

A Sleepless in Bethlehem@  
Ruth 3

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

Maeve Binchy wrote a short story about a couple on the eve of their wedding day. Bridal attendants, relatives, and other guests were arriving from out of town. After months of planning and expense, final details were all in order, and the big day was just hours away. Flowers had arrived, and the church looked lovely. The bride had only herself to prepare. She was looking forward to a long hot bath and a restful sleep.

And now this. Her fiancé, sitting across from her, was ashen-faced and fumbling for words. She could hardly believe her ears. He was backing out. There was nothing she could do. He just couldn't go forward. To save face, she persuaded him to let HER be the one who didn't show up for the wedding. Relieved that she was taking it so well, the young man agreed.

Next day, as promised, when the wedding march struck up, he solemnly took his place at the front of the church with his best man and the rector. The doors in the back swung open, and all eyes (including his) turned to look. There she was, coming down the aisle, perfectly at ease on her father's arm and as beautiful a bride as anyone could imagine.

The couple didn't discuss what happened until sometime later on their honeymoon, but the upshot was that she knew him better than he knew himself. The experience, no doubt, put him on notice that there was a good chance she'd outsmart him again in future situations where they didn't see eye to eye.

I know you all have been thinking about this question all week. Was it love at first sight for Boaz when he first saw Ruth? If it was, Boaz appears to be a bit of a sluggard as a suitor - slow in making his move.

From our story today, it appears that Boaz is outfoxed and outmaneuvered by two women who understand him better than he understands himself. Did they ambush him in the middle of the night to give him what he's wanting anyway? If so, it sounds like a Desperate Housewives episode to entrap an honorable man like Boaz.

In one of the most intriguing and also comical scenes in the Bible, Boaz, awakens in the middle of the night to discover a woman lying at his feet. No doubt it's an understatement to say he was jolted. There probably aren't words to describe his shock at the awful predicament he was in, and it would be worth a lot to have seen the look on his face.

Two months have past that now brings us to the end of the barley and wheat harvests. After this year's harvest, Boaz's quarterly reports are looking good. His accounts are in the black. His workers are paid, and he has even extended his hand to the poor. All season long, he has done everything according to the book. The threshing floor where he is sleeping is heaped with piles of winnowed grain - evidence of a successful crop, lots of hard work, and of God's good bounty. The famine that existed a short while ago that devastated the land, it is now in the past. Boaz is a grateful man. Ah, the well-deserved rest that comes to such a man. He has feasted merrily with his workers and is now slumbering peacefully on the threshing floor

(presumably with one eye open to guard his grain).

Suddenly out of nowhere is a silhouette of a woman next to him in the darkness. Boaz whispers hoarsely in the darkness, "Who are you?"

Before we continue we need to back up a little bit. Naomi realizes the importance of their relationship to Boaz. I'm sure Naomi hoped Boaz would take the initiative in establishing a relationship with Ruth that would eventually lead to marriage. Naomi, being the nervous mother-in-law, is sitting there each day wondering, "Why isn't Boaz making any moves towards Ruth?"

Perhaps he was being sensitive toward Ruth as a widow, not wishing to impose himself upon her until she was emotionally healed and ready to contemplate remarriage. Or perhaps Boaz was a typical man who needed a woman to tell him what he really needed.

Naomi decides to take matters into her own hands. 1. One day Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for?" If life follows the normal trajectory, there's a high likelihood that Ruth will outlive her Israelite mother-in-law. What will become of Ruth? A foreign widow, all alone in Bethlehem? Life may be difficult for them now, but without Naomi, difficulties will escalate for the Moabitess. Only a husband can give that "wing" of protection and security.

Naomi is showing HESED towards Ruth in wanting the very best for her. If Ruth marries Boaz, then Naomi will go to her grave in peace, knowing her daughter-in-law has found safe haven.

Obviously, after asking the rhetoric question to Ruth in verse one, Naomi, I'm sure, has a plan already in her mind.

