



UNCOVERED

Ruth 3

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Everyone wants to know and be known. So many of the people we see every day know us only superficially. We want for others to understand who we really are, rather than make assumptions about us on the basis of skin color or clothing. Even within the church, it's easy to be type-cast, particularly if you're the music person, or the youth person, or the pickup truck person. Our congregation is one of the most loving, most welcoming, most thoughtful churches you'll ever encounter, yet even so, there are nevertheless people who have been with us for years and who still feel unknown. Even our church is a community in which people find it difficult to know and be known—especially older people, internationals, people of color, those who aren't called to marriage, etc.

Ruth 3 speaks directly to our desire to be known. It's one of the steamiest passages in the Bible. It would probably be rated R if we were seeing it on the big screen. Down at the village barn, after eating and drinking at the great harvest festival, the men are encamped around the grain pile. Then an exotic, perfumed woman tiptoes over to a man as old as her father, and she begins to undress him. What does she want? The man rolls over and asks, "Who are you?" Precisely. That's what this story is all about.

Ruth wants what every woman wants. And every man as well. Ruth is on a mission to be known, and understood, and loved. And Boaz stands in the foreground as a flesh and blood ambassador of the God who knows, and understands, and loves all who come to him.

Imagine an older man, old enough to have grown children. After a good meal and plenty of wine, he falls asleep in total darkness. While he's sleeping, a younger woman finds her way to him, undresses him, and then makes love to him in the dark. It's not a story that you'll find in the children's storybook Bible. It's also not a story that you'll find in the book of Ruth, though it does sound a lot like Ruth 3. It is, however, a Bible story found in Genesis 19. The story continues: the next day, the young woman told her sister what she had done. Then that evening, the older man ate another good meal. He drank another bottle of wine. Once again he fell asleep in the darkness of the cave where he lived with his two daughters. Then the younger sister came and made love to him.

Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and named him Moab (meaning "From Father," or "Who's my Father?"). He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi, and he is the father of the Ammonites to this day. Genesis 19:36-38.

Years later, the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt and journeyed north. As they prepared to enter the Promised Land, they set up camp in Moab, east of Canaan, across the Jordan river. There that the Moabites attacked them—not with spears and swords, but with sex. Moabite women, worshippers of their local fertility god, seduced the Hebrew men, leading them to worship another god. Then the Lord's condemnation fell upon them. A huge plague broke out, leaving tens of thousands dead (Numbers 25).

All this back story is important for understanding the book of Ruth, which begins describing how Naomi, her husband and her two sons faced famine in Bethlehem. They fled to the east and settled in Moab, the very place where Hebrew men had been seduced by Moabite women and then had died under God's curse only a few generations earlier. When her husband died prematurely, what must Naomi have thought? Had God's condemnation fallen on her husband? Then Naomi's sons married Ruth and Orpah, two Moabite women. Did Naomi fear that her sons had been seduced, just as their great-grandfathers before them? No plague killed them, but neither couple was able to conceive children. After ten years, both sons died; only the women remained. Little wonder that Naomi, whose name meant "Sweetie," changed her name when she returned to Bethlehem. She said, "Don't call me *Sweetie*. Call me *Sour* instead. For the Almighty has soured me bitterly. I went away full but the Lord brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:20-21).

It was a completely understandable thing for Naomi to say, given all the tragic circumstances of her life. It was also a pretty clever and ironic thing to say, reversing her name from Sweetie to Sour. Yet it was also doubly ironic, because she did not in fact return empty. She actually returned with one of her daughters-in-law—the one whose name meant *Full*. Previously, on the road back home, Naomi had compelled both Ruth and Orpah to turn back in order "to find rest" (Ruth 1:9) with their Moabite families and Moabite gods. Yet Ruth wouldn't turn back. She promised her loyal lovingkindness (Heb: *chesed*) to Naomi and to Naomi's God. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem and declared before the village that the Lord had brought her back empty, she did so standing beside her fiercely loyal daughter-in-law Ruth, whose name meant *Full*.

