

November 18, 2018

Women of the Old Testament:

Ruth -- Arranging the Future for a Better Future - © Rev. Seth D Jones

Ruth 1-4

Ruth is another of the women mentioned in Jesus' lineage. She's another outsider, a Moabite who is brought into the fold of Israel and becomes a great-grandmother of King David.

Let's begin our discussion today with Jesus. Throughout our exploration, we have seen how the women of Scripture provide a direct challenge to the prevailing attitudes and customs of the day, and also of our day. Each week, I have tried to draw a direct line between the words and actions of these women through to Jesus. This week, I want to challenge one of the strongest prevailing ideas in American Christianity: *the idea that God controls us and our future, and if we just passively wait for God to reveal God's self, we will know what to do next.*

This idea can only arise from a place of privilege and advantage in a culture of wealth. One's position in the culture relative to others allows more opportunity to come one's way than someone else. Because many of us have an advantage which comes to us by birth, by skin color, by background and status of our parents, we can indeed sit back and wait for opportunity, or, in evangelical parlance, God to present itself. I am speaking generally here, of course. Everyone's particular situation is different.

But look, there are numerous stories in the Gospels where Jesus calls us to active preparation and to demand actively things from others and God. In Luke 18, Jesus tells "*a parable about the need to pray and not to lose heart*" (18:1). A widow keeps coming to a judge, a judge who has no belief in God nor any respect for people, and demands justice from the judge. Even though the judge is a horrible person, he relents "*because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming to me*" (18:5). This story is shocking. Jesus puts an unbelieving, disrespectful judge in the position of God in this parable. Even more shocking is that Jesus tells the disciples to pay attention to the judge in the parable, not the woman. The judge relents, gives in, finally lets justice have its place for this incredibly annoying woman.

What is the implication here? This is a parable about prayer. Jesus is telling the disciples to demand continually what they believe they need from God, to actively bother the Lord for justice, redemption, safety, salvation, hope. Involve yourself in the concerns of God and then bug him until God can't take it anymore. What a strange parable! So much for passively waiting for prayers and justice to be answered. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples

to be like this widow - be persistent and even bothersome in the arrangements required for the betterment of the future.

Which brings us to Ruth. In many commentaries, Ruth is held up as the passive, perfect model of what it means to be a loyal and devoted daughter-in-law and wife. That is certainly one way to read it. Ruth doesn't directly challenge the ways of the culture like, say, Rahab, or Tamar. But Ruth does things that ensure her future. The whole story flips over when we read Ruth as an active agent in creating her own future, a widow who demands justice not with words but with action.

None of this, of course, is to deny God is not working with Ruth and Naomi and Boaz. But there's not a lot of mention of God in the Book of Ruth, even though Ruth devotes herself to Naomi's God and Naomi's people.

*But Ruth said,
'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!' (1:16-17)*

These verses, beautiful as they are in any translation, miss the urgency in the Hebrew. Imagine these words spoken with a pointing finger and a strident, angry voice and you will be close to the imperative nature of Ruth's tone here. She is actively ensuring what she believes to be the best possible future for herself. In fact, she demands it. Naomi just wants to get back to her family, but Ruth wants a better future for herself and for Naomi.

Chapters 2 & 3 are all about how Ruth makes that future happen. Naomi is a passive agent in this entire story. She may tell Ruth to do some things, but Ruth goes out and does her own thing, and then tells Naomi she did as Naomi said. Ruth is controlling the situation from start to finish. Ruth has made promises to Naomi and she keeps them, but she does it her way, finally.

Central to the entire story is what happens with Ruth and Boaz in Chapter 3. Chapter 1 is the introduction and building of character. Chapter 2 is the meeting of Boaz and Ruth,

the beginning of the plot of the story. Chapter 3 is the active engagement of the characters in the plot of the story. And Chapter 4 is the resolution, the denouement, of the story of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is a perfectly constructed short story.

