**13th March 2016**

**Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17**

A few weeks ago we had an extra day this year: February 29th, the leap day of leap year. The custom is that on a leap day a woman can propose marriage to a man. One day in four years a woman can do this according to our customs. In this age of greater equality I don’t hear many women complaining about this? The female of the species seems to be very selective about the things they’d like equality on. They seem quite happy to let the men be all awkward vulnerable and nervous in asking a girl out and proposing marriage. They are not fighting for equality on this task.

When I proposed to Debbie it was all a bit of a disaster. I had taken her back to one of our favourite spots, Newstead Abbey near Nottingham. We sat on a felled tree looking out on a gorgeous field and woods and I said ‘what do you think about marriage’. I know it was a bit weasel words and edging my bets. ‘I’d love to marry you’ Debbie replied cutting to the chase. Then yours truly bottled it: ‘Oh I’m not sure I’m asking you to marry me. Well maybe I am. Err, yes, shall we get married?’ There was no bended knee moment, here’s a ring, soulful eyes and violins playing. I did however have a small bottle of champagne hidden in my coat pocket just to reassure her that I had meant a proposal- it just came out all wrong!

We continue the story of Ruth today. This week we look at how the women did not wait for the man to pop the question but took their own initiative to secure their future happiness. This sermon carries an eighteen certificate; it contains adult material and scenes of a sexual nature. You have been warned.

Just to recap: The book of Ruth begins as a story of Naomi. Naomi and her husband Elimelech flee Bethlehem – which means “house of bread” – because of famine. They settle in Moab, on the east side of the Dead Sea.

Years later, Naomi’s husband and sons die; she and her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, are in a very vulnerable position. Naomi receives word that there is food again in Bethlehem and sets out for home, insisting that Orpah and Ruth return to their families. Ruth’s persistent refusal to leave Naomi’s side begins the turn toward renewal and transformation. Naomi and all of Israel will find a new future through Ruth.

This story is grounded in the theme of “turnings.” The Hebrew verb *shub* occurs twelve times in Ruth 1:1–18. At times, *shub* simply indicates a physical change in direction (1:15). Naomi also uses it to describe her perception of God’s rejection of her (1:13). Most accurate translation is that with the death of their husbands Naomi sees it as though *the hand of the Lord has turned against her.*

When we find ourselves in distress it is understandable to feel that the world and even God is against us. But the God found in the book of Ruth is primarily a God of blessing who is quietly at work to bring good out of this disaster. By the time this book ends, all sorts of unexpected turns and reversals will come.

When Naomi blesses Ruth and Orpah (1:8), she uses the Hebrew word *hesed*. *Hesed* expresses the love, loyalty, and commitment that one partner has for the other. Such loyalty exceeds legal requirements or duties. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *hesed* typically describes God’s nature in covenant with Israel. However, beginning with her vow to Naomi (1:16–17), Ruth is established as an example and source of *hesed* in this story. Such loyalty will eventually restore Naomi’s faith. So Ruth and Naomi stick together and return to Bethlehem.

Naomi and Ruth were vulnerable widows looking for bread. Their journey brings God’s gifts of community and companionship; they are changed, as are those around them. When we are desperate – what a blessing to have people who will walk alongside us. What a blessing to know God is with us. When we are aware of that we have the hope that things may turn around.

Ruth chose to join her life’s journey with Naomi’s, forming an unlikely alliance for survival. In today’s scripture, these two widows navigate a decisive turning point. The stage for this account is set in the second chapter of Ruth, which tells of an encounter between Ruth and Naomi’s relative, Boaz. Ruth 2:20 identifies Boaz as “nearest kin.” The Hebrew word used here is *goel*. Elsewhere translated as “redeemer,” *goel* is a family member who is supposed to restore something that another family member has lost because of debt or poverty.

As Ruth 3 begins, Naomi and Ruth plan what they might do for the sake of their future security. They are both widows and widows in those ancient societies were very vulnerable if they had no men to look after them. The men so far in this story haven’t taken the initiative to look after them so Naomi and Ruth are going to take the initiative to look after themselves.