Young men, it took me 50 yrs to learn this: "Whenever a woman, especially if it's your wife, asks a rhetoric question of you, you can rest assured she already knows what she wants and has it already planned out. Whatever you say it does not matter."

Naomi has it all planned out what needs to happen. The plan is, since Boaz is not making any advances here, she is going to take matters into her own hands to get this relationship going. Jump start the relationships.

For starters, usually the fathers and or the brothers negotiated marriage. There is no man to speak for Ruth. Even if there was a man to advocate on Ruth's behalf, she has no bargaining power at all  
\* no dowry, \* no social connections, \* no political advantages to bring to the table.

In Western thought, romance is considered to be the number one priority when it comes to marriage. In Naomi's day, marriages cemented strategic alliances for families. Based on the cultural standards for marriage in that day, Ruth was out of luck. Worst of all, she's a foreigner and has a history of barrenness. This all adds to a double - negative to her deficiencies. These obstacles do not deter Naomi. She's pretty gutsy.

Naomi in verse 2 asks the second rhetoric question, "Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours?" Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. The way Naomi phrases this suggests that Boaz is not simply a relative but the near kinsman who must fulfill the role she has in mind. What role is that? Boaz to be the Kinsman redeemer.

ANCIENT FAMILY LAWS is that in every Israelite family, two issues were paramount: \* the survival of the family name and \* the keeping family land in family hands. The Elimelech family ran into trouble on both counts. \* Famine drove them off their land, \* and the deaths of Elimelech and his two sons threaten the family with extinction. Mosaic law, however, carried provisions to save a dying family and to protect their ownership of their land.

There are two parts to this Mosaic Law: The levirate law addressed the situation where a man died without an heir. Under this law, his brother was required to marry and impregnate his widow. The son born from this union would carry forward the line of the deceased. It's a way to perpetuate the life and name of the deceased man. This is taken from Deuteronomy 25:5-10

The second aspect of the Kinship-Redeemer is the Hebrew word, goel, means protector. Leviticus 25:25-28. When a man fell onto hard times and was forced to sell his land, his nearest relative or Kinsman-redeemer was called to step in and purchase the land or buy it back from an outsider to keep his relative's property from coming under the ownership of someone outside their family or tribe. Both laws were costly and involved enormous sacrifice. What Naomi is saying to Ruth is that since Boaz is your Kinsman-redeemer, he has a moral and lawful responsibility to you.

Tonight I want you to go to the threshing floor to let him know.

Even though Boaz has helped Naomi and Ruth economically, he is not doing anything about the real crisis in the family created by the deaths of all the male members. Naomi is putting a big responsibility on Ruth.

Back to the story, the best threshing floors were located on top of a hill and done on a hard surface to keep the grain free from dirt and it's easier to sweep up the grain. It's always windier on top of a hill than down in the valley. The threshed grain was tossed in the air by a fork, and the wind would blow away the chaff allowing the heavier kernels of grain to fall to the floor.

Naomi begins to lay out her plan to Ruth. Verse 3 & 4: **A** Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

The first thing that Naomi suggested is for Ruth to look her best. That is to wash up, put on perfume, (anoint yourself with olive oil) and put your best clothes. Working in the fields, in a hot climate and the lack of modern style deodorants can create a sweaty smell. Naomi said put on your best clothes. Some think Ruth was dressing as a bride. Leave it to the commentators to say, that could not be the case, it would have repulsed rather than attract Boaz.

Daniel Block, New American Commentary, in his commentary does make an interesting point. Naomi is advising Ruth to end her period of mourning by removing the symbols and garments of widowhood. and dress in such a way that shows that she is over her widowhood and is ready to return to normal life, including marriage.

Naomi directs Ruth to go to the threshing floor in the darkness, wait until Boaz finishes eating, and note

carefully where he lies down for the night. It would be disastrous if in the darkness Ruth approaches the wrong man. This is an extremely gusty move, to sneak up on Boaz while he is sleeping, uncover his feet or legs, and then lay down herself.

