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Narrative Lectionary 4.47 – Ruth 03/04 & 04/04
Ruth 3:1 – 4:17; Matthew 7:7-8

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“Surprising...Abundance...of Love”

There have been a ton of movies made on the Biblical stories
of Jesus and Paul and Moses and even Noah and Abraham,
but if *I* were to make a movie on a Bible story, this is the one I'd choose.
While it's true it's not my favorite genre – of murder mystery –
it's certainly my next favorite: a love story full of drama, passion, and...sex!

If you were here last week you'll remember that our story begins during a time of famine in Israel,
which is a hard concept for us to grasp.
When we're hungry, we go to the refrigerator or kitchen cupboard;
if we don't see what we want, we run to the store.
If times are hard, we may have to go to a food pantry or a community dinner,
but most of us never have to deal with the reality of no food.
In an agricultural society like Israel, however, the entire country lives or dies by the results of the harvest.
Historians tell us that harvests that were adequate for ancient Israel's needs
happened only about 7 out of every 10 years;
during the other 3 years, lack of rainfall or pest invasion would cause crops to fail.
And if you got more than 1 year of crop failure in a row, there would be widespread famine.
People would die.

It was famine that had forced Elimelech and Naomi and their two boys
to leave their home in Israel & flee to the neighboring country of Moab where they lived as foreign refugees.
While their empty stomachs found relief, and the boys grew and their hearts found love in Moabite wives,
another kind of famine hit their lives: Elimelech and his sons died,
and Naomi and her daughter-in-laws, Orpah and Ruth, were left with nothing –
no men to love and no men to protect or provide for them.
They were widows and women and worth nothing to society.

But now the story has changed!

Naomi and Ruth have journeyed back to Naomi's home country of Israel where,
thanks be to God's loving faithfulness,
there has been an incredibly abundant barley harvest!
Chances are folks were praising God in the words of Psalm 65:
*“You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.”* (vv. 9–13)

Whether they were praising God or not, they were certainly celebrating,
because after you get the harvest in, you party — for an entire week –
not just because you felt like it, but because God had actually commanded it!
*“Rejoice during your festival,
you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves,
as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans,
and the widows resident in your towns.
Seven days...you shall surely celebrate”* (Deut. 16:13–15) ...
and consume “whatever you wish — meat, wine, [beer]... whatever you desire” (Deut. 14:26).

And that's exactly what Boaz did. He had a GOOD time eating and drinking – drinking a LOT – until he passed out.

Which is where our story today picks up....

Naomi had been around long enough to know what was going to happen
and she instructs Ruth on just how she should play her cards.

“Wash...” [in a desert country 3000 years ago
you didn’t waste water on washing unless it was a very special occasion!]
“...put on your finest, sexiest dress and your most alluring perfume,
and keep out of sight until Boaz is asleep. And then...climb into bed with him!
Don’t worry! He’ll tell you what to do – laugh out loud!”

No doubt it’s what Ruth has dreamed of all along these past weeks.
After all she’s been working in his fields, and enjoying the special attention
this older, but kind, wealthy, and eligible man is paying her –
but she has no idea how to make it happen.
And now, here it’s her mother-in-law giving her step-by-step instructions on how to seduce her man!

Can’t you just picture the eagerness with which Ruth gets ready
and the excitement as she watches and waits for him to finally fall asleep!

And then at long last the moment has arrived, and she slips in next to him,
snuggling up against him under his cloak, and removing his clothes, offering herself to him.

Can you imagine his surprise
when this older bachelor wakes up to the smell of perfume, and the soft touch of feminine skin?

It’s TOTALLY dark so he has no idea who this is or what’s happening!
How much did he have to drink? What on earth has he gotten himself into?!

And then she speaks. It’s Ruth! Young, beautiful, exotic, alluring Ruth!
Ruth who is not only beautiful on the outside but beautiful within –
unbelievably compassionate and loyal and the hardest working woman he’s ever seen.
Ruth – the one he fell in love with the moment he first saw her.
He had thought about asking her to marry him – but he loved her too much for that.
He knew she deserved someone much younger than he –
he loved her enough to put her happiness before his own.
Oh, if he were only 20 years younger! But he wasn’t. So he hadn’t.
He’d let her go to a younger man – for her sake.

And now, here she was – in his bed – offering herself to him!
It was everything he had dreamed of and more.
He could have had her right there and then –
but again, his love for her was greater than his own needs and desires.
There was another man – a younger man – who was next in line to be the kinship redeemer of this woman.
It would have to be his call.

In the end, it all works out and there is the happiest of endings.
Boaz and Ruth marry. They have a son, Obed. Naomi gets to be the nanny.
or as some rabbinic scholars have suggested she actually gets to be the wet-nurse,
since her old & withered breasts suddenly become firm & fill & overflow with the milk of life.
And then Obed grows up and has Jessie.
And Jessie grows up & has a whole bunch of sons,
including a runt of a son who slays a giant with a slingshot
and becomes the greatest king Israel will ever know.

And this is where I put the question to you:

This is a great story, but how is it relevant to you and to us?

There's a song about the Bible that begins,

"Some people say it's a very good book with treasures old and wise.

To others it's only fairy tales that children memorize."

So my question to you is this:

What does this 3000 year old story have to do with us and our lives today?

What connection can this story of love and sex

possibly have to do with your life or our lives here and now?

[allow time for people to answer....]

[Those are all great answers....]

For me, there are 3 "take-aways" in this story.

First of all, there's the whole thing about letting in God's surprises,

about opening our minds and hearts and lives

to people who think or talk or act differently from how we've been raised.

If we look down on them, or judge them, or dismiss them out of hand,

if we stick to our old ways of doing things, nothing will ever change,

and we will probably end up being like the younger man in the story

whose name is not even remembered.

But if we risk opening our minds and hearts to the chaos that often comes with new energy,

and we welcome new experiences and new people into our lives –

people who perhaps look or think or act differently than we are used to –

God could end up working amazing miracles of grace in our lives.

Secondly, there's the whole thing about scarcity and abundance.

Even when all we can see is scarcity, God is still – God is always – God is forever –

a God of abundance.

When Naomi was complaining that she had nothing left in her life,

there was Ruth, standing right there beside her – and Naomi didn't even notice!

By the end of the story, the women in the village give voice to what Naomi can now see:

Ruth is more valuable to her than (the perfect number of) seven sons could ever have been.

Whenever we see scarcity, we need to remember this story.

Abundance is not only on the way – it may even be here right now, if only we have eyes to see.

And finally, God is all about love – not the law.

The law, after all, is just about how to put love into practice,

so whenever the two conflict, one should always choose love.

And so, even though Boaz's life-long adherence to high expectations,

doing things the "right & proper" way, and coloring inside the lines,

nearly thwarts God's plan, God still works it out. Love wins.

The story of Ruth is one of the greatest in the Bible

because it's about a God who is always there and always at work whether we can see it or not.

God is there, surprising us, pouring abundance into our lives, and wrapping our lives in love.

God is always there – as Lutherans would say – "in, with and under" it all.

God is there "in, with and under" a Surprising...Abundance...of Love! **Amen**