Now ladies, I don’t know what your mother told you about how to find a man but Naomi’s advice is straight out of the tabloids!

In 3:3, Naomi proposes action filled with double meanings. She tells Ruth that Boaz will be winnowing barley down at the threshing floor. She should bathe and anoint herself with perfume and get dressed up and go down there but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

“Do not make yourself *known…”* uses a verb that can also mean sexual intimacy (Genesis 4:1) think of Adam and Eve knowing each other!. “Threshing floor” has an association with sexual activity (Hosea 9:1). When the men had brought the harvest in they would eat and drink and get merry and the prostitutes, many of whom were widows because they had few other options for getting money to survive, would go down to the threshing floor with their perfume and fine dresses and get to know some men. Is Naomi suggesting that Ruth play the whore?

To dress yourself up in this way could mean making it look as if you are a bride on her wedding day, but it could mean trying to be seductive.

Naomi then says to Ruth that when Boaz lies down uncover his feet. “Feet” can be a euphemism in Hebrew for genitals. The translators of the Bible have always veered for the respectable and polite understanding of the word. Literally it could be translated as ‘uncovering one’s nakedness and was a euphemism for having sex with someone.

And then Naomi’s final advice after she has done all that is lie back (think of England – or Moab) and he will tell you what to do!

Honestly --- Mother in laws!

What is Naomi asking Ruth to do? To compromise Boaz and force him to marry her? To trick him into a marriage that his respectability would normally prevent him from contemplating? Whatever her thinking it is an extremely risky plan. She is asking Ruth to behave like a prostitute. She says she is seeking security for Ruth, but this is a funny way of going about it!

If a man wakes up in the middle of the night and finds a woman lying next to him, he could hardly be blamed for thinking that she is offering herself to him, though he would be wise to remember that accepting the offer might mean he will have a hard time avoiding marrying her. To put it another way, in this ancient culture, sleeping with an unattached woman might imply a marriage commitment. As far as we know, in Israel at that time, there was no such thing as a marriage service or registrar of marriages. So even if Ruth is offering herself to Boaz sexually, she might seem by that act to be proposing and not merely propositioning.

There is risk of offence for the sake of survival. Ruth follows Naomi’s counsel. She risked being seen as a whore and of offending Boaz. But she takes the initiative to secure her future.

Earlier Boaz had talked about her seeking protection under the skirt of God. She is pointing out that human life works on the basis of our also finding protection under the skirts of another human being. That is what marriage involves. Yet Ruth’s going on to refer to his being her kinsman redeemer reflects the way a particular obligation to take another person under the wings of his protection applies to Boaz, with his position in the community.

Making herself look nice, like going on a date, shows she is not merely appealing to his sense of moral and social obligation. She wants to be someone he is attracted to as well as someone he is under obligation to. It is another indication of the way marriage customs, that are very different from those of the urbanized West, do not preclude sexual attraction and sexual love. We often think that arranged marriages are loveless – which is not always the case and more often than not both partners do their best to make things work. In any given situation they take the initiative to make things work for the best.

I don’t know if you are interested in your family history? Often when people start looking into the past they find some surprises and often some shocking details. Those they have idolized or heard good stories about may not turn out to be so perfect and their lives are often more complicated or colourful then previously realized. You may have thought your family was quite respectable only to find out it was not.

One of my relatives, who died 40 years ago- was one of eleven children. She was not the youngest but she was the last to get married. The story goes that she got worried that she would be left on the shelf and in the desperately poor 1920s in working class Burnley – think Coronation Street except with cobbles and clogs – it was a pitiful position to be in. So she took the initiative to do something about it.

