

Ruth Part Three: Unexpected Hope

I. Turning the Corner

In Ruth 2, it is Ruth who *takes the initiative* to find food for her and Naomi.

Naomi, at this point, is in this space of despair; like she just can't seem to get up off the couch.

- There is a time, in grief, in the brokenness where we need that space to just 'sit down', embrace the pain, be present to the reality of the hurt.
- And then there is a time for our eyes to move from grieving what *was*, to embracing what *will be*. To shift from behind us, to what is in front of us. This is not "forgetting" the past – or the people we have lost. It's this moment of looking up, of reengaging the horizon as it rises in front of us, even as we now walk with a bit more of a limp.

Ruth tells Naomi that she has been gleaning in the field of Boaz. And it's like a light comes on, a glimmer of hope dawns on Naomi, and she turn the corner.

"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers." – Ruth 2:20

Guardian-redeemer: In the Law of Israel, there are instructions of how a family member can restore or buy back land that had been forfeited, or someone who had been sold into slavery. Although relatives were responsible to help vulnerable family members, they were not obligated to carry out the restoration.

II. Subverting Expectations

What sort of 'meeting' was this on the threshing room floor?

Scholars have debated to what extent this 'threshing-floor' encounter is, well...not so PG. And that's not a recent development either. In the 4th Century, Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306-373) wrote that Ruth and Boaz have intercourse right there in the threshing room. Is that true?

No. Here's why. And why it matters.

Ruth goes through with the plan, and when Boaz notices a woman at his feet, he asks "Who are you?" Ruth answers, "I am your servant, Ruth...Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family." (3:9). What is she saying here? She's proposing marriage to him. She's asking Boaz, "Will you marry me?"

As scholar Joyce Baldwin notes: “‘Spreading the cloak over’ was a vivid expression for providing protection, warmth, and fellowship. The phrase spoke eloquently of marriage.” – Joyce Baldwin

The last chapter of Proverbs speaks of a “Woman of Noble Character,” which is interesting, because you now have Boaz calling Ruth exactly that: *he* has found a woman of noble character.

“For the lips of the adulterous woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword.” – Proverbs 5:3-4

Ruth and Boaz *do* break with a lot of expectations at this point. Ruth proposes marriage here – that’s not normal in that culture. Boaz agrees to marry a Moabite woman; again, way outside the expected norms. But morally speaking, they both act as models of faithfulness to God. Boaz, rightly, calls Ruth a “woman of noble character,” and this scene doesn’t change that assessment.

“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the Lord enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.” – Ruth 4:13. When does Boaz make love to Ruth? When she becomes his wife. And God blesses them with a child, miraculously it seems...for Ruth had not conceived when she was married to Naomi’s son.

Why it matters:

- **This story prepares us to hear another story** of a young mom, who is described in similar ways to Ruth. As God enables Ruth to conceive a son – something that the text suggests was not possible before – so God enables Mary to conceive a son in a completely miraculous way; with no ‘earthly’ father at all (Matt 1).
- **In Boaz, Joseph has biblical precedent to roll with the very suspicious, unexpected nature of what they are going through.** He can look at Boaz and say, “This guy was also in a strange situation – a Moabite woman, who shows up at his feet, and proposes to him – yet this is how God brings about King David. Maybe God really *is* working like this again?”
- **Ruth breaks expected roles.** A woman, in this ancient setting, makes the first moves – and they are intentional and well designed. This is totally out of left field for Boaz, yet he rolls with it. And neither Ruth nor Boaz are reprimanded for it.

There may be cultural stereotypes, or traditions we feel constrained by, but they aren’t actually “wrong.” In fact, these might be the places where God ‘shows up.’

- **Ruth is bold. She’s courageous. She takes initiative.** These are not distinctly masculine traits. They’re *godly* traits. All of us are meant to be bold, courageous – to take initiative. There are important differences between men and women, of course. But this isn’t one of them.

- **Boaz and Ruth remain an example of people of integrity.** They not only demonstrate steadfast, loyal love to each other – which they do. They also demonstrate love for God and what God has asked of them.

III. No Longer Empty Handed

In Chapter one, Naomi says “if I thought there was still hope for me...”(1:12). She literally believes her future is hope-less. She cannot envision anything except her loss.

God is at work, doing something so much bigger than Naomi can imagine; and it’s precisely through her “this-isn’t-how-I-envisioned-life.”

Naomi who had left Bethlehem, or as we saw in week one, “Bet Lechem”, the “house of bread,” because of famine; they had run out of bread. No grain. And now, her arms loaded down. Arms full.

But this ‘fullness’ of grain is suggestive too. It won’t be much longer...maybe just a little more than nine months...and Naomi’s arms will be full of another sort of bundle, a weightiness that far outweighs the grain. For at the end of chapter 4, we read: “Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, “Naomi has a son!” (4:16-17a).

Naomi, she does “open her arms” again.

The resurrection of Jesus opens wide a whole new way of envisioning and living in the world. In ancient cultures, and many traditional cultures still today, the way to have a ‘future’ was by having children.

Because Jesus was raised from the grave, he can say: “Your future is not tied to having physical descendants. Your security doesn’t come from your kids, but from the new family in God – the Church.”

“Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. “Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mothers and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:32-35).

Jesus totally recasts how ‘kinship’ works in the Kingdom of God. The lines of our family are redrawn, not on physical descent but on allegiance to doing God’s will.

So Jesus, for the first time in his culture, gives value to the life of singleness, celibacy, and not having kids. And out of this new vision of reality we see massive shifts in history:

- Orphanages originate in this time – Christians rescuing babies who had been exposed and adopting them as their own.

- Christians refer to each other as “brother and sister” in Christ. When we look around the room and we see, not a disjointed set of family groups, but our *own family*.
- This is good news! It means we *all* belong.
- The church is to be the place where a person can be single, celebrate, and totally whole. This is the place where all who want kids but haven’t had any have an armload.

The question: Who’s at your table? Who’s not, but needs an invite?

We become the Build-a-Bigger-Table people because we have been invited to Jesus’ Table. And like there is an abundance of grain to fill Naomi’s arms, there is an abundance of God’s grace to fill us too; and then share with our world.

Life Group Discussion and Reflection Questions

Open Up

Expectations can be...tricky. What are some of the common ways people dealing with expectations – of themselves, of their lives, that others place on them?

What are some ways that you tend to deal with, or manage, your expectations?

Dig In

1. What “hopes” or “desires” does Naomi have at the beginning of Ruth 3? What does she do with these? How might that be an example of ‘initiative’ for us or for you?
2. Ruth follows through on this bold plan (3:7-9). She and Boaz are both ‘subverting expectations’ that their culture would have; Ruth, by proposing to Boaz, and Boaz, by agreeing to marry Ruth. This situation looks a bit dodgy, but it is a brilliant, risky move that pays off for everyone involved. How is Ruth’s action a picture of boldness and courage for you? Where might you need this kind of boldness in your life?
3. To follow Jesus is to live against the grain of some societal norms – to subvert expectations of how we might function in the world of business or dating.
4. The arm full of grain that Boaz sends to Naomi with Ruth is pointing to the other “arm full”, with Naomi holding the baby boy that comes from this relationship in Ruth 4. This is an “unexpected hope” that Naomi receives. Are there any areas of your life that you need to trust God with in a similar way? An area where one “expectation” needs to be shifted in order to receive something new?

Prayer

Take time to pray for each other. Maybe there are specific areas that arise out of your discussion. Give thanks to God for meeting us in the middle of the messy, challenging moments, and bringing hope in unexpected ways.