

Behind the Scene
Ruth 2
Sermon by Dan Schrock
August 17, 2014

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ²And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter."³So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

⁴Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you." They answered, "The Lord bless you."⁵Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?"⁶The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab."⁷She said, "Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers." So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment."⁸Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn."¹⁰Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?"¹¹But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹²May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"¹³Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."¹⁴At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

¹⁷So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. ¹⁹Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."²⁰Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin."²¹Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" ²²Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field."²³So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law. (NRSV)

I

A while back I was listening to a man vent his frustrations about God. "I get so frustrated trying to relate to God!" this man exclaimed. "God is much harder to

communicate with than anyone else I know. When I want to communicate with people, I go and visit them, phone them, email them, or Skype them. We can talk and listen to each other face-to-face. Over the phone, we can hear each other's voices and have a back-and-forth conversation. We can get in touch by email or instant messaging. I get immediate, sensory feedback in all these relationships. Trying to communicate with God isn't like that at all. I can talk all day at God, but I never hear anything back from God, at least not audibly. I can't see God. I can't touch God. I can't smell God or taste God. Why does it have to be this way? I want more feedback! Why does God make it so hard to be in relationship?"

My friend has a point. Being in a relationship with God is not like being in a relationship with human beings. God can look into our eyes, but we can't look back into God's eyes. God hears every word we say, but we might live our whole lives without ever hearing God speak audibly into our ears. I, for example, have never seen the face of God, nor have I ever heard God speak aloud into my ears. As a consequence, many people feel that God is hard to have a relationship with. Many people feel that God is distant and mysterious.

II

If this describes your experience of God, then the book of Ruth is for you. In many other books of the Bible, God speaks directly to human beings. In Genesis, for example, God and Abraham have several conversations. In Exodus, God and Moses often talk with each other, first at the burning bush and then later on Mt. Sinai and in the tent of meeting. In Job, God speaks directly to Job without interruption for four straight chapters. In prophetic books such as Jeremiah, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah, "the word of the LORD" comes directly to the prophet, who then turns around and speaks it to the people of God. In Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus himself speaks as the Son of God,

and in the elegant phrasing of the gospel of John, Jesus is the very Word of God who has become flesh and lived among us. In all of these biblical books, God speaks directly to human beings. Apparently they can hear God audibly with their ears. To many of the people in these books, God feels close at hand, immediate, and available.

But not in the book of Ruth. In the book of Ruth, God never speaks to anyone. God is silent. Moreover, God never appears to anyone. There are no grand visions or fancy dreams in this book, no magical appearances or apparitions. Yes, the characters in the story sometimes talk about God, but that's very different than hearing directly from God. A great example of this comes in 2:4, when Boaz comes out to the field from Bethlehem. He greets his farm workers with the words, "The Lord be with you," upon which they answer, "The Lord bless you." This sounds very much like a standard greeting that Boaz and his employees might use with each other every morning. It's a little like the polite response we make when someone sneezes. We say, "God bless you!"

People refer to God twice more in chapter 2. In verse 12, Boaz kindly offers Ruth a blessing which also sounds a little like a prayer. He says, "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel!" Eight verses later, in verse 20, Naomi says something similar. After hearing all the nice things Boaz did for Ruth that day, Naomi exclaims to Ruth, "Blessed be he [Boaz] by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" To my ears this too sounds like a cross between a blessing for Boaz and a prayer to God.

So yes, people in the story do talk about God, and some of their God talk edges toward prayer. Even so, God never says anything in this book. God steadfastly remains silent.

III

Isn't this how most of us experience God? In general, God does not speak to us directly. For most of us God is silent most of the time. For whatever reasons—reasons known only to God—chooses not to say very much. To be sure, we have the Bible which we sometimes call the Word of God. I value the Bible highly. As far as I'm concerned, the Bible is one of the most valuable things we have. It has the capacity to inspire us, guide us, and compel us. God does speak to us through the Bible! God has spoken to me so often through the Bible that I couldn't even estimate how many times it's happened, but it's thousands of times at least. And yet honestly, it takes work to understand the Bible. Some passages are really tough to interpret. It would be a lot easier, maybe, if God would just speak to us directly into our ears. But that's not what God usually chooses to do.

More typically, God comes to us in hidden ways, beyond the obvious. This is exactly what God does in the book of Ruth. God may have nothing to say, but that doesn't mean God is absent. Far from it. God is very much present and active in this story, in at least three ways.

First, God invites Ruth into the family of Jewish faith. Ruth is a Moabite widow. From the viewpoint of good upright Jewish people, she's not an ideal candidate at all to become a Jew. She's a foreigner who's spent the first decades of her life worshipping Moabite gods. Moreover she's a woman, and now, a widow besides. Hardly what the people of that time and place called an important person. Yet something stirs in the heart of Ruth to cling to Naomi. That something we can call God. "Where you go, I will go," she tells her mother-in-law. "Your people shall be my people and your God my God" (1:16). It is God who works in the heart of Ruth to devote herself to her widowed mother-in-law. It is God who entices Ruth into the Jewish family of faith.

Second, God is present to Naomi in the person of Ruth. Naomi thinks God abandoned her. She even gives herself a new name, Mara, meaning bitter, as in God “has dealt bitterly with me” (1:20). But God has not abandoned Naomi—it’s just that right now she isn’t seeing the ways in which God is caring for her. She ignores the wonderful woman who is standing right beside her, who has just pledged loyalty to her. Ruth walks her talk and continues to express the presence of God to Naomi. When they arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi seems to be trapped in some sort of depression, because she sits around doing nothing. Ruth, however, immediately gets to work gleaning in the fields—and her industrious work helps to care for Naomi.

Third, God acts through Boaz to save Naomi and Ruth from hunger. We usually think of salvation in spiritual terms, but this salvation is very much a physical one. Boaz tends to the little physical details. He invites Ruth to stay in his field. He orders the young men not to molest her. He has his workers pull out some heads of grain and drop them on the ground so Ruth can pick them up. He feeds her bread and sour wine. She works hard; but he helps to make her work productive.

In these ways, through these people, God motivates, feeds, blesses, cares, and rescues. God does these things indirectly, obliquely, at an angle. God works behind the scenes.

IV

Behind the scene. That is where you will often find God. Don’t expect a lot of direct speech from God, because you’re not likely to get it. Instead look around you, at the people you already know and love. What is God up to in their lives? Where is God acting through other people? That behind-the-scene looking is where you will usually find God.

Alternatively, who is God setting in your path for whom you might become the tangible presence of God? For whom can you care? To whom can you convey something of God's mercy? How does your life point behind the scenes to God?