangerous neighbors who threaten the Children of Israel from every side. Egypt and Edom to the south, Philistines to the west, Amorites to the Northeast, and to the east those miserable scoundrels the Moabites. They threaten the holiness and integrity of God’s Chosen People, and they must be resisted and destroyed wherever possible, for they are not like us, and God surely hates them.

Now in no way does this situation mirror ours in America today, right? I mean, come on, we love it when foreigners come into town and change things up, don’t we? When they speak foreign languages in our schools and restaurants? When the world around us is awash in refugees, immigrants, wanting to come to America and live here, bringing their strange gods with them? Russia to east, China to the far west, turmoil in Central America, in Western Asia, Northern Africa. It’s a mess out there! And maybe we ought to take a page out of old Testament and go all Holy War on these people, and rid the world of their kind, forever. Kill ‘em all, let God sort ‘em out, after all, isn’t a bible verse, but it sure sounds like Gospel!

But, oddly, at the same time, there is this strange undercurrent- of immigrants, of foreigners living among the Israelites, either resisting the armies of Israel, or assimilating into their ranks. Uriah the Hittite, Doeg the Edomite, immigrants and aliens! And in addition to that, there is this strange little book tucked in after Judges, this little love story about a girl – a foreigner girl, who becomes, believe it or not, great grandmother of the Great King David himself! The last shall be first indeed!

In this story the woman Naomi goes with her husband to Moab. Not by choice, of course, that would be like retiring to New Jersey – but because of famine. They live there for a while, and all the men folk up and die. So Naomi’s out of luck – no husband, no income, presumably no life insurance, so she starts packing to return to Bethlehem, where she at least has some family. Her daughters in law? They’d be best off with their own kin, after all, they ARE Moabites. Even if their husbands yet lived, you know how the Children of Israel are about men marrying foreign wives. Oh, you don’t? Well, let me tell you, they don’t LIKE it! Not at ALL! It’s worse than marrying Baptists! It’s just like, you know, interracial marriage! Those primitive Israelites really had a problem with interracial marriage! Can you imagine that? Yes, you can.

But here’s the amazing thing. In the midst that very angry, very anxious time, Ruth followed Naomi home, and became part of David’s heritage. David in turn became the heritage of that other Bethlehem product, Jesus of Nazareth, who did in fact change the world. All of us baptized in Jesus’ name become siblings with him, part of his family, and his heritage becomes, in a very real way, ours as well. So Ruth the Moabitess, courageous little daughter in law, is OUR heritage. She’s NOT one of them, she’s become one of US.

And sure, she’s plucky, sure she’s heroic and hardworking and presumably cute as a button, but it’s not HER heroism or hard work or even her cuteness that seals the deal in this story: It’s the welcome of the community. The people of Bethlehem speak well of her, they accept her, and eventually rejoice with her when her main squeeze Boaz likes what he sees and puts a ring on it. Here, there’s proof in chapter two verse four: Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem, and he said to the reapers, “The Lord be with You!” See, he wasn’t JUST a good guy, He was Lutheran!

The reapers say, “The Lord bless you!” Which is as we all know a mash up of “The Lord be with you” and “Bless your heart” So scholars reckon these folks were in fact not just ordinary Lutherans but the cream of the crop, that’s right, Southern Lutherans, and they practice southern Hospitality – Bethlehem being in the Bible Belt of the Israelite South.

Now, the little story of Ruth ends with “And they all lived happily ever after.” But it gets there in a roundabout way that we don’t really have time for, and I want to bring home a couple points, in all seriousness.

First of all, the stranger is welcomed into the community. Even though she MAY bring her Moabite gods into town with her, they embrace her! They TRUST her and welcome her. Without that welcome, this story isn’t going anywhere. This comforting embrace goes against everything the book of Joshua and Judges teaches – that the outsiders cannot be trusted, that they must be resisted and destroyed if possible.

It’s not that Joshua and Judges are WRONG, it’s that their story is NOT the ONLY story! Not only are the Israelites to guard against foreign influence and threats, but they are ALSO to be a light to the nations, to be ambassadors for God, who welcomes the stranger! Sometimes they must take up arms to defend their promised land against invaders, to protect their families and livelihood. But those times shouldn’t change who the Children of Israel really are: God’s holy people, the Royal Nation, the Lord’s own possession. If the threats to the nation change the nation from confidence and strength and welcome and embrace into fear and distrust and violence, then what good is that nation to bring Good News to anyone?

The people of God in this story are just being the people of God. They do no heroic deeds. They slay no enemy, foreign or domestic. They are true to their nature, to the nature of the God they serve – they welcome, they embrace, they work hard, and they share with gladness.

So here we are, again, their descendants, and what do we share? Is the world a scary place? Are there foreigners and others trying to change who we are, threaten our way of life, destroy what we have labored so long to create? Sure there are. Must they be resisted, must they be fought and destroyed? In the case of groups like ISIS, I’m all in favor of going full Old Testament on them. There’s a time and a place for everything!

But will those threats change who we are, Southern Lutherans, known far and wide for hospitality, generosity, grace and wisdom? Will we change from the welcoming community to an armed camp? Who are we, and WHO is our God, that we should change because we are afraid of those outside?

What happens when the stranger comes to our door? What then, people of God? Is the world such a scary place that we forget who we are? Who we belong to? No, we do not! As the prophets have spoken, it is NOT hate and fear that change the world, but rather love and courage. As Jesus walked in love and courage, so should we. As the people of Bethlehem welcomed the stranger Ruth, so shall we welcome the beauty and joy and love and hope that is wrapped hidden in the stranger at our door. This is who we are, who we are called to be, not what we DO, what we ARE. So hear me and believe me when I say, “The Lord be with you!” And also with you.

God in heaven, gaze down upon your people and give them courage to risk themselves in hospitality, so the stranger might be made welcome.

God of Angel Armies. Bring your providence to bear upon our world. Give us grace to face our fears with courage. Give us the resolve to face our future like Ruth and her people, so the earth, our world, so full of fear, violence, murder and hate, might be transformed into the world you intended, the world you envision, the world that is to come. Amen.