

“Acting in Faith” – Ruth 3 – November 18, 2018

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The third chapter of Ruth begins with Naomi deciding to take the matter into her own hands. Or rather she instructs Ruth to act. God had set things in motion by leading Ruth to the right place, the field of Boaz, but now it was time for the human agents to do something. Just as Naomi had told her two daughters-in-law back in Moab to seek out new husbands for their security and well-being, she now tells Ruth to make a special call upon Boaz.

The scene that occurs next is both delicate and dangerous. In fact, it is absolutely outrageous. Naomi tells Ruth to bathe and dress in her finest clothes and apply her sweetest fragrance. She was then to go alone, at night, to the threshing floor, where the men were celebrating the harvest. More than likely the celebration included the consumption of alcoholic beverages, perhaps making Boaz in a more agreeable mood, and that is what Naomi wants. Naomi tells the younger woman to seek out the sleeping man and uncover the lower part of his body. The Hebrew word translated here “feet” actually refers to the legs from thigh to foot, and in many instances is a euphemism for one’s private parts. We don’t really know just how uncovered Boaz would be – the author has left that to our imagination - but a Jewish audience hearing this would certainly see the sexual implications. So after exposing him to the cool night air, Ruth is to lie down next to him. Naomi concludes her instructions to Ruth by saying, Boaz will take it from there. At least, since he is the man, that is what is to be expected.

Surprisingly Ruth agrees to Naomi’s plan without comment. Ruth is entering into a very risky situation – a woman walking about alone at night, a woman known to be without a protector, a woman who is a foreigner – all these leave her very susceptible to assault. And she is entering a scene with a group of possibly inebriated men. And, should the encounter go poorly, should Boaz declare her a woman without morals, her fate, and, by association, also Naomi’s, would be dire. A risky situation, indeed. Yet Ruth trusts Naomi and is willing to take the risk.

So, Ruth’s second encounter with Boaz commences. The scene proceeds as Naomi had described it. After eating and drinking, Boaz, we are told, is in a contented mood. He seeks out a spot at the end of a heap of grain. He decides to sleep on the periphery allowing Ruth more accessibility to him. Was it coincidence that Boaz sought an out of the way location, thus making the following encounter private? Or was it providence? After he is asleep, Ruth goes to him, quietly uncovers him, and lies next to him. Tension mounts as we wonder how this patriarch of Israel will react to the exceedingly bold action of the young, Moabite woman.

At midnight, the man stirs in his sleep. No doubt from the chill of his exposed lower extremities. He gropes around in the dark to locate his covering and discovers a woman at his side. Surprised, he questions who she is. And instead of simply telling him her name and waiting for him to act, as Naomi had suggested he would, Ruth takes the bull by the horns and confronts him. She, not he, takes charge. She instructs him to “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are one with the right to redeem.” This is an important statement. In the previous chapter,

Boaz had asked for a blessing and reward from God upon Ruth, stating that Ruth had sought refuge under the wings of God. The word for wings and the word here for “cloak” is the same word. In essence, Ruth is saying to him, you called down this blessing upon me, now I challenge you to be the human agent of this divine blessing in my life. This phrase “under one’s wing” is used as a metaphor for marriage in Ezekiel chapter 16. Ruth is proposing marriage to him, and furthermore, as a redeemer he has an obligation to perform. We find out in the next chapter that there is a parcel of land belonging to the family that needs to be redeemed. Ruth, a foreigner, is pointing out to him, an Israelite man, the responsibility he has for her family, the family she whole-heartedly accepted back in chapter one.

Now it’s all laid out on the table. How will the man Boaz respond? What action will he take? First he proclaims to her another blessing. He exclaims that this act of hesed, her loyalty and loving-kindness that goes above and beyond the call of duty, is greater than her initial act, when she devoted herself to Naomi and returned with her to Bethlehem. Ruth very well could have sought a marriage proposal from any number of the young men that worked in the field, and thus would have gotten security for her own future. But by choosing Boaz, who is the kinsman-redeemer for Naomi’s family, Ruth not only secures her own future, but the future of Naomi as well. Furthermore, her first-born son would continue the line of Elimelech and Ruth’s dead husband Mahlon. Boaz calls her a worthy woman.

