

Pastor's Message – 11/14/2021
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Once upon a time, when things got too risqué in television, the screen would fade to black and let the audience imagine what happened next. Sometimes, like in the Book of Ruth, the Bible will do that too. Our reading from the Book of Ruth today has been edited. They've skipped the good parts. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, even when we read the good parts, because of differences in language, we may not immediately realize just what it is we're missing.

But first, a little background since we left Ruth and Naomi on their way to Bethlehem last week. The Book is named after Ruth, but it could very well be called the Book of Naomi since much of it revolves around her. Today's Bible reading is the story of a mother-in-law matchmaker.

When tragedy strikes her family through the death of her husband and sons, Naomi is left vulnerable. In the ancient, male-dominant culture, she has little chance for a healthy life. Her only hope is to move from Moab, where she had relocated with her husband some 10 years earlier, back home to Bethlehem. There she has a family and old friends who may take her in and provide for her.

Naomi suggests her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, (who have escorted their mother-in-law back to her ancestral home) do the same, i.e., return to Moab. The normal order of things would have been for a brother of a deceased man to marry his sister-in-law, but with both brothers having died, there is no one to provide for either of the younger women. So, Naomi advises Ruth and Orpah to move back to their family homes in Moab where they might be able to remarry and find financial security.

Orpah takes the advice. Ruth refuses. In an act of courageous loyalty toward her mother-in-law, she famously says, "Where you go, I will go; ... your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

At home in Bethlehem, things are still difficult. Naomi and Ruth are living off of gleanings, the leftovers that Hebrew law required landowners to make available to the poor. The practice of gleaning is described in Leviticus 19:9 "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest." This is not the only verse in the Torah that requires the landowner not harvest to the edges of his field, nor pick every last grape from his orchard. This was a kind of welfare program for the poor and needy.

But then Naomi notices something.

The older gentleman who owns the land from which Ruth is gleaning is impressed with and (the text seems to imply) attracted to her. Boaz has noticed how hard Ruth works at this demeaning labor. Through the grapevine, he has heard the tragic story of the loss of her husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law. He is impressed that she has chosen to move from her family home in Moab to help care for her mother-in-law in Bethlehem. Ruth is clearly a remarkable woman, and Boaz is smitten.

Naomi sees the special treatment Ruth is receiving. Boaz has told his workers to leave plenty of grain in the fields for her to gather. He tells them to keep an eye on her so she is safe.

Perhaps due to her naiveté, or simply because she has more important things on her mind, Ruth does not seem to notice what is obvious to the reader and the older and wiser mother-in-law.

As the third chapter begins -- and the entire third chapter is part of this week's reading -- Naomi advises her daughter-in-law about how to make herself known to Boaz. Boaz was going to have a fine time that night, winnowing the harvest, drinking, and sleeping in piles of newly-threshed barley. Naomi tells Ruth to dress up and uncover Boaz's feet in the dark after he's sound asleep. ("Feet" is a frequent euphemism in the Hebrew Scriptures for everything below the waist.) Ruth does as she's told, and Boaz recognizes that she is a "worthy woman," and tells her to sit tight. While she has effectively offered herself in marriage to Boaz, there is another male who has a closer claim to Ruth than he does. Before dawn, he sends Ruth home with six "measures" of barley. It's impossible to know how much barley this was. If one assumes the standard unit of weight, a seah, it would come to about fifteen bushels. That would be an extraordinary amount of grain to carry in one's cloak. Suffice it to say, Boaz sent Ruth home with as much grain as she could carry.

The part of chapter four omitted from today's lectionary reading covers the public exchange between Boaz and Ruth's dead husband's nearer relative. After a little drama, the story ends happily, and Boaz and Ruth married. Here's the part about the book perhaps being better called the Book of Naomi. While it is Ruth who gives birth to a child, it is Naomi who became the baby's nurse (4:6) and the ladies of the neighborhood said, "A son has been born to Naomi."

There's more to this story than meets the eye. While Naomi the matchmaker was getting Boaz and Ruth together, it appears God had

been doing a little matchmaking of his own. Behind the scenes, God was knitting together the virtues of Ruth with the people of Israel.