So which is it? Sweet or sour? Empty or full? That's what the rest of the book of Ruth is all about. Naomi may very well have believed that Ruth was bad luck because of her ethnicity. But Ruth called that into question by declaring her allegiance both to Naomi and to Naomi's God. Was there an everlasting curse on the Moabites because of Lot's incestuous relations with his daughters? Or was the curse on those who, regardless of ethnicity, abandoned hope in the Lord and put their trust in false gods? And conversely, would blessing follow those who, regardless of ethnicity, abandoned their false gods and put their trust in the Lord?

NAOMI'S PROPOSAL. Ruth 3:1-5.

In the first scene, Naomi proposes a way for Ruth "to find rest" (3:1). After Boaz showed Ruth great kindness in his fields, Naomi senses an opportunity and conceives of a plan.

It turns out (3:2) that Boaz was a near relative of Naomi's dead husband. It was customary in those days for close relatives to serve as kinsmen redeemers, i.e. to come to the rescue when family members suffered injustice or hardship. In particular, if a brother died, leaving behind a

widow with no male heir, it was the duty of the next brother to marry his sister-in-law in order to preserve the family's lineage and property. Naomi had two sons, but both of them died without male heirs. So in theory, she could have expected her brother-in-law or another close relative to marry her in order to preserve the family line. But it was the time of the Judges: "In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Naomi was old. She was most likely beyond the age of child-bearing. She was Sour, and empty, and just another mouth to feed. Nobody wanted to marry her.

Then there was Ruth. She may have been young and beautiful, but she was from Moab, and that's all that the men of Bethlehem could see. In those days, you just didn't marry someone from outside your tribe, especially a filthy Moabite like Ruth. Incest and seduction probably ran in her veins. Even if she had renounced her ancestry and become "one of us," she was still second in line for a kinsman redeemer behind Naomi. It was probably expected that, as with Leah and Rachel long before, the oldest and nearest relative should have been first. Technically speaking, Ruth would have been eligible for redemption. But no one would have thought of it.

No one except Naomi, who says to Ruth (3:2), "Behold!" It's a Hebrew invitation to pause and conjure up a mental picture of what's being described. Picture this, says Naomi. Boaz is winnowing barley *tonight*, down at the village threshing floor. It's going to be quite a party! So here's what you need to do. Naomi gives Ruth instructions using four verbs (3:3) that often go together in engagement stories. (1) Wash yourself, (2) put on perfume, (3) wrap on your cloak—the garment women wear for special occasions like engagements & weddings, and (4) go to him. In other words, prepare yourself as a bride and then go find Boaz. But (3:3), do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. If this sounds familiar, then it's because Lot's daughters essentially had the same plan.

Naomi's warning not for Ruth to make herself "known" is a double entendre. It could simply mean not to disclose her identity, or it could be a sexual reference. In Hebrew, "to know" someone can be a reference to sexual intercourse. Sex always has a symbolic function in the Bible; it always signifies knowing and being known intimately, so much so that "to know" a person can be a euphemism for sex. Thus, one way of understanding Naomi's instructions to Ruth would be that Ruth should not engage in sexual intercourse with Boaz until after he finished his meal.

You may be thinking that even though Naomi's directive could be construed as a reference to sex, it nevertheless shouldn't be. After all, this is a Bible story about Ruth, the virtuous heroine of every women's Bible study, and the holy matriarch of Jesus' lineage. If this is what you're thinking, think again. Only five women are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus:

1. Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute and conceived a son by her father-in-law.
2. Rahab, the former prostitute from Jericho.
3. Ruth, the midnight visitor to the threshing floor.
4. Bathsheba. David murdered her husband in order to conceal their illicit affair.
5. Mary, the unwed, teenage mom.

In Jesus' genealogy, Ruth is among a cast of characters who all have questionable sexual ethics.

In addition to guilt by association within Jesus' genealogy, let's also remember that Ruth was from Moab, and her own ancestry had a reputation for seduction and incest. Then consider also as further evidence the highly suggestive language in 3:4. Naomi says:

- *Observe*—literally 'know,' which as we have learned can be a euphemism for sex
- where he *lies down*—which can also be sexual euphemism
- and then you go over and *lie down*
- and uncover his... *feet*.

