

The Diary of Ruth: An Imagined World

David M. Bender

Bethesda Presbyterian Church, York, South Carolina

Before his untimely death by an assassin's bullet, Robert F. Kennedy frequently ended his 1968 presidential campaign speeches with a quote revised from George Bernard Shaw: "Some men [*sic*] see things as they are and say, 'Why?' I dream of things as they never have been and ask, 'Why not?'" Kennedy describes two means of interacting with a flawed and broken world. In the first, humanity remains firmly planted within the ugliness of a world that has traveled far from God—a world where racism and oppression, hatred and consumerism, uncritiqued technology and idolatry seem to rule. This is the world of "sin" and "death" to which Paul refers (Romans 5 and 6), the world into which the tempter invites Jesus into full participation shortly after his baptism (Matthew 4:1-11). This is the world once defined as "that innate corruption of man which has been derived or propagated in us all from our first parents, by which we, immersed in perverse desires and averse to all good, are included to all evil."¹ Even as we recognize, question, mourn, and seek justice in this world with our question, "why?" this first means of interaction offers no final freedom from this world.

In the second means of interaction with the world suggested by the quote, humanity might realize the power and love of that which lies beyond the obvious, the promise of the intangible in a world of tangibles, of poetry in a world of prose, the hope that lies within a reality not yet realized. Kennedy describes this hope in the goodness not yet realized as a dream; others describe it as imagination, or an alternative consciousness or community waiting to be formed,² or as visions of the possible, or as a new poetic possibility in a world of inculturated prose.³ It is the dream not just of an improvement in the conditions of the existing world, but the realization of an alternative reality. Theologically, this alternative world acknowledges YHWH as the center, and all human actions, reactions, and interactions are formed by and reflect this theocentricity. Walter Brueggemann says we must be summoned to this alternative imagination in order to imagine the world and ourselves differently.⁴ It is through the poetic voice of the preacher that we might call the world to this imagined theocentric reality. In fact, God calls the preacher/prophet to announce the freedom of this imagination to overcome the presumed world by opening out "the good news of the gospel with alternative modes of speech—speech that is dramatic, artistic, capable of inviting persons to join in another conversation, free of the reason of technique, unencumbered by ontologies that grow abstract, unembarrassed about concreteness."⁵

Thus, imagination is a world-making event. Through it, God can create new understandings, usher in new realities, and uncover what was theretofore hidden. As imagination invites an alternative world *outside* the text, it also invites us to an alternative world *within* the text. The world-making power of imagination invites us into fresh, vibrant, and faithful interpretations of Scripture. The Book of Ruth offers a prime example. While this beautiful, well-crafted story invites us into a world of heartbreak, love, loyalty, and redemption, it leaves many gaps and silences. Fewell and Gunn assert that the faithful interpretation of the story relies upon the imaginative

filling in of these gaps.⁶ They argue that a deeper engagement of the text comes from looking at it from the “inside,” considering the thoughts, fears, motivations, relationships, influences etc. of the characters.⁷ This essay invites the preacher into the imagined world inside of the text of Ruth. This imagined world is not simply a fanciful fairy tale. Rather, in filling in some of the silences in the story, this essay offers informed imagination—imagination informed by the details of the story, other relevant testimony in the Scriptures, the rules, regulations, and realities of the period, and the reason of human nature. This information invites us to explore the imagined world of the diary of Ruth as she pauses at critical moments in her life to share her thoughts. While this essay invites the preacher into one imagined world, many characters and stories we preach offer an imagined world waiting to be discovered. Using our imagination to listen to the silences and fill in the gaps offers a deeper engagement with these texts that can enliven and invigorate our preaching.

Entry 1

Dear Diary,

Well, I made the proposition, and now I’m just waiting for a response—any response. Ah, who cares? I mean, it’s only my life on the line here. This woman who has never been anything but kind to me, Naomi, holds my future in her hands, and she doesn’t even seem to know it. Will she say “yes” or “no”? How did I even get here, where this nice lady controls what I am to become and where I am to become it? I was so young when they came to live in the village—Naomi, her husband, and sons. I didn’t take any notice of them—I was really too young to pay any attention to boys. They seemed nice enough. They looked like they could have been our kin,⁸ and I was shocked when I learned that they spoke our language.⁹ They were a little different, of course. I had heard of the Israelites—never seen one close up, though. I know our people had trouble with their people in the past, and we aren’t the best of friends.¹⁰ They told their story about a famine in their land and how they were looking for a home with food; I wondered where all of the other hungry people of Israel went. I sure wasn’t interested in the sons. I knew that one day I would marry a prominent Moabite man and give him plenty of sons. I had to—that’s why I was born. I would have no hope and no peace and no status without being a good mother of sons. But when I first saw them, I was a young girl, much more interested in childhood games than in birds and bees. Anyway, I don’t have any idea about how it happened. My parents started talking with Naomi and Elimelech and exchanges were made and the next thing I know they tell Orpah and me that we are getting married. Was I ready to be married? No, probably not. I didn’t even like boys—I didn’t have any idea of what was expected of me or what the wedding night would be like or anything. On the day of the wedding, I’ll admit that I was frightened. Of course, all my friends said the same. I don’t know this guy; I don’t know how he is going to treat me or where he will take me or what he will do to me. I don’t know if he’ll drag me off some day to live in Israel. All I knew was that people were beginning to talk. “You’re so ugly that your mom and dad knew no Moabite man who would take you?” It was kind of embarrassing. People tried to act kind and happy, telling me what a great wife I would be and what a great life we would have, but I just knew they were talking about me behind my back. I can hear them snickering: “She had to marry a foreigner, couldn’t even get one of her own.” What could I do? I did what was expected.