Ruth and Naomi come up with a plan to ensure that Boaz take on Ruth as a wife. Boaz is related to Naomi, but does not really owe her anything in the weird and ever-changing requirements of *levirate marriage*, which we have spoken of now several times. Even so, Boaz seeks to be a just man and a man of means and compassion in his community. By Biblical law, he allows the poor to glean in his fields. Gleaning is the back-breaking work of gathering up fallen grain from the harvest. This was often left to the poor to do, and they would take home a portion of what was collected from the ground. This is how Boaz first meets Ruth, or rather, this is how Ruth arranges to first meet Boaz.

After this meeting, Naomi suggests that Ruth get dressed up and meet Boaz at the threshing floor, which is where the wheat is sorted and separated. “*Make sure he is drunk*”, Naomi says. “*Get close to him and he will tell you what to do.*”

Here is what you need to know about this part of the story. First, *threshing floors* are a euphemism for prostitution and brothels in the ancient world. Second, *uncovering the feet* is a euphemism for sexual intercourse in the ancient world. As with all our women up to this point, they are all boundary crossers. They upset the balance of the world they live in. They insist on justice actively and do not wait for God to show them what to do. They just do it. In each case, these women have ensured not only their own future, but also the future of God’s people. Ruth has the patience, the willingness to do the necessary work, and negotiates whatever she needs to in order to reach the greater goal of her better future.

So Boaz and Ruth wake up in the morning. If Ruth makes the walk of shame on her own from the threshing floor, Boaz and Naomi’s family will be shamed. If Boaz accepts Ruth as his wife, he will ensure the future of Naomi, Ruth, and his own. This is what Ruth tells Boaz to do. Notice Ruth did not wait until Boaz told her what to do, like Naomi said.

Do you see how ingenious Ruth is? It seems to me the perspectives that are available to you in this story are

1. to side with most of Western history and put Ruth into a position of being the good woman who is passively subject to her mother-in-law and her future husband

or

2. to see Ruth as an active agent of her own future, a woman who is confident and not dependent on the rules and ways of the culture she is also a part of, a woman willing to be a persistent and powerful actor who ensures a just future for herself and the family *she* has adopted.

The choice you make here, as with Tamar and Rahab, will say as much about you as about this story.

For me, I love what happens when I choose the second option. Ruth becomes a towering figure of transition between the early story of Israel and the first kingdom of Israel, ruled by King David. Ruth is not mentioned again in Scripture until Matthew's lineage of Jesus. Why would that be? Perhaps it is because the story of Ruth tells us something important about Jesus.

Jesus runs all over the norms of the day as well. Jesus tells several parables about being persistent and even annoying in our demands to and from God. Jesus tells the disciples to do what they can to ensure their future and the future of those they love, and also of those they do not love. It is an active call to engage the world and the culture around us; not a passive waiting for God to do something for us.

Ruth and Jesus provide an opportunity to reflect on our own lives, the decisions we've made and the things we've done.

Were those decisions for the sake of a better future, not only for ourselves but also for everyone you bring along with you, whomsoever that may be?

Did those decisions lead to a better future?

And if they did, what do you think God might have been up to in your life during those decisions?

What if it was precisely because you were an active agent in your own future that the future was better?

What if that is still true even now?

What decisions will you make now?

Which decisions would you like to, or which decisions are you able to actively change so that they become a better future now?

The Lord has indeed given us the ability and the tools to be active agents for our future. Like the parable of the 10 Bridesmaids, which Jesus tells in Matthew 25, we are given what we need to actively prepare ourselves for God's presence, God's justice, God's love. We can be like the five bridesmaids who passively wait for the Lord to arrive and then hope we can get what we need beforehand; or we can be like the other five bridesmaids, who, like Ruth, ensured their better future by being prepared with oil and wicks for their lanterns.

This is Thanksgiving week. As you gather with family and friends, be thankful for what the Lord has provided you, and recognize the Lord's provision as also giving you what

you need to actively engage the needs of your future and the future of those who are around you. Engage that future confidently, like Ruth, with no care for the attitudes of the day or the perceptions of the culture. Be prepared and, as Jesus says, *“Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour (your future will be upon you)”*.

Amen.