

The Roots of Our Redemption

Why is the Book of Ruth in the Bible? Today, at long last, we're going to find out. And in the process, I think we will also find answers to the other two questions I've been raising. First, what has been motivating the characters in the story? And for that matter, what motivates us? Why do we do what we do? And second, is God always at work behind the scenes, even when God does not appear to be present?

But first, let's hear the end of the story. Ruth Chapter Four. [Sandy reads]

Let's review. Chapter One. Ruth and Naomi share two tragic problems. They are both widows. Because of which, they have nothing. When their husbands died, they lost their family name, their family inheritance, their family land. Their only means of subsistence is gleaning in the fields after the harvesters have finished. Their only hope is for Ruth to find a new husband, and for Naomi to have her dead husband Elimelech's property redeemed or restored to her.

Chapter Two. Enter Boaz. Or to use the language the storyteller uses, "As it happened." [Front wall]. "*As it happened, she [Ruth] came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.*" As it happened, Boaz came to the very field where Ruth was gleaning. As it happened, he noticed her, and asked one of his servants who she might be. As it happened, the servant knew who she was, and told Boaz. As it happened, Boaz was moved more by the kindnesses Ruth had shown his kinswoman Naomi than he cared that she was a foreigner, an outsider, a despicable Moabite even. As it happened, Boaz was a lover of the Lord Yahweh, the God of his people, and moreover, he loved the law that Yahweh had given his people. As it happened, Boaz even knew about the laws of leaving the gleanings for the poor and alien (Lev 19:9-10), and the law of Levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10), and the one about the *go'el* or nearest kin, who had both the right and the responsibility to redeem property that had been lost by a nearest kin (Lev 25:25-28).

Chapter Three. Naomi's bitterness over the way she felt the Lord had dealt harshly with her has begun to lessen, and she even feels a new ray of hope. Maybe, just maybe her kinsman Boaz can provide both her and her daughter-in-law Ruth with the redemption or help they need. Naomi shrewdly plans a late-night encounter between Ruth and Boaz down on the threshing floor. There are a lot of linguistic double-meanings and confused surprises that are downright comical. But the net result is that once again Boaz is moved by Ruth's faithfulness to his kinswoman Naomi. He agrees to take her as his wife. But as far as his acting as *go'el* for Naomi, there is just one problem. Boaz is actually not Naomi's nearest of kin. Another man is.

This brings us, once again, to Chapter Four. Boaz puts together his own shrewd plan. He goes to the "gate" of the city of Bethlehem, the place where all manner of business transactions take place. And once again, "as it happened . . ." But let's use the language of serendipity the storyteller uses here: "*No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there . . . than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by.*" Coincidence? Luck? We're starting to understand our "God-behind-the-scenes" a bit better, aren't we?

Boaz invites the man (whose name the storyteller doesn't bother to tell us, for reasons we will see) to "*Come over, friend; sit down here.*" Boaz also shrewdly invites ten village elders to join them, to serve, in effect, as a court of law.

And then Boaz “sets his trap.” Hey, uh, just wanted to let you know that our kinswoman Naomi is selling this piece of land that belonged to Elimilech, just in case, uh, you wanted to buy it, since you are, uh, the *go’el*, the next of kin. And if you’re not interested, just let me know, and I’ll, uh, buy it, since I am, uh, the next of kin after you.

Just as Boaz predicted, Boaz’ “friend” jumps on it. “*I will redeem it!*” (Exclamation point added by me.) After which Boaz shrewdly adds, “Oh and by the way, just to, uh, be clear, “*The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.*” And once again as Boaz had shrewdly predicted, the man changes his mind. (Which by the way is probably why the storyteller didn’t bother to give us his name. He was nothing but a self-serving fink!) What the fink actually says is, “*I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.*” If Boaz had lived today he would have quietly said, “yessssss!!”

One final, customary “exchange of sandal,” and in one fell swoop, Boaz ends up taking Ruth as his wife, and serves as *go’el* for Naomi. Solving both of their problems! Isn’t that an awesome ending?!