Many biographies help us understand a significant individual by telling stories that predate the subject of the story giving us a sense of the soil from which this significant person has grown. There are a variety of influences that make us who we are, including our families of origin.

The story of King David, the man after God's own heart from whom the Messiah will one day come to rule Israel forever, begins with the story of two remarkable women.

- Long before David was more courageous than any member of the Israelite army and took on and defeated Goliath, a young woman named Ruth courageously left her home to care for her vulnerable mother-in-law.

- Generations before David spent those quiet days shepherding his father's flock, a young Moabite woman humbled herself to glean from the edges of the harvest to provide for herself and her mother-in-law.

- Long before God plucked David from obscurity to be anointed by Samuel as the next king of Israel, Boaz noticed Ruth working in the fields, and, through Naomi's matchmaking, the two were married.

We can trace the virtues of this great king back to his great-grandmother, and -- though not through blood -- great-great-grandmother. While Naomi works cleverly to bring Ruth and Boaz together, God has also been at work, sowing a legacy of love to the people of Israel, that will bear fruit in Ruth's great-grandson David.

In one of those passages that we tend to skip over when reading through the Bible, the genealogy of Jesus listed in Matthew, you will read that Ruth is one of only four women mentioned. Each of the four is in some ways scandalous. Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law *and* the mother of his sons. Rahab was the prostitute who hid the spies Joshua had sent ahead of his invasion of the Promised Land. She recognized God's power in the military conquests of the Israelites and asked to be spared when Joshua attacked Jericho. (You know the song.) Oh, and Rahab was Boaz's mother. The fourth woman mentioned is "the wife of Uriah," that is Bathsheba. David arranged to have Uriah killed in battle and committed adultery with Bathsheba. Bathsheba was Solomon's mother.

Surprised? The whole story of Ruth is full of surprises. The surprising loyalty to a mother-in-law. The surprising re-marriage for the widow. The

surprise that this Gentile woman becomes the ancestor of a Hebrew king: David! Of course, this fits God's style: his surprising coming in the ordinary way in Jesus, his surprising birth by a virgin, his surprising resurrection from the dead. God's story and then our story is the surprise that, in spite of it all, God loves His people and works to save and restore us when sin and evil have taken hold and there is no reason to think that we will get only what we deserve.

The Book of Ruth, as I mentioned last week, is a book of turnings: a book of *shub*, the Hebrew word for reversals. Today, the Book reaches a decisive turn. The later chapters tell of how Ruth and Boaz become acquainted. Verse 20 in chapter two describes Boaz as “next-of-kin.” The Hebrew word used is *goel*. Elsewhere translated as “redeemer,” *goel* is a family member who is supposed to restore something that another family member has lost because of debt or poverty.

Remember how the woman of the neighborhood named Ruth's son? They recognize the child's importance to Naomi. “He shall be to you a restorer of life” it says in verse 15. “Restorer” is another translation of the Hebrew *shub*, that word of “turning,” used throughout the Book of Ruth.

The architect of Ruth's relationship with Boaz is her mother-in-law Naomi, and when they have a child, the women of the neighborhood proclaim the child as Naomi's. In fact, he is, and without her vision and plans, this ancestor of David would not have come to be. Without God at work behind the scenes, God has already promised that a savior would come from the line of David, humanity would experience *shub* – would experience restoration and new life.

Way back in August when I chose the sequence of Bible readings from September through November, I was excited to see how the end of the story in the Book of Ruth led directly into the season of Advent when Christians begin once again to anticipate the coming of Jesus: a descendant of David and a descendant of Ruth and Boaz.

Jesus represents the ultimate *shub* – the ultimate turning. Jesus is the ultimate restorer of a world that so desperately needs a turning from the direction it is moving in. When the Book of Ruth fades to black, and when even the Bible fades to black – when the world seems destined to fade to the black of hopelessness and despair, God works behind the scenes, beyond what the eye can see, to the ultimate turning and a fade not to black, but a fade to white and light in the fulfillment of the promise to send Jesus, the savior of the world, the ultimate turn to hope and restoration.