Feet can be sexy, but usually they're not. In rural, agricultural, sheep-poop-laden places, feet are nasty. However, in Hebrew "feet" is also sometimes a euphemism for genitalia. There are six instances in the Old Testament when "feet" is clearly used this way. For example, when King Saul relieved himself in the cave (1 Sam 24:3), the Hebrew doesn't say "urinated" but says something about Saul's "feet." There are also instances in the Old Testament when we suspect that "feet" is used this way. For example, when the six winged seraphim sing before the Lord (Isa 6:2), they use two wings to cover their faces, two wings to fly, and two wings to cover their "feet." Many Old Testament commentators take this as a reference to genitalia rather than actual feet. In any case, the fact that we can't be sure whether Naomi is talking about Boaz's genitalia or his actual feet only adds to the sexual overtones of the passage.

In summary, Naomi's proposal is for Ruth to dress up like a bride, approach Boaz after dinner, uncover his "feet," lie down beside him, and then to wait for him to tell her what to do. What a plan! Naomi may be sour, but she's also spicy! Let's see how Ruth responds.

RUTH'S PROPOSAL. Ruth 3:6-9.

In the next scene, Ruth proposes that Boaz see her in a new light. As Naomi instructed, Ruth goes down to the threshing floor (3:6). When Boaz finishes the harvest feast (3:7), his heart is merry—literally "good"—so he lays down beside the mountain of seeds that he and his laborers have worked for so long to harvest. Then Ruth tiptoes over to him, uncovers his "feet"—whatever that means—and lays down beside him. At midnight (3:8), the man is startled, and the narrator once again says, "Behold!" There's that word again, calling us to picture the scene in our minds, but it's probably too dark to see anything. Boaz can nevertheless feel a woman lying at his "feet," which prompts him to ask (3:9), "Who are you?"

Who is Ruth? If she's a true Moabite, then she'll simply shush Boaz and seduce him. Maybe she could finally get pregnant this way. It would allow her to take back some control over her otherwise chaotic and unpredictable life. But if she did that, she would remain utterly typecast. She would remain "that Moabite woman." In other words, she would remain unknown.

On the other hand, if she's a true convert to the Lord, then it's time to trust him for redemption, quite literally. She needs to trust God that Boaz, who has been so kind and generous with his grain will also be kind and generous with his affection. She saw him eat and drink and perceived that his heart is "good." Could he move beyond stereotypes to know her truly?

Ruth mustered her courage and answered him (3:9) saying, “I am Ruth your servant.” It’s the first time in the story that her name has been spoken and the first time that she has not been identified as the woman from Moab. What’s so ironic about this moment is that it happens in total darkness. That must be the point when our storyteller says “Behold!” (3:8). It’s an invitation to walk by faith and not by sight, i.e. to behold this woman for who she really is. It’s what every woman truly wants.

The Rev. Joost Nixon says that the very anatomy of a woman points to how she is meant to be known. But sex is only one way of knowing her. He goes on to say:

In the modern world of male and female relationships, more men are like Francis Drake than John Smith. They are interested in conquest, visiting women like cities along a coastline, stopping only long enough to raid and despoil. There is no real penetration of the interior before boredom strikes and they move on. The result is invariable devastation. But many Christian men, though they can say they are the husband of one wife, are injudiciously bored with their wives. There has been conquest—they “got the girl.” But now that they have her, they only nibble and set her aside.... Leif Erickson may have landed at Newfoundland, but he knew nothing of Ol’ Muddy, or Pike’s Peak, or the Painted Desert. He never tasted a Georgia peach, or was cowed by an electrical storm in Denver. He may have landed, but he never really explored.¹

In the darkness, Ruth invites Boaz to see her in a new light. In 3:9, she says “Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a kinsman redeemer.” Not only is she no longer that woman from Moab, now she asserts that she’s part of Boaz’s family. Family is the what the kinsman redeemer system is all about. It’s meant to protect family members in crisis. For Boaz, seeing Ruth through new eyes as his kin is like a legal loophole. It’s a way around the problem of Ruth’s Moabite ethnicity. By claiming Boaz as kin, Ruth declares her eligibility for marriage.