It seems that in this cultural context, at winnowing time, the threshing floor often became a place of illicit sexual behavior. Realizing that the men, who are now in a good mood, would spend the night in the fields next to the piles of grain, prostitutes would go out to them and offer their services.

Ruth is taking a huge risk here because when Boaz awakes and discovers his feet uncovered and a woman lying nearby, he could interpret this situation in at least two ways. \* Boaz, in his grogginess, could wake up and interpret Ruth=s actions as those of a common prostitute and willingly accept Ruth=s gestures and take advantage of her. \* Or he could wake up and interrupt Ruth=s actions as those of a prostitute and shoo her off as an immoral woman with whom he will have nothing to do with. Both of these responses would have defeated Naomi=s purpose; far from securing Ruth=s welfare, this poor Moabite woman would have returned home broken in body and bruised in spirit.

Naomi=s scheme is delicate and dangerous, charged with sexual overtones. Men, what would you think if a woman who bathes, puts on perfume, and then in the dark of night goes out and uncover your feet? Given the spiritual climate in the period of the judges, an average Israelite man would have welcomed the night visit of a woman. That is what Naomi tells Ruth to do, to lie down next to him and uncover his feet.

Now when you read Biblical commentaries, they are not the most exciting things to read, especially the more scholarly ones. Daniel Block, *New American Commentary*, goes into detail about the possible meaning of the 3 Hebrew words: uncover, feet, and lie. When I began to read that section, it peaked my interest. Who said the Bible is boring? I=m just going to give you a taste of what he said. See me afterwards if you want to borrow the commentary. You must be at least 18 years of age or older.

The word uncover, it=s root meaning is the uncovering of someone=s nakedness. The word feet can mean lower limbs which can include feet, legs and thighs. The word lie is often used to denote sexual relations. What really went on that night? How much did Ruth uncover? Was it just his feet, legs, thigh, or more. Did she uncover herself in anyway?

Carolyn James writes, Although Hebrew scholars I consulted tend to think that Ruth simply uncovered Boaz=s feet or legs and waited for the cool night air to awaken him, we simply do not know exactly what she did. But here=s one thing we know. Naomi=s intentions are upright and her whole purpose is to secure Ruth=s safety, not to jeopardize her reputation and is sending her to a man she has very reason to believe will not exploit the situation to his own advantage but will receive her daughter-in-law with respect and honor.

She goes on to say, We, also know that Ruth and Boaz have both exhibited unusual levels of godly character, and we expect no less from either of them here.

Boaz begins to feel the cool air and wakes up. How does Boaz respond? Verse 9-11: "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." Boaz shivers in the cold, stirs, and wakes to find a woman at his feet. This is the moment when Ruth surprises everyone. Instead of waiting as Naomi intended, Ruth speaks out. Ruth identifies herself

and then instructs Boaz to spread the corner of his garment over her, because he is a close relative.

A literal translation of that is, to spread one=s wing over. . Ruth is using the same language that Boaz used 2 months ago when he first met her. Ruth is requesting that Boaz take her under his wing and assume responsibility for her security. In common Hebrew usage, for a man to spread one=s wings, garment over a woman is an idiom for marriage. Ruth is no beating around the bush, but makes it very clear that she is not demanding sex, but for Boaz to step up to the plate and marry her because he is a Kinsmen-Redeemer. In her short little speech she lectures Boaz on his obligations to her. W00! Who is this woman? You stand back in awe wondering what has possessed her.

Daniel Block writes, Here is a servant demanding that the boss marry her, a Moabite, making the demand of an Israelite, a woman making the demand of a man, a poor person making the demand of a rich man. She is not appealing to him as a destitute widow, but confronts him with his legal responsibilities as a near relative of Elimelech. This whole scheme that Naomi placed on Ruth from the beginning seemed like a hopeless gamble. But it worked!

This is what Boaz says, 10 "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. 11 And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Instead of shaming and driving Ruth away into the night, as one might expect, he praises her actions, calls on Yahweh to bless her for what she has done.