Except the story of Naomi and Ruth and Boaz isn’t quite over. After they became husband and wife we read, “*The Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son . . . They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse . . .*” and he became . . . “*the father of David.*” (Exclamation points added by me. ☺) “!!!!” That’s right, KING David! The greatest king in the entire history of ancient Israel! Descended from the marriage between Ruth and Boaz, between a Moabite and an Israelite!

I think we’re finally ready to answer our questions. First, why do people do what they do? What motivates them? And for that matter, what motivates us?

If we’re honest (and we probably should be, since we’re in church ☺), we humans often have mixed motives for what we do. And some of them are admittedly self-serving. Naomi shrewdly concocted that interaction between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor for not one but at least two reasons. To find some “security” for Ruth [*My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.*”]. “So that it may be well with you.” But, c’mon. The story seems clear that she did it at least partly for herself as well . . . “*so that it may be well with . . . [me!]*” Does that make her a bad person, a dishonorable person? No, it just makes her a person. And I love it that the Old Testament allows its characters to be human beings, with both strengths and flaws. Characters like Naomi. Characters like us.

What about Boaz? Do you think he minded, even one little bit, taking Ruth for his wife? To be sure, he was an honorable man, a God-fearing man. But he was also just a man. And Ruth was just a woman. Just the way God created them.

And what about Ruth? We learned already in Chapter One that Ruth was faithful to a fault. And she was also stubborn. She refused to leave Naomi. Almost as if it were a matter of self-serving, personal pride and honor. But at the same time, Ruth was honest, and she was sincere. As the text says, she was a “*worthy woman.*”

And now the second question, was God behind the scenes in this story? If you’re not sure, then I haven’t done my job very well. Just listen to all the ways God was behind the scenes. First, centuries before Ruth and Naomi and Boaz were even on the scene, God chose a people, the Israelites, to be his people. And the story of that people, told first of all in the Old Testament, has now become our story as well. We too are heirs of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and now Boaz, and Ruth, and Naomi. We too are God’s chosen people.

Second, God gave that people his commandments, his Torah, so they would know how he wanted them to live, namely to love one another as He loved them. If it hadn't been for God's Torah, which he ended up writing directly on their hearts, including the laws of leaving the gleanings for the poor, and of Levirate marriage, and of the kinsman redeemer, this story would not and could not have happened the way it did. And that same Torah has been passed down to us, written on our hearts and in our bibles, thanks be to God.

Third, God invited his people to live lives of worship and sacred ritual. Rituals like the blessings that were invoked by virtually everyone in the story of Ruth, blessings that invoke the Lord Yahweh's name and made them ever mindful of who their God is. We carry on those sacred rituals today, thanks be to God. In fact we're going to practice one of them in just a bit.

Fourth, whether or not we believe that God sits behind a screen like a puppeteer pulling strings, especially every single string, God causes certain things to happen. Good things. As our Apostle Paul wrote, *"for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose"* [Romans 8:28].

Fifth and finally, there is written into life, by the Creator and Master Storyteller, an overarching story, that we ourselves are part of. God has an overarching plan. And by the way, we're still not quite done with the story of Ruth, did you know that? Fast forward to the very first book of the New Testament, to the very beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. Where we find this. It's another genealogy.

Matthew 1.

² Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³ and Judah the father of Perez... [I'll skip over a few] . . ., and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵ and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶ and Jesse the father of King David!!! [Exclamation points added by me ☺]

But Matthew continues. *"And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, ⁷ and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph... [I'll skip over a whole bunch more]*

And Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵ and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶ and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah. [Exclamation points added!!!!]

So we see, so we learn, so we are reminded that God uses flawed yet faithful human beings to bring about God's purposes. This is why the Book of Ruth is in the Bible. It shows us the roots of our redemption. It gives us hope. It gives us flawed yet faithful human beings who end up giving birth to our Redeemer and Savior, the Messiah, known also as Emmanuel, God with us. Flawed yet faithful human beings like Naomi and Elimelech, Ruth, and Boaz. Flawed yet faithful human beings like King David. And as we will see in coming weeks during this new season of Advent, flawed yet faithful human beings like the young, courageous Mary, and the older, but equally courageous carpenter Joseph. Yes, even flawed but wanting-to-be-faithful, trying-to-be-faithful human beings like you and like me. [Exclamation points added!!!!]

Amen.