

DIVINE COINCIDENCE

I don't think Naomi would have liked Mother's Day. When we left her last week, Naomi lamented to her old friends and neighbors the loss of everything she held dear. She had migrated with her husband and two sons into Moab. During their ten years in that foreign land both husband and sons had died. Her heart was as empty as her arms. Mother's Day would have been one more poignant reminder of bitter pain.

Naomi saw God as the ultimate source of her misfortunes. She had rehearsed her lament until it had worn familiar tracks in her mind: "Shaddai, the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full but Yahweh has brought me back empty. Yahweh has afflicted me—he has brought charges against me in court that I don't understand; Shaddai has brought misfortune against me.

Naomi, whose name means "Pleasant," wished for a name change. She asked to be called Mara, a Hebrew word meaning "Bitter." Naomi had moved from Pleasantville to bitterness.

Some of you have made that same journey. You have been to places where dreams die, where hope evaporates. You have suffered unimaginable loss and there has been little relief from your pain. You may have come to believe that God is against you, resisting all of your efforts to make sense of life, or to move past your loss. There is precious little comfort. You live with a relentless, dull ache that has become background noise to all your waking moments.

Naomi lived there. The Book of Ruth, chapter one has been all about her story.

In chapter two, Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth, becomes the main character. And in chapter two, the dizzying, downward spiral of Naomi's life stabilizes. For the first time in a long time, Naomi tastes God's unmistakable kindness. Turn with me to Ruth, chapter two.

Against the bleak narrative of chapter one, the writer introduces a new character: Boaz. Boaz was one of Naomi's in-laws, a close relative of her deceased husband. He was, the text says, "a man of standing." In a military context we would have called him a war hero, a Medal of Honor winner. In this more civilian setting, the words describe a man of wealth, influence and integrity. Boaz was an honorable man, a leading citizen of Bethlehem, and he belonged to Ruth and Naomi's extended family.

And, in contrast to Naomi, who seems to have been immobilized by her loss and bitterness, Ruth initiates action. If they are going to live, they need food. And in Israel, one way God had provided food relief for needy people was by allowing them to glean during the harvest.

In the Law of Moses, God decreed: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:9-10). "When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deuteronomy 24:19).

When farmers in ancient Israel harvested their crops, they hired workers with scythes who would cut the grain with one hand and gather what they cut with the other. As their hands filled, they would make piles of cut grain around the field. Women would follow them, doing the relatively lighter work of binding these piles of loose stalks into bundles. After everything was cut and stacked into sheaves, the farmer would thresh out the grain.

God commanded his people to leave margins in their fields during the harvest. They were to leave standing grain around the edges and in the corners. As harvesters dropped stalks of cut grain and as the women tied them into shocks, they were not to go back and pick up what they had dropped. God intended that as provision for the vulnerable and needy, for foreigners, orphans and widows, for those who were jobless and destitute.

Ruth determined to make use of this provision. But it could be a risky venture. Not every farmer in Israel was as generous as God intended. Those who gleaned learned to keep their distance from the hired hands who sometimes treated them with suspicion and open hostility. Ruth displayed uncommon humility and determination in her decision to become a gleaner, and she hoped to find a field where the workers might treat her favorably.

Look at verse three: “So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.”

Notice the words: “as it turned out.” The Hebrew reads, “And her chance chanced upon.” We might say, “As luck would have it,” or, “It just so happened...” The words are ironic. The coincidence is divinely superintended. But none of the players in this drama know that yet. For Ruth, happening on the fields of Boaz is simply a happy accident.

The irony continues in verse four: “Just then, Boaz arrived...” If we were translating colloquially we might have said, “And lo and behold, Boaz himself showed up from Bethlehem.” The writer is making us aware that more than mere chance is at work. These events are being orchestrated behind the scenes.

Boaz noticed Ruth immediately and asked his foreman about her. He identified her as Naomi’s daughter-in-law, the Moabitess—by the way, the writer keeps calling her that, Ruth the Moabitess. He is underscoring her status as an alien in Israel, someone with few rights or expectations.

The foreman also commended Ruth for her work ethic. The daytime temps during harvest in Israel would have been in the mid-seventies to mid-eighties. Gleaning grain is hard, dusty, tiring work. Ruth had kept at it all that morning except for one brief break in the shade.

Boaz responded immediately. Ruth is family, even though Ruth doesn’t know it yet. Boaz is a near relative with responsibilities for his clan that will become evident later. He graciously invites Ruth to stay in his fields and glean. He orders his workers to treat her well. Boaz even allows her the privilege of getting water from the jars provided for his farm-hands.