Here is a woman who has been barren, impoverished, foreign widow, - worthless in society=s eyes. He could have treated her as Moabite trash, Boaz now places the highest possible value on her by treating her as a person who he is contemplating in marrying. This is a stunning moment in biblical record.

Boaz foreshadowed how Jesus would one day reach out to women who were rejected by their communities to commission and empower them to serve him. The Samaritan woman, and Mary Magdalen are just a few prominent examples.

At the end of verse 10, Boaz says your kindness, Hesed, is greater than what you showed earlier. Why? You could have run off with a younger man, a man who is in the prime of his strength and masculinity.

As I said last week the word, Hesed is used only three times but the whole book is soaked in it. The Hesed that Boaz showed to Naomi and Ruth is now being shown to him.

You would think that they would get married the next day. They live happily ever after. Every love story has a monkey wrench thrown into it. Relationships never go as smoothly as you would like for them to go. This one is no different. In verse 12 Boaz drops a bomb shell. Verse 12, Although, it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Boaz is forced by his own integrity to tell Ruth that he is indeed A kinsman-redeemer, but not THE kinsman redeemer.

There is a man who is closer relative to Ruth than he is who has prior claim. The existence of a nearer kinsman adds a whole new layer of suspense to the story.

Instead of trying to manipulate the situation or go behind someone=s back, Boaz knows that he needs to address this situation tomorrow morning at the city gate with the other kinsman-redeemer. This shows his

incredible character.

Let me make it clear, I believe strongly that Boaz isn't a victim of underhanded schemes, manipulation, or entrapment here. At this point he knows exactly what he is doing and he is now planning out in his mind what he needs to do to make this marriage happen.

It was too late for Ruth to return to Bethlehem without risking both of their reputations. So Boaz instructs Ruth to lie down and sleep until morning.

I doubt if either Boaz or Ruth got any sleep at all, with so much on their minds and the uncertainties of the next day. Without a doubt Boaz's mind probably was preoccupied with plans for resolving the case in the morning and anxieties over whether he would be able to gain the right to Ruth's hand

Before dawn the next morning, before anyone else was up, Boaz made sure that Ruth got away without being discovered or recognized by the rest of the workers. They both had a reputation to preserve. But before she left he sent her off with another substantial gift of food. Scholars estimate that it ran anywhere from 60-100 pounds. Scholars feel that Boaz sent this gift to Naomi as a sign of good faith, that he determined to carry through with his promise to gain the right to Ruth. In fact, since Naomi was Ruth's legal guardian he may even have intended the grain as a *ḥōhar* the bride price paid at the time of betrothal

Back at the homestead, if Ruth and Boaz had been deprived of sleep that night, no doubt the same was true of Naomi. The one who had concocted this scheme probably lay awake all night wondering how her daughter-in-law was faring. Did it backfire? Was she taken advantage of? Is Boaz willing to be the Kinsmen-Redeemer?

You can imagine the excitement of Naomi when she heard Ruth's footsteps. As Ruth explains everything that happened to Naomi, Boaz is already heading for Bethlehem's gate, where he will keep his word. 18 Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today." Wait, which normally means *ʾāto sit, to dwell.* Today we would say, *ʾāto sit tight.*

Isn't that the hardest thing to do is to wait. Sit tight. Wait upon God.

Whenever I try to rush things and hurry things along, I often get in God's way. To wait means you are surrendering your rights to try to control the situation and letting God be in control. Naomi and Ruth have to wait for Boaz. Boaz has to wait for the next kinsmen to come to the city gate.

-We are going to have to wait until next week to see what happens?

Postscript - The purpose of posting this sermon is for personal Bible Study and resource material for pastors.

Resource materials:

Carolyn Custis James, [The Gospel of Ruth](#) (Zondervan 2008)

Daniel Block, [The New American Commentary](#) (B&H Publishing Group 1998)

J.A. Motyer, [The Message of Ruth](#), (Inter-varsity Press, 1983)