Ruth also declares her interest, by asking Boaz to “spread his wings over her.” It’s the same kind of language that Gabriel uses (Luke 1) when the Virgin Mary asks how she will conceive a son. Gabriel says, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you.” In other words, Mary, the Lord himself will spread his wings over you. It’s new creation language. God hovers over Mary, and calls forth new life in her. In reply, Mary says, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord”—the same thing that Ruth says to Boaz.

All Boaz has to do is to behold Ruth by faith rather than by sight. Let’s see what he says.

BOAZ’S PROPOSAL. Ruth 3:10-14

In the next scene, Boaz proposes that Ruth remain concealed just a little while longer. We know that Boaz sees Ruth in a new light by the way he responds—with both joy and concern. In 3:10, he calls for God to bless Ruth, because she has shared her her loyal lovingkindness (Heb. *chesed*)

¹ Joost Nixon, “Unknown and Frustrated,” Credenda/Agenda 19:1. <http://www.credenda.org/archive/issues/19-1poimen.php>.

not only with Naomi but also with Boaz. One deep friendship begets another, and this time Boaz is the recipient of Ruth's gift.

Boaz also celebrates the fact that Ruth walks by faith rather than sight. She has chosen an older man instead of any of the young ones, even the rich ones. So Boaz assures her (3:11) that he'll take care of everything. And don't worry, he says, because my colleagues on the village council know that you are a "worthy woman." This is a reassuring thing for Boaz to say, since it's the village council who must ratify his decision to redeem Ruth.

It's also an extraordinary complement, because "worthy woman" describes the model of wisdom found at the end of Proverbs. After thirty chapters of instruction on wisdom for navigating the complexities of life, Proverbs concludes with a picture of the ideally wise person. And who do you think is esteemed as the model of wisdom? A king? A priest? A scholar? No. Prov 31:10 asks, "A *worthy woman* who can find? She is far more precious than jewels." Then follow 20 verses describing a woman who embodies all the wisdom that Proverbs teaches. In ancient Hebrew Bibles, Ruth was the next book following Proverbs. Thus, Proverbs 31 asks who can find a worthy woman, and Ruth 1-4 answers it. Who can find one? Boaz can. And he's determined to marry her if at all possible.

There is a small glitch, however. As it turns out, Boaz is not the first in line. There is another relative who is closer, and if he opens his eyes to see that the woman from Moab is actually a "worthy woman" and could make an "excellent wife," then he may well act to redeem her himself. So Boaz responds to Ruth's proposal with his own. Even though Boaz has come to see Ruth in an entirely different light and they are essentially engaged to be married, they need to keep it secret. When the light comes, they will have to go back to acting as if this night never happened, at least until Boaz can meet with the village council. So, Boaz says to himself, (v 14) "let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."

Why then, does Boaz take the risk of keeping Ruth lying beside him until the morning? Some folks say that it's because Boaz, whose passion has been kindled, doesn't want to miss a sexual opportunity with a beautiful woman. But I think that's a misreading of the story. Contrary to popular opinion and the incessant messaging of our eroticized culture, you don't have to have sex in order to have a deep friendship. As we will discover very soon, the sexual tension will be resolved in this story, in a surprising and comic way. Boaz, however, doesn't hang on to Ruth in order to have sex with her.

On the other hand, I suspect that Boaz does keep her with him in order to meet his own needs. I think he wants a sign, and there's nothing wrong with that. He wants to open his eyes just a little bit, to confirm his faith and make sure that this hasn't all been a dream. If he can hold on to her through the dark of night and then simply catch a glimpse of her before she leaves, he can have the courage to take another huge leap of faith before the village council the next morning.

So Boaz invites Ruth to stay with him a little longer and then sneak back home to Naomi without being seen. And he swears his own allegiance to her in the name of the Lord, saying, if the nearer relative refuses his opportunity, then "as the Lord lives, I will redeem you."

GOD'S PROVISION. Ruth 3:15-18.

You might think that it would be a small thing for Ruth to sneak back home as if nothing happened. But after all the uncovering of the night, it will be pretty difficult for Ruth to go home empty. Keep in mind that when the matriarch of the Moabites crept into the cave and slept with Lot her father, she came out full, having received in her belly her father's seed. Ruth, however, has not slept with Boaz, yet their encounter has been profoundly intimate. It's been one of those unforgettable, climactic moments of knowing and being known, which again is what sex always signifies. Nevertheless, Boaz and Ruth have not had slept together, so Ruth is about to go home empty.

