FCCOE; 12/6/20; Ruth 3; Rev. T. Ziegenhals

Series: God in the Midst of the Chaos

"Waiting"

Introduction: I think it's safe to say that in the year 2020, we have all become unwilling practitioners in the discipline of waiting. We are waiting for a vaccine to be distributed. We are waiting to return on a regular basis to the office or classroom. We are waiting to hug a friend or visit a loved one who lives a plane ride away. We are waiting for election results to be certified and for black lives to truly matter. We are waiting to share coffee and donuts together at church (heck, we'd even settle for carrots!). And maybe above all in this season of Advent (which is often called a season of watching and waiting) we are not only waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but we are waiting for him to fulfill that audacious promise he made before he left this earth to come again and put everything right, removing all darkness—all crying and mourning and pain, and even viruses—as he fully establishes the full brilliance of his new creation (Rev. 21:1-4).

Waiting can be especially difficult in this age in which we live because so often that which we want is usually only a Google click away. So, we struggle that we cannot just click our way back to "normal," whatever normal really is. So, I think it is helpful to recognize that while we don't have much control over our need to wait in these difficult days, we do have control over *how* we wait. And how we wait can make a difference, in both our lives and the lives of others, in how we love our neighbor and how we bear witness to the God on whom we wait. Our trio of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz can be helpful to us here as we move on in their story. Let's hear chapter 3 and listen for how they wait, both patiently and purposefully.

I. Ruth

A. Recall that Ruth, from Moab, had met Naomi when Naomi's husband, a man named Elimelek, took his family to Moab to escape a famine that had hit their hometown of Bethlehem. In Moab, Elimelek died. His sons married local girls and then ten years later these sons died, without having been able to produce sons, or daughters, of their own, leaving Naomi with no grandchildren and two Moabite daughter's in law. One chose to return home to her family in Moab. The other, Ruth, chose to return to Bethlehem with Naomi when the famine had ended, made the LORD her God and his people her people, and vowed to care for Naomi for the rest of Naomi's life. She is described in 2:12 as having taken refuge under the wings of God. As Boaz prayed after first meeting Ruth:

> May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

B. This is a wonderful picture of one who is waiting upon God, a picture of trust, of rest, of confidence in him. But such waiting doesn't mean we are passive or inactive, hoping something or someone will come along to take care of our trouble, that maybe we'll receive a surprise inheritance check in the mail, or a text from Bank Gloucester saying, "Bank error in your favor. Collect $2,000!" No, Ruth, as we saw last week, despite all the losses she had suffered, despite her longing for a husband, she chose not to sit around but to take the initiative to care for Naomi, as well as herself, by going to glean (collecting the leftovers) in a nearby field so that they would have food. Ruth worked hard. Significantly, as she worked, we see God was working on her behalf, guiding to her to the man, Boaz, who would

eventually bless her life beyond her imaginings. Waiting is not necessarily passive; it can be active and intentional. God is at work as we get out to work, care for others, improve our skills, consult with a surgeon, pursuing justice, etc. The list goes on.

II. Naomi

A. As the story goes on, we see both patience and intentionality in Naomi's actions. Chapter 3 opens with the words, "One day." What we find is that the season of harvesting has ended and that of threshing, separating the wheat from the chaff, has begun. So, a couple of months have passed since Ruth had first found herself gleaning in the field owned by Boaz. Although both had seemed attracted to one another, Boaz had not made a move. Knowing that any long-term security for Ruth in those days rested in her finding a husband, Naomi decides to actively help him along, concocting a very curious and involved and even risky plan. Up to this point, it's likely that she, as well as Boaz, had been allowing Ruth to grieve the loss of her husband and did not want to impose upon her until she was ready. But it seems that Naomi now knows that the period of waiting is over, that Ruth could now take off her garments of widowhood and put on her best clothes, as well as washing up well and splashing on some perfume. This would signal to Boaz that Ruth was now available for marriage.

