

Sermon for Sunday, November 7, 2021  
Ruth 2:1-23

“As It Happened . . .”

There are two questions I invite us to consider as we ponder the second chapter of Ruth. First, do good things sometimes just “happen” in our lives, whether we call it luck or fate or serendipity? Or is God always behind the scenes in some way? And second, why do we do what we do? What motivates us?

The storyteller takes his time introducing us to Boaz. All we are told at first is that “*Naomi had a kinsman.*” How close of a kinsman, he doesn’t say. Not yet. And as to what kind of a character Boaz is, whether good or bad or in between, he doesn’t say that either. He simply says that Boaz is “*a prominent rich man.*”

With verse 1 as a teaser, in verse 2 the focus immediately shifts back to Ruth and Naomi. Remember that they are both widows. Which in that culture means that they have absolutely nothing. No land. No status. No food, even. And furthermore, Ruth is a foreigner from the land of Moab. Israel’s perpetual enemy. But “*as it happened,*” Ruth apparently knows about one of the laws in Israel’s Torah. A law that says foreigners must be allowed to “glean” or gather what is left over in the grain fields of the Israelites. In fact, not just foreigners, but all of the poor, including orphans, and, important for our story, widows. So Ruth, with the permission of Naomi, of course, takes the initiative to begin gleaning in a nearby barley field just outside of Bethlehem. And that is where, “*as it happened,*” she first meets the owner of the field. Whose name, she eventually learns, is Boaz.

Boaz, we assume, had simply come to see how the harvest was going. Nothing unusual there. And he notices this woman he doesn’t recognize, gleaning in the fields. Nothing unusual there, either. Boaz, as it happens, knows the Torah, specifically Leviticus 19, verses 9-10, where it says, “*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. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.*” So it wasn’t a surprise to see a woman he didn’t know gleaning in his field. There were probably others as well. He asks one of his servants who the woman is, or rather “to whom she belongs.” No surprise there. Everybody belongs to somebody, to some family, or group of people. And the servant tells him. She is the Moabite woman you have been hearing about, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, who came with her back to Bethlehem. Forsaking her own people, and customs, and god (small g).

Boaz, we now see for the first time, is a good man. He goes beyond the call of duty, beyond what is specified in the Torah, and instructs her to remain in his field, where she will be safe. And to help herself to the drinking water his own servants have drawn.

Why does he do that? What motivates him? In this case, he is grateful for what the Moabite woman had done for his “kinswoman” Naomi, and this was his way of thanking her.

But there is another reason Boaz does what he does. Boaz believes in the LORD. He believes in the *hesed* of the Lord, the loving kindness that extends to all people. Not just the Israelites. But even the Moabites. He believes that the Lord calls him to do the same. And Boaz blesses Ruth with these words: “*May the Lord reward you for your deeds . . . the God of Israel,*

*under shoes wings you have come for refuge.*” Boaz believes that, like a mother hen, God’s wings of refuge extend even to this alien, this foreigner

In verse 14 we read, *“At mealtime Boaz said to her, Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine.”* At our Bible study this past Wednesday, we laughed at Boaz’ invitation for Ruth to dip her bread in the “sour wine.” To us, that didn’t sound necessarily hospitable. For some of us, all wine is sour, so “sour wine” must be particularly sour. Perhaps vinegar, even. No thank you, Boaz.

But our resident Old Testament scholar Dr. Douglas Miller helped us understand that Boaz was simply extending the hospitality of his household to Ruth. Which included extending his protection. Welcoming her into his home.

Why would he do that? The cynical side of me thinks ahead to Chapter Three, and wonders whether Boaz doesn’t already have his eyes on Ruth, whether there isn’t already some physical, sexual attraction. But the storyteller doesn’t say that—and don’t you think he would have? Boaz, as we already know, is a good man, a God-fearing man, a man who knows that God’s *hesed* love extends to all people. And that he is called to do the same. He knows the Torah, and that later in the very same chapter in Leviticus, 19:33-34, God says this: *“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD Yahweh, your God.”* So Boaz decides to tell his servants to *“Let her glean even among the standing sheaves [that is, the sheaves that had not yet been gathered by the harvesters], and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.”* He’s not just being grateful, or nice; he’s obeying God’s commandment to love the alien as himself.

As we heard, when Ruth returned to her mother-in-law Naomi that evening, she had an ephah of barley, which I learned is about one half of a bushel, more than enough for Ruth and Naomi to eat that day. *“And her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned . . . [and] said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked?”* Why did Naomi ask that? What motivated her? Did she want something? Or was she simply astonished at the hospitality and generosity of even her own people? And so she added these words of blessing. *Blessed be the man who took notice of you.”* And her blessing reveals that Naomi was starting to see the hand of God at work. The same God she had essentially cursed at the end of Chapter One for dealing bitterly with her, and bringing calamity upon her.

And that wasn’t all. When Ruth told her what the man’s name was, that it was Boaz, she was astonished, “gob-stopped,” and said to Ruth *“Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! . . . The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.”* The actual Hebrew word she used was “*go)el*,” which in the Torah was the one person in an entire extended family having both the authority AND the obligation to redeem or buy back family members who had lost their property, family name, and social status. Did that “just happen?” Was that what we would call “pure luck?” Naomi was slowly becoming convinced that it didn’t just happen, it wasn’t pure luck, but that it might be—it had to be—the hand of God himself. Even though God himself has not yet personally shown up or appeared or spoken in this story.

Naomi still couldn’t yet see what lay beyond the horizon, what would unfold in Chapters 3 and 4. But somehow she knew, already at this point, that things were going to be okay.

Going back to our opening questions, why do we do what we do? What motivates us? There can be many reasons, some of them pretty self-serving and perhaps not so honorable. But what makes all the difference in the world is when we have the Lord in our lives. When we know God's law, and seek to follow it, every day. When we humans are at our best, knowing the Lord is what motivates our decisions and actions.

Is this same God at work behind the many and varied scenes in our lives? What about those times when he seems nowhere to be found? What we learn from the story of Ruth is that this same God, even when he seems absent or at least silent, is nevertheless always present in, always speaking to us through, Scripture. The Torah. The Bible. And so even when things seem to "just happen," there is a broader, deeper story at work. A story of a loving, merciful God.

There is yet a third question I believe this story calls us to consider. How does the God we meet in the Bible call us to treat the foreigners, the aliens, the dispossessed in our own land? Maybe the laws of this land aren't clear, those laws that politicians love to debate. But God's laws appear to be quite clear. We are to provide food for the alien. To welcome the alien. To love the alien. Just as we love ourselves. May we do as Boaz has already done.

Amen.