Boaz, however, has a different plan. He will yet fill Ruth's belly with seed. He says (3:15), "Hold out the cloak that you're wearing." Doing so makes Ruth look sort of like a pregnant lady. Then Boaz loads her up: one, two, three, four, five, six scoops of fresh grain, poured into her shirt, like sextuplets in utero. It's a comic and delightful resolution to the sexual tension of the evening.

Off she goes, home to Naomi, whom she tells all that Boaz had done for her. She says (3:17) "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, 'You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'"

Why shouldn't Ruth go back empty? One reason is that if she's truly engaged to be married, then she needs a dowry. And Boaz chooses a thoughtful gift for his future mother-in-law. Naomi once fled Bethlehem, the "House of Bread," because there wasn't a crumb left to be found. Now Boaz fills her cupboards with fresh grain.

An even bigger reason why Ruth shouldn't go home empty is that she also needs a sign. Just as Boaz doesn't want to let Ruth go until he can catch a glimpse of her, so also, in the kindness of God, Ruth returns home with a downpayment. It's a promise of friendship and fruitfulness in the years to come. It's also a picture of the way God sustains his people as we walk by faith, not by sight. We're rarely kept in complete darkness, without a glimpse of what the Lord has in store for us. Even if the sermon is a bust, we never go home from worship completely empty, without being fed from the Lord's table. The Lord meets our needs and keeps us going as we journey with him towards consummation. Thus, Ruth, whose name means "Full," goes home with a foretaste of the fullness which is to come.

Chapter 3 concludes with Naomi's assurance that Boaz will not break his promise. He will settle the matter right away, so Ruth is simply to watch and wait for her redeemer to act. In chapter 4, Boaz will succeed in his secret mission and bring redemption to both Ruth and Naomi. Both of these empty widows will become full. Both will see God's grace overcome brokenness in their own lives and in the world around them.

The best thing about this story is the way that God remains in the background, almost completely out of view, and yet you can feel his presence all around, like static electricity before a lightning strike. He's active everywhere, in the big picture and in the small details. He's clearly at work in the lives of the main characters—all beautiful, broken and worthy of love. In Ruth's case, God is actively overturning the stigma associated with her ancestry as a Moabite. God sees Ruth

and knows her for who she truly is. He brings her into a community not of perfect people but of other misfits who long to know and be known. That's what we represent as a church—every person here, both beautiful and broken. We aren't perfect. Rather, we're a community of misfits being made perfect by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and the power of his Holy Spirit. Only on this basis are we able to truly know and be known.

In addition to Ruth, we see that God is likewise at work behind the scenes in the lives of Boaz and Naomi. At the same time, we also see him at work internationally, opening the way for entire nations to be redeemed. Just as Pentecost reverses the curse of the Tower of Babel, so also here do we see here the beginnings of God reversing the curse of Lot's incest with his daughters. This time around, in the dark of night, Boaz does not sleep with Ruth "his daughter." Instead, he blesses her, and promises to redeem her, anticipating the greater redeemer who will come to the aid of all people from every tribe and tongue.

Finally, Boaz is not Jesus, but he's a symbol of Jesus to us. It's people like Boaz who invite us to see God at work in our lives and our world, usually behind the scenes yet perceptible for those who have eyes to see.

I recently heard the story of a Christian lady who was wrongly accused of child abuse and fired from her job at a daycare. One of her children—an atheist—used her calamity to make a theological point, asking, "Where is your god to help you in time of need?" It was around that time that Christian Legal Aid got involved and helped her file a wrongful dismissal suit. Not too long afterwards, the matter was resolved, justice was served, and the lady was able to share with her son that God was present to her through the Christians who provided her legal aid.

God is not often uncovered in the foreground in our own lives. Usually he's at work behind the scenes. But he's present to us through the ambassadors that he sends—people like Boaz, who serve as conduits of his love, and through whom we may be known in the ways that God knows us. Like Ruth we must watch and pray and wait for our Redeemer as we journey with him towards that day when he restores all things.