

Uncovering and Recovering

Sometimes we have to ask why certain stories, or even entire books, are in the Bible. Take Song of Solomon, for example. Scholars pretty much agree that this book of Hebrew poetry is a celebration of human sexuality. Somehow I can't see myself ever doing a sermon series on the Song of Solomon. Or take some of the stories in the book of Genesis. Like Genesis 19:1-11, where we are told that "the men of Sodom, both young and old," came to Lot's house and demanded he send out the two strangers who had come to see him. Horrified, Lot instead offers them his two daughters. Or take Genesis 19:30-38, where Lot's same two daughters conspire together to get their father inebriated, and then "lie" with him, supposedly so they can preserve offspring through their father. Each of them has a son. One of them, the writer says, becomes the founder of the land of Ammon, and the other, of Moab. Okay. This may explain why the Moabites were so despicable in the eyes of the Israelites. But do we really need to know these stories?

Or take Chapter 3 in the Book of Ruth. While those of us who don't know Hebrew, or anything about the culture in which this story was written, may not know it, the story is filled with sexual imagery and innuendo. Take for example the word "feet," which seems to play a central role in the plot. The word is sometimes used in the Old Testament as a euphemism for the male "private part." When Naomi tells Ruth to "uncover" Boaz' feet, one can't help but wonder what she is really telling her daughter-in-law to do.

But before we avoid Chapter 3 or even the entire book like we would avoid South Broadway in Wichita, we have to face the fact that this IS in the Bible. It survived centuries of Church-wide councils and debates over which books should be in the Bible and which shouldn't. And here it is today, in our Bibles, right after Judges and just before 1 Samuel.

Before we dive into this chapter (or maybe I should say, cautiously and fearfully dip our toes into it), I propose that we again keep in mind two foundational questions. First, what is motivating the characters in the story—why do they do what they do? And second, where is God in the story? Behind the scenes? Out in front, even?

Ruth and Naomi share two problems. They are both widows. Unless and until Ruth finds another husband, she will forever be consigned to "gleaning in the fields," simply to survive from day to day. And Naomi is in dire danger of losing her dead husband's name, his land, his inheritance. The only thing that can save her is a "nearest kinsman," *go-el* in Hebrew.

So we can't blame Naomi at the beginning of the chapter when she says to Ruth, "*My daughter, I need to seek some security for you.*" Meaning, a husband. What is motivating her to do this? "*So that it may be well with you,*" as she actually says? Or so that it may be ultimately "well" with herself? The storyteller leaves us guessing.

"*Now here is our kinsman Boaz,*" Naomi says. Maybe he might become Ruth's husband. Interestingly, Naomi uses a different Hebrew word for kinsman here than *go'el*, as if to downplay or disguise the very real possibility that he could be her savior as well. She proposes what seems to be an elaborate scheme. She tells Ruth to "*wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor,*" where she has heard Boaz presently is. Seems relatively respectable, right? Except in the Old Testament, the threshing floor is

sometimes referred to as a place where prostitutes hang out. Does Naomi want her daughter-in-law to act as a prostitute?

She continues her instructions to Ruth: *“When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what do to.”* The Hebrew verb for “lie down,” *shachav*, is often used in the Old Testament as a euphemism for having sexual relations. The Hebrew word for “uncover” is *galah*. And when used together with the noun for feet can seem to mean only one thing. Naomi wants Ruth to seduce Boaz!

Ever-obedient Ruth simply says. “All that you tell me I will do.” And indeed, she does. She waited until he had eaten and drunk, and thus was in a contented mood, and had lain down, and apparently had fallen asleep. She *“came stealthily”* (which seems here to be a rather “sneaky” word), *“uncovered his feet,”* and *“lay down”* beside him.

Wow. Why is that in the Bible? What is motivating both Naomi and Ruth at this point? And where is God?

I’ve learned over and over that when leading a Bible study on something from the Old Testament, it is pretty awesome to have your very own Old Testament scholar in the group. Doug Miller proposed that Ruth, being a Moabite, might not have even understood that the phrases “uncover his feet” and “lie down” were both euphemisms. That ever-obedient Ruth might have followed Naomi’s instructions very literally. In which case, no wonder when Boaz woke up at midnight and found a woman he couldn’t see, literally *“lying”* at his literally *“uncovered feet,”* he was startled! That would be slapstick humor at its best! And there would be nothing dishonorable at all about this part of the story, except a little clever wordplay!

Boaz asks the woman who she is, and Ruth reminds him, namely she is his *“servant,”* using a word for servant connoting a higher level of status than that used in chapter two, and Boaz’ “fine character” immediately kicks in. He blesses her. Actually, he asks the Lord Yahweh to bless her [*“May you be blessed by the Lord”*] (which is the first time Yahweh had been even mentioned in Chapter Three), because *“this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first.”* Scholars aren’t quite sure what “loyalty” Boaz is referring to. Loyalty, perhaps, to him? That she passed over *“young men, whether poor or rich,”* and came instead to him? Or might Boaz be referring to Ruth’s loyalty to his own kinswoman Naomi?

“And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.” A worthy woman. אִשָּׁת הַיֵּל in Hebrew. The feminine version of how the storyteller had described Boaz in chapter two. “A prominent rich man,” אִישׁ הַיֵּל in Hebrew, a “worthy man.” What is the storyteller trying to tell us about both Boaz and Ruth?

“I will do for you all that you ask,” Boaz says. I will *“spread my [your] cloak over you [your servant].”* I will take you as my wife. Ruth’s problem appears to be solved.

But not Naomi’s. Boaz reveals that he is not her “next-of-kin,” her *go’el*, the one with the power to redeem and restore Naomi to her dead husband’s name and inheritance. *“There is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord Yahweh lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”* Boaz seems pretty determined to do “the right thing.” He even invokes God’s name.

The next morning Boaz sends Ruth on her way with six full measures of barley. Why did Boaz do this? Commentators have suggested all kinds of reasons. It could, they say, be a bride-price. It could be the price of a parcel of land that will be needed in the fourth and final chapter. It could be a token of apology to Naomi, a signal that Boaz is going to do what he should have

done all along, namely restore the “six measures” or “seeds” or inheritance of Elimelech to his widow. The storyteller doesn’t tell us what the barley means. Instead, he leaves us, at the end of Chapter Three, with several seemingly unresolved questions. Will the two problems shared by these two women both be resolved? For that matter, will either be resolved? Is it possible that honor or worthiness sometimes lies hidden behind apparent dishonor or unworthiness? What really motivated these three characters? And above all, is God somehow active behind the scenes of this story?

The main commentator I read in preparation for this sermon is a woman, Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, who got her PhD at Princeton just a few years before our own Doug did. And she did something creative at the beginning of her commentary on each chapter. She gave it a name. A name, it turns out, that is subtly based on the main theme or themes in the chapter. Her title for Chapter Three is “Uncovering and Recovering.” Two of the most important Hebrew words that recur in the chapter, she says, are *galah*, and *go’al*. *Galah* means to uncover. *Go’al* means to redeem, or recover. Making the reader and listener wonder. Can what has been uncovered by recovered? Is it possible that in God’s economy, even two dishonored and disenfranchised women, one an Israelite and the other a despised Moabite, can somehow end up being honored? What is motivating these characters? And is God somehow involved behind the scenes? We’ll finally find out, next week!

Amen