

Ruth 3

If you didn't already know how this story ends and you haven't already read to the end, how can you stand it? It's like when an episode of a TV series ends on a cliffhanger...and you actually have to wait for the next episode instead of binge watching.

Also, there's a bit of weirdness here that we should address.

If you've been following the story from the beginning, you know that Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi are both widows without sons. That makes them very vulnerable in a society whose primary economic security rests on a male head of household.

Ruth has been gleaning from Boaz's barley field – that's like God's welfare system for the poor and the immigrants. It gives a way for the poor to support themselves by gathering up what the field owners were to leave behind for them.

But it's not the best long-term solution. In that culture and that time, for Naomi's and Ruth's lives to really take root and grow, Ruth needs to be married. So Naomi hatches a plot.

Naomi's plot and this little scene on the threshing room floor have definite sexual overtones and some interpreters have run pretty wild with the scene.

To understand what Naomi is doing here we're going to introduce another Hebrew word. Goel. Goel is translated as redeemer, or kinsman redeemer.

We don't really get the full picture until the last chapter, but apparently Naomi or maybe more likely her now deceased husband had owned land that had to be sold because of their situation. A redeemer is the male next of kin. He is entitled to buy back the land to keep it in the original family.

In this case, there's an add on. Redeeming the land means also redeeming Ruth – marrying her to keep the family line intact.

AND...this phrase spread your cloak over your servant is a reference to marriage. This is a marriage proposal. Ruth actually proposed to Boaz.

But it turns out there is another relative who has first dibs. It seems like a crazy system to us. But, it was what they knew.

We already have seen who Boaz is. He has shown great hesed...loving kindness...to Ruth.

If this were a movie, we'd probably see signs that maybe he was drawn to her in ways beyond just compassion and kindness. But he is also a man with integrity and he'll give this other relative his fair due.

Naomi has seen enough to know that Boaz will absolutely do the right thing by Ruth. And that's where we're left at the end of today's reading.

So what should we take from this reading today? Again, we are seeing God's work unfold through the work of people.

But the people aren't passive. Naomi doesn't wait to see whether or not Ruth finds a husband. She guides Ruth to take things into her own hands. And Ruth doesn't actually wait for Boaz to make the first move. She takes the lead here. She tells Boaz what to do!

Obviously, God is perfectly capable of miracles. But most often, God's work is through people. We can pray about any situation. But often the answer to our prayer is discerning what God wants us to do.

Maybe you've heard the old joke. There's a big flood in a certain village. A very pious Christian man stands on his porch, praying earnestly as the waters rise. A neighbor comes up in his canoe and says get in, I'll get you to safety.

The man answers, no God will save me. He keeps praying, but the waters rise even more. He climbs up to his roof. A villager in a motor boat comes by and says get in, I'll get you to safety. But the man says no, God will save me.

Then the levee breaks. The man scrambles to the chimney top. The National Guard comes with a helicopter and they shout get in. The man says no, God will save me.

And he drowns. When he's face to face with God, he asks, why did you let me drown! God answers, what did you want from me? I sent you two boats and a helicopter!

Granted, in some situations there truly doesn't seem to be anything we can do but pray. And regardless whether there is or isn't, we are always called to pray.

But we are also called to act.

The trick is knowing what we're supposed to do and if where we think we are being led is the right direction.

Discernment is a part of this whole scene. This is a really bold move on Ruth's part. Naomi is asking a lot of her. What if this is the wrong thing to do?

How do we know Naomi and Ruth aren't just trying to scam a guy with a decent livelihood? How does Boaz know that? How do we know this was God's work?

Sometimes discernment seems like a sort of mysterious, mystic process... And there's an element of that – the sense that God is nudging you to do something doesn't really have a completely logical basis. So feeling and intuition do play a role.

On the other hand, relying only on our own personal beliefs and feelings can lead us to all sorts of wrong ideas – like the guy in the flood.

Discernment first happens from a position of connection to God. Naomi may have spent years of her adult life in Moab, but she no doubt knew the God of Israel.

For us, that means discernment is guided by a life of faith...prayer, scripture reading, worship, conversations within the Christian community. That life of faith helps us to see that God's overarching purpose is life and shalom for all of creation.

If an action we think might be God's will is actually going to hurt someone, we're likely on the wrong track. Even if we think it's someone who deserves it.

On the other hand, if our discernment leads us to an action that will lead to life and growth and flourishing of ourselves and the community, it's a clue that we're on the right track. After all, that is God's overarching purpose for creation.

If this all pans out for Ruth and Boaz, Naomi and Ruth's family can grow and flourish...and strengthen the community.

Next, in the case of Naomi and Ruth, the law given by God to order society did actually give her a framework for what could be. The law about the kinsman redeemer helps us know that this isn't something far out of bounds. It actually fits with the community's norms.

So sometimes something as mundane as rules and laws can help. Just a caveat. There have been many unjust laws in human history and that's a different story. But that isn't what's happening here, even though it's weird in our eyes.

And then, this story acknowledges that God's will doesn't necessarily boil down to only one right answer. God desires the flourishing of Naomi and Ruth's family, of Boaz's family, and of the whole community.

But it turns out there might be a different specific answer. There's this other kinsman redeemer. We'll find out more next week.

And then finally, it all goes back to our word of the month – hesed. Steadfast love and faithfulness.

Boaz sends Ruth out with six measures of barley. I'm not really sure how much that is, but Boaz has already far exceeded what the law asked of him.

As we go through this story, the barley really comes to represent the overflowing of God's steadfast love and faithfulness into Naomi and Ruth and Boaz and from each of them to the others. Hesed, like the harvest abounds.

It's ultimately this steadfast love and faithfulness, this lovingkindness, that is going to be the salvation, not only of Ruth and Naomi, but of the whole world.

And that of course is always our call too in our dealings with another. As Jesus himself will say centuries later, as God as showed steadfast love and faithfulness to you, so you should love one another.