When Ruth inquires about his kindness, Boaz commends her for his faithfulness to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Ruth’s loyalty has not gone unnoticed in Bethlehem. Notice verse twelve: “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.” Boaz is not only a distinguished man of honorable character, he also shows himself to be a godly man. Boaz wishes for Ruth the blessing of Israel’s God, Yahweh. He notes that she has come to take refuge under his wings.

But Boaz is not done. When it’s time for the noon meal, Boaz invites her to eat with the rest of his harvest crew. This is more significant in the ancient world than in ours. Today it would simply be a kindness. In the time of Ruth and Boaz, it represented inclusion into the harvest crew. Ruth is a welcomed guest. Boaz even takes the unusual initiative of personally serving Ruth a generous portion of roasted grain—more than she could possibly eat.

Today we might think he was hitting on her. Hollywood would script flirtatious glances

and furtive longings. We can readily imagine the romance that might be woven into the screen play.

But it is not in the text. Boaz is an older man, old enough to be Ruth's uncle! He calls her "daughter" and treats her like one. Boaz incarnates the very heart of God. Moses instructed Israel: "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:17-19).

Boaz had inscribed that ethic upon his heart. After lunch, he went so far as to instruct his men to be intentionally sloppy, to drop stalks of grain Ruth could pick up.

The result of this generosity became evident when Ruth threshed out the grain she had gathered. She would have beaten the collected stalks with a stick to separate the grain kernels from the chaff. Then she would have tossed her pile into the air. The breeze would have blown away the straw and chaff and the heavier grain would have collected on the ground. When Ruth was done she swept up about thirty pounds of barley, enough food to sustain her and Naomi for about two weeks.

Ruth stayed in the fields of Boaz throughout the entire barley harvest until the end of the wheat harvest. That would have been about six weeks worth of gleaning. At the same rate, because of the unusual generosity of Boaz, Ruth would have easily gathered enough grain to sustain them for over a year.

When she got home, she couldn't wait to show Naomi how much she gathered. She even gave Naomi her doggie bag from lunch.

And of course, Naomi wanted to know everything! She especially wanted to know the name of their benefactor.

When she found out that Ruth had worked with Boaz, Naomi caught a whiff of hope. Look at verse twenty.

For the first time in a long time, Naomi sensed God's kindness, his *hesed*. We've heard this word before. God's *hesed* is his covenant love, his unfailing love. *Hesed* is like *agape* in the sense that it is initiating love, not reciprocating love. In other words, it doesn't act because it expects anything in return, but because there is a need it can meet. Yahweh, Naomi says, has not stopped showing his *hesed*. To which we can almost hear the unspoken words, "...he has not stopped showing his *hesed* after all." God's unfailing love is still active.

And then she adds, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers." In ancient Hebrew culture, clan solidarity was huge. It mattered that families not die out. It mattered that ancestral lands not be lost. A kinsman-redeemer was a close relative who had the means and the responsibility to buy back and restore clan property. If a family member became so poor that he had to sell himself into slavery to pay off his debts, the kinsman-redeemer could be expected to step in and buy his freedom.

A more somber role of the kinsman-redeemer was to avenge the murder of a family member. Justice back then was up close and personal.

And a kinsman-redeemer might have the responsibility to marry the widow of a close relative and have children by her to perpetuate the family of the man who had died.

My Uncle Lloyd died of a heart attack when he was just thirty-four. He was serving as a youth pastor in Sioux Falls, SD when he died. He left his wife, Aunt Ruth, with four children. When Uncle Lloyd died, his closest brother, Uncle Allen, stepped up to make sure Aunt Ruth and

her young family were cared for. Uncle Allen did home repairs, provided money and other necessities until Aunt Ruth could establish herself as a single mom.

Even though we don't have anything in our culture like a kinsman-redeemer, Uncle Allen functioned like one. He was a close relative who assumed responsibility for the well-being of a family relative.

Boaz stood in that relationship to Naomi and Ruth. Naomi recognized immediately the hand of God in all the coincidences of Ruth's day. It was a hand of kindness, *hesed*, unfailing love.

You see, *even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work.*

We said last week that Romans 8:28 was writ large all over the Book of Ruth: "...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In chapter two, that truth begins to emerge: even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work.

Naomi looked at the circumstances of her life and could only assume that God had turned against her. His promised *hesed* had failed in her case. She could not discern God's presence.

You've been there. You have walked through times when you have felt abandoned by God, or worse, that God had turned against you.

Even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work.

The final chapter of our lives has not yet been written. For those who follow Christ, there is no final chapter. In the words of David: God's unfailing love will follow us all the days of our lives and we will dwell in God's home forever.

Even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work.

Naomi, at last, begins to grasp that. She will never know just how powerfully God is at work in her life and that of her daughter-in-law, but God's kindness once again leaks into her conscious awareness. God *is* good. Even when it seems God is not at work, God is at work. We'll see that unfold even more next week.