

A Search for Security

Ruth 3

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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³Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” ⁵She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

⁶So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. ⁷When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. ⁸At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! ⁹He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” ¹⁰He said, “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. ¹¹And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. ¹²But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. ¹³Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.”

¹⁴So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.” ¹⁵Then he said, “Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.” So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. ¹⁶She came to her mother-in-law, who said, “How did things go with you, my daughter?” Then she told her all that the man had done for her, ¹⁷saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, ‘Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” ¹⁸She replied, “Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.”

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, the overarching concern is for economic security, and its close cousin, food security. When their husbands die in chapter 1, Naomi and Ruth lose the income their husbands had brought into the household. With fewer economic resources, Naomi and Ruth are now more vulnerable to poverty and hunger. Their present is dicey; their future is precarious.

In their search for greater economic security, Naomi and Ruth agree to leave the land of Moab and emigrate to the land of Israel, where Naomi owns a small plot of land near Bethlehem (4:3). This plot of land is their only significant asset in the world. So off to Israel these two women go.

When they finally arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi and Ruth are hungry. They have virtually no money for food; and while Naomi does own that plot of land, dirt is not something you can eat. Therefore at the beginning of chapter two, their immediate crisis is the very real possibility of starvation. They need something to eat. Now. And they will need more food for the rest of this week and for the week after that and for the long succession of weeks after that. Where and how to get all this food? How will they live? How will they survive?

Their situation is dire, so they must act quickly. You would expect that Naomi would take charge of this situation. After all, this is her home village. She knows lots of people here in Bethlehem, and they know her. Moreover, she's the older of the two women; and as the mother-in-law, she should be the one taking charge, strategizing plans, making contacts, and getting this problem solved. But she inexplicably does nothing. She procrastinates, and we don't know why. Is she trapped in depression? Is she in a dark night? Do her problems seem so overwhelming that she's immobilized? Whatever the case, Naomi dawdles.

In chapter two, it is Ruth who takes action. Ruth seems to realize that Naomi isn't going to get the job done and that if their precarious situation is going to improve, she, Ruth, will have to make it happen. However, as admirable as Ruth's determination is, her actions are risky. By going out alone to glean barley in the fields, she could very easily be molested. Remember the facts. First, she is an unmarried woman, probably in her twenties, likely attractive enough to catch the eyes of young men. Second, she is an immigrant, a foreigner, a Moabite, without rights or legal standing. Some scoundrel or a young man, even a gang of them, could do whatever they want to her and probably get away with it. Fortunately, she ends up gleaning in the fields of Boaz, a man of unimpeachable integrity, who protects her. He suggests that she stay in his fields, then orders his young men to

behave themselves and leave her alone (2:8, 16, cf. 2:22). In his fields she will find sexual security as well as food security. For the moment, all is well.

But when chapter three begins, a new crisis emerges. Both the barley harvest and the wheat harvest are over, which means there is no more food for Ruth to glean in the fields. What will she and Naomi eat now? Ancient Israel had no food stamp program, no economic assistance for widows, and no unemployment benefits. Starvation and the broader question of economic security are once again staring them in the face. Once again their condition is desperate.

It is at this point that Naomi finally takes action. For the last two months, she has been passive. Ruth has been working hard out in the fields, so perhaps Naomi has been cooking their meals and keeping the tiny house they are living in. Other than that, she has done nothing but sit around.

Suddenly that changes. To give Naomi the benefit of the doubt, maybe during the last two months she has been watching, praying, thinking, and strategizing about what to do after the barley and wheat harvests are over. In any case, she now has a plan for what needs to happen next. It is a bold, risky plan, although one that just might work.

Her plan is for Ruth to seduce Boaz. She has been watching these two interact with each other, suspects a little romance has sparked between them, and intends to help the process along. Her plan is for Ruth to “wash and anoint” herself and put on her “best clothes” (3:3). In other words, she wants Ruth to make herself look and smell good, to become as physically appealing as possible. When you’ve prepared yourself, she tells Ruth, go down to the threshing floor, and after Boaz is asleep from his food and wine, sneak up to

him, “uncover his feet and lie down,” and do whatever he tells you to do (v. 4). If Naomi can bring these two together in marriage, then her and Ruth’s worries about economic security are over, because Boaz is a moderately wealthy man.

This chapter has at least six kinds of sexual innuendo that would have been apparent to readers of Hebrew. First, threshing floors were sometimes the location for extra-marital affairs with a prostitute, as in Hosea 9:1. Second, Boaz’s inebriated condition recalls the incestuous relationship between the drunken Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19:30-38, which resulted in the birth of Moab, the ancestor of Ruth. Third, Naomi’s advice in verse 3 to “not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking,” can be a euphemism for sex, as it is in Genesis 4. The verb “know” can have a double meaning. Fourth, Naomi’s advice for Ruth to “lie down” can suggest sexual intercourse, as in Genesis 19:33-35, 30:15-16, and 38:26. Fifth, the euphemism “uncover” can carry sexual overtones when used in conjunction with other words like “nakedness” or “feet.” And sixth, the word “feet” in verse 4 is etymologically related to the Hebrew word for “foot,” which is sometimes a euphemism for the penis or the vulva in at least six different passages in the Old Testament.¹ None of this means that Naomi is telling Ruth to have sex with Boaz, but she is telling Ruth to press her relationship with Boaz a little further to see what happens.

This plan carries significant risk. What if someone in the village sees this and jumps to the conclusion that Ruth is a prostitute? If that happens, no man in the village will want to marry her. Even worse, what if Boaz acts dishonorably? What if he takes advantage of Ruth’s vulnerability, has intercourse with her, makes her pregnant, and then abandons her? If that happens, Ruth and Naomi will be even worse off because they’ll have three mouths to feed rather than just two.

¹ Dueteronomy 28:25; Judges 3:24; 1 Samuel 24:3; 2 Kings 18:27; Isaiah 7:20; and Ezekiel 16:25.

Despite the risks, Naomi and Ruth press ahead. People in desperate situations will take desperate actions in an effort to save themselves.

The plan works. When Boaz wakes up from his sleep, Ruth asks him to “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (v. 9). This is a clear-cut invitation to marriage, as in Ezekiel 16:8 and Deuteronomy 22:30 and 27:20. True to her forthright, assertive nature, Ruth is asking Boaz to marry her.

Boaz says yes! He will indeed marry her, as long as the other man in the village who’s more closely related doesn’t want to marry her instead. And true to his honorable nature, Boaz does not take advantage of the situation. So far as we can tell, he and Ruth do not have sex.

There is not yet a wedding or even a firm engagement. So far this is merely a tentative engagement, pending what the man who is closer kin decides to do. Even so, Ruth and Naomi are well on their way to economic security.

Perhaps you’ve noticed that I have not yet mentioned God in this sermon. That’s because chapter 3 doesn’t mention God either. God is here, alright, but not in any visible or explicit way. We might guess that God works through Naomi’s inventive and daring plan, through Ruth’s seductive request for marriage, and through Boaz’s integrity and resolve.

As such the story invites us to consider our own lives. Where has God worked through our daring plans, our integrity, our resolve? How has God operated through other people in our life, but behind the scenes, to care for our economic security? What gracious, loving actions of God do we want to name? What stories do we want to tell?