B. As we think about Naomi's purposeful planning, recall, as we observed last week, how Naomi's bitterness was slowly being transformed by hope as she began to notice the providential fingerprints of God working in her life. Notice, then, what hope does. Hope in the sovereign goodness of God moves us to action. It does not allow us to remain passive. When we feel hopeless, that is when we fall into depression and do nothing. But when our hope is grounded in and fueled by the promise of God acting on our behalf, it moves us to try and find ways to do good, to express kindness.

III. Boaz

A. But, oh what a curious way Naomi seemed to find! Imagine, if you can, being Boaz. On this particular night, Boaz was feeling content and at peace within himself. God had been blessing him. The famine had ended, and his harvest had been rich. His accounts were back in the black. Workers had been paid and the poor had been provided for. Now it was time for the good and hard work of threshing. At the end of the day, those involved would sleep right on the threshing floor, both to guard their crop and to enable an early start again the next day. After sharing a good meal of food and wine with his laborers, Boaz settled down for a well-deserved night of sleep. But then his feet begin to feel cold and he finds himself waking up. Through bleary eyes, he notices the silhouette of a woman lying at his feet. Knowing that prostitutes often brought their services to a threshing floor (to take advantage of men who were working and sleeping away from home for extended periods of time, cf. Hos. 9:1), he was horrified! What if the evening news caught wind of this?!

B. Wide awake now, Boaz asks who the woman is. Ruth identifies herself. She had snuck in under cover of darkness, uncovered his feet, and waited. All seems to be going according to Naomi's plan. But then Ruth takes the script and tosses it out. She was supposed to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Instead, she proposes to him, and then tells him what to do! "Spread the corner of your garment over me" is literally, "spread your wings over me," a symbolic act in the Ancient Near East that signified marriage (cf. Ez. 16:8). In effect, Ruth challenged Boaz to be the answer to his prayer – that the God under whose wings she had taken refuge would provide for her (2:12).

C. That might have been well and good had it ended there, but then Ruth goes on to remind Boaz that he is a guardian-redeemer of Naomi's family. We come to learn (ch. 4) that Naomi will need to sell some property to help make ends meet and it would be the obligation of this redeemer to purchase such property to keep it in the family and help provide for Naomi. Ruth, it seems, still has her mother-in-law's best interests in mind. Her kindness has not stopped even in the midst of her own needs, and even after she learns that there may be a redeemer in the family who is a closer relative than Boaz.

D. Importantly, she and Boaz, both identified as having noble character (2:1; 3:11), made right choices, as hard as that might have been for them as they lay so near each other in that quiet, dark, stary night. Ruth did not seduce Boaz but remained at his feet. Boaz did not take advantage of Ruth but decided to wait to consummate the marriage until he had been able to work out what God was requiring of him. It's a scene riddled with risk and temptation and uncertainty, not to spice up the story or portray Naomi and Ruth as manipulative, but to highlight Ruth and Boaz as having made righteous choices, and perhaps even to ask us whether we'd have done the same when confronted, as we are, with tempting situations.

Looking back on this episode, we see, then, that waiting involved times of being patient, but also times of being very purposeful. One writer calls this "strategic righteousness" (John Piper). Strategic in that there are actions that are planned and intentional, and righteousness in that those actions are good and right in God's sight and timing. It is easy, as we think about all of this, to fall into the temptation that the end justifies the means. It's easy for us to want something so much that we resort to doing what we think is right in our own eyes but is either illegal or immoral or both. How we wait matters. It bears witness to the God we wait upon and how we love our neighbor. Can we wait, trusting that God is at work on our behalf, and undertaking actions that are righteous and good?

Let us move to the table of the Lord through a text that is often read in this Advent season from the apostle Paul to a pastor in Crete named Titus. Paul is writing about what we might call active, advent waiting, a kind of strategic righteousness that is motivated by hope, as he reflects on what Jesus has done, and still promises to do (Titus 2:11-14):

> For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

We are a people who are called to wait for Jesus to restore all things. While we wait, may we make God our refuge and strength, and be eager to do what is good, making right choices, for our good, the good of our neighbor, and for the glory of God, confident that there is no other God like the Lord who works on behalf of those who wait for him (Isa 64:4), and who promises to bring to completion the work he has begun, in us, and in our world (Phil. 1:6).