She tried to get friendly with a fellow weaver at the mill where she worked – everyone worked in the mill in Burnley in those days. One night, so the story goes, she got him drunk and got him into bed and ended up pregnant. In the days when being pregnant outside of wedlock was a shameful catastrophe for both man and woman, but more so the woman, the so called shot gun wedding took place. This all ties in because the date of the wedding was only seven months before the date of the birth of their daughter. The marriage wasn’t a happy one, but in those days, couples stuck together, as divorce was equally shameful and women always came off worse. My relative was just grateful and never spoke a bad word about her husband. Survival was the name of the game and she survived. Her name was Ruth too.

But this story of Ruth is different because it is a genuine love story. Ruth and Boaz are mutually attracted to each other. Ruth has taken the initiative but Boaz will also have to take the initiative to make their marriage happen.

In any decent romantic film however there have to be threats to whether the couple do end up together; otherwise the movie will end too quickly. Here the plot device to maintain suspense is the existence of another kinsman who has the same social and moral obligations as Boaz and has first rights to take on Ruth, Naomi and the family land. But Boaz does a bit of dealing and points out the risks this person may take on in having Ruth as a wife and Naomi as a mother in-law and thus scares him off. The craftiness of Boaz seals the deal. Love will find a way.

To cut the story short Boaz acts with honour as *goel* (“next of kin,” “one who redeems”) and marries Ruth. Jesus of course is also described as our Redeemer the one who saves us and rescues us from sin and death. Next week palm Sunday we will start to reflect on this. His act on the cross is comparable to Boaz who rescues Naomi and Ruth from their poverty and desperation.

Ruth and Boaz have a child. The scripture says God gives conception (4.13).

Throughout the book of Ruth, Naomi and Ruth are models of persistence and loyalty. As the narrative closes, we learn how their relationship expands into a larger community of women. These women recognize the child’s importance to Naomi. “He will renew your life and sustain you in old age” (4:15). “Renew” is a translation of the Hebrew *shub*, that word of “turning” used throughout the book of Ruth. The women of Bethlehem, not the father, nor the mother, name the child Obed.

A story of widows who have no living children becomes a story of birth. A struggle to survive becomes the means by which God restores hope to these women and to Israel’s unborn generations. God sets into motion a promise –through Ruth, the Moabite – for in her line David will eventually be born and then eventually the Son of David, Jesus of Nazareth will come to redeem the world.

The book of Ruth affirms that God works through surprising people and in unexpected ways in order to bring restoration to God’s people.

For centuries translators and interpreters of the Bible have portrayed Ruth as a model daughter in-law, indeed the ideal woman, humble, obedient, submissive, and deferential. They have made her into the character they have wanted her to be. But if we look at the story with open eyes, we will see it protests against such stereotyping. Ruth is determined, clever woman, who takes responsibility for her future, a passionate woman who is remarkable in her love and her loyalty.

This story is about gritty realities. The struggle for survival by any means, even if it means throwing yourself at a man. Somehow God uses it all – which is different from saying God approves of it all!

Like the story of Ruth, somehow through all these gritty realities God is working his purpose out.

God has hidden in the wings of this story of Ruth and only twice comes on stage. Once near the start to bring a famine to the end and again near the end, to give Ruth a child. But his name occurs many times, mostly in words of blessing.

Though in the bitter words of Naomi to the women of Bethlehem God is presented as the cause of great distress, the God of the book of Ruth is primarily a God of blessing. He brings prosperity where there is poverty, food where there is famine, fullness where there is emptiness, hope where there is despair and a child where there is an unspoken longing and endless disappointment.

The God of Ruth is one under whose wings can be found security and the most surprising love, for the book of Ruth is above all a love story. Yet is it not sentimental, nor solemn. With a playfulness and superb skill it tells of a love flourishing against all the odds, a love that is a bit risqué, but a love which conquers against all that denies or cheapens humanity.

We pray that God will be at work in the mess of all that cheapens or denies humanity. We pray those who are desperate will find comfort and eventually turn from despair.

We pray for ourselves that we too will find shelter under the wings of God and the courage to trust that God is working to turn every situation for the good even in life’s more risky moments.

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And Trevor Dennis commentary on Ruth in Guidelines Bible readings.