There is one catch, though. There is another kinsman-redeemer whose relationship with Naomi’s family is closer. Boaz assures Ruth he will go speak with the man. Ruth remains with Boaz for the remainder of the evening, yet before first light, he tells her to go, before she is seen. Remember, this nighttime visit is very scandalous, and neither one wants a tarnished reputation. Boaz gives her some grain to take back to Naomi, so Ruth won’t return to her empty handed. This refers back to Naomi’s feeling of emptiness in the previous scenes of the story. Through Ruth and Boaz, her emptiness will be filled.

This third chapter continues the themes we have already seen in the first two. Ruth continues to show Naomi loyalty that is far beyond what is expected and God’s providential activity works quietly behind the scenes, bringing Ruth and Boaz together safely. But in this third chapter, the characters must act.

Naomi, in her despair and heartache, first believed that God was working against her – that God didn’t care for her and was thus deserving of her fate. But through Ruth’s devotion to her and the arrival of Ruth at the field of Boaz, Naomi has started to recognize her despair being lifted. A plan for her future reveals itself to her – and, remember, she has to work within the confines of her time and place, so their only hope in this situation will be through the beneficence of a man. And so she works that angle, and comes up with a plan to hook Ruth up with Bethlehem’s most eligible bachelor.

And Ruth doesn't go blindly into the hornets' nest – while she is taking a tremendous risk, she trusts Naomi's wisdom and judgment. She is willing to act because she loves her mother-in-law and wants what's best for her. But her action also envisions a good outcome for her. Ruth is not taking on a life of misery and hardship, just so Naomi has security. Sometimes I think we are afraid to show God's love to others because it will cause us a life of martyrdom. We don't think there is enough for everyone to have a piece of the pie, and we think we would have to do without. We are afraid of not having enough, and so we hoard our resources. There is room for God's grace and mercy for all to take part. God's love is abundant, and sharing that love with others in need doesn't mean we have to give up any of that. God still loves us. God desires that all people can know wholeness and security within their lives. There are abundant resources in Creation for all to share in God's goodness.

Boaz is a worthy man. But he's still afraid. He met Ruth and liked her. Admired her, even, for her devotion to Naomi, to Naomi's people, and even to Naomi's God. But Ruth was still a Moabite. She was from a tribe despised by the Jews. So Boaz hesitated to take action, because, what would people say? He was described as a worthy man in chapter two. He was respected in Bethlehem. He had resources. But what would people say if he associated with a Moabite woman? Married her, even? Would people look down on him? Perhaps he was afraid that he would lose status if he associated with one of "them." He didn't have the courage to make the first move, but his quick agreeableness to Ruth's proposal demonstrated his eagerness.

This third chapter of Ruth encourages us to act in faith in order to help ourselves or to help others. Sometimes when the situation seems so bleak, we become frozen by our emotions – and maybe our despair hinders us from acting in faith. But perhaps God is providing a way, if we could just take a peek into the hope that God willingly offers. Do we believe that God is with us in the pain?

Or maybe fear of losing ourselves or our stuff keeps us from acting in faith. We forget that our God is Creator and longs for us to be made whole. And being whole sometimes means trusting that we will have enough and letting go of a mentality of scarcity. Can we trust that there is enough for everyone?

Or maybe fear of what others might think about us keeps us from acting in faith. We worry about our status by association – what would it mean if I stood up for someone who has no rights? What would it mean if I speak out for someone who has no voice? Will others condemn me by association? Or will I do what is right, despite what others think?

As we go out from here today, let us each wonder how is God calling us to act in faith?