After the wedding, things went okay. It was clear that they were a good people. They always talked about their God and didn't pay any attention to Chemosh,¹¹ but I don't blame them. Even I can tell that the human sacrifices he requires just aren't right.¹² I got along especially well with Naomi. We cooked and cleaned, gathered water and took care of the household. We spent plenty of time talking. To be honest, I spent much more time with her than with her son. Then everything began to fall apart. I won't tell you more than I know; I just know that they started dying. First my father-in-law, then my brother-in-law and my husband, just like that. What a terrible time—for me, for Naomi, for Orpah. It hurt so much, especially for Naomi. We wanted to mourn, but life got in the way. I entered Naomi's room that day and found her packing. "Where are you going?" "Back to my people." "Well, we're coming, too." What choice did I have? Stay around the house with Mom? I figured no other Moabite man would have me. I'd never be able to give a man a child—never be worth anything to anyone. I'd end up an old maid, or a prostitute, or dead. At least, that's what I was thinking when I started packing. We had a long, hard trip, so I packed very lightly.

Just like that, we left, all three of us. Finally, Naomi told us to turn back. She talked Orpah into it, but not me. I look at this woman, and I know that my admiration for her had grown into respect, and the respect had grown into love. I don't want to abandon her now. After all, what do I have to go back to? I'd never be able to attract a Moabite man since I've been with an Israelite. I'd rather take my chances with Naomi and her people. So, I make my proposition. I lay it on thick as molasses: "Where you go, I will go...your God will be my God." So, I've laid it out there, and I'm waiting for a response. If she says "no," then I go back home, rejected, defeated, with no future. If she says "yes," then I follow her to face goodness knows what. My whole life depends on this decision. I feel so helpless. If she rejects me, I'll go back and become the joke of the community, a sad, aging widow with no hope and no help. If I go with her, who knows what will happen? My life lies in the balance. What will she say?

Thanks for listening,
Ruth

Entry 2

Dear Diary:

It's hot out here, and I've just got to take a quick break from these fields. I expected hard times when we left Moab with little money, few possessions, and not much a plan. I should be grateful. No, I am grateful. I'm just lucky that the Israelites have this law that requires them to let us pick up the scraps from the field.¹³ If we didn't have the scraps, we wouldn't have anything. I'm glad to do it, but it's hard work. I feel vulnerable; I feel scared. I just looked at my last entry. Thank God, Naomi said "yes." We went back to her country, and the women recognized her immediately. It was strange. I thought they might look at me funny, just like we thought Naomi and her family were strange when they came to town. What I didn't know is that they have laws prohibiting Moabites from inclusion into their family.¹⁴ We strolled into town, and no one talked to me. They didn't say "hello" or ask me my name or anything. They didn't even acknowledge my existence or offer to take my bags or offer me a drink. I felt invisible—Naomi must have felt this way when she came to Moab. I'm sure the ladies told themselves that their problem with me was a "religious thing"; in truth, I think it is more of a "racist thing." It's sometimes hard to tell the difference. I'm sure that by

the time my children or grandchildren read this diary, the stupidity of racism won't be a part of this world. What a wonderful day!

So, they let me glean. There were plenty of fields from which to choose. Why did I choose Boaz' field? I have no idea. It wasn't better or worse than the others. It was just there. But I think I chose well. He seems like a nice guy, and kind of handsome, too. They say he is rich. Hmmm—I wonder if he looks better to me just because he's rich! I know he's been asking about me. Strange as it sounds, he asked me to come back to his field, and he told his hands to take care of me. What a good turn of events! But I don't get it. Why would he care? He says it's because I was so good to Naomi. How does he know Naomi? What does all this mean? He keeps praying about the God of Israel being my refuge. I still don't know all about that, but I know that Boaz himself could be my refuge. So here I am out here in the field, just taking a break. It's backbreaking work, but Boaz is making sure that I get more than my share. Of course, I don't know any of these people. I see men gawking at me, and it's scary. These fields are large, and there are plenty of places where people can hide and jump out on me.¹⁵ In fact, the other day, I saw them attack like a pack of jackals. One young girl was gleaning, paying no attention to where she was going. She ended up at the far end of the field, near the very thickest part. I saw them begin to circle with evil intent. One circled around through the thickness and sneaked up behind her. One circled and sneaked up from the side. The other finally walked straight at her. When she saw him and the look in his eyes and realized the danger, she turned to run, and she ran straight into their trap. They hit her and began to drag her off. I heard the screaming, and I looked around. No one seemed to notice. No one seemed to care. There was no one to help her—no one to be her hero. I was frustrated; I couldn't do a thing. So I just listened, with tears streaming down my face, to the haunting torture of her screaming.

I went home that night with her screams still ringing in my ears. Some people might call this travesty horrible or terrible, abusive or oppressive or criminal. I would agree, but we women use one other word when we describe it. The word we use is—Life. So, like a paranoid whipped puppy, I'm always watching the movement around me. I live under the thick burden of this constant fear. As a stranger in this strange land, I could disappear, and I don't know if anyone would be able to chase me down. As low as Naomi has been, who would even try? I feel so out of control. So, I stay alert—that's all I can do.

I'll write again,
Ruth

Entry 3

Dear Diary:

I can't believe what I just did. I've put myself out there again. Once again, I find myself totally out of control. My entire future, my entire being rides on the whims of this one man. I've just asked him to marry me. Everyone knows this just isn't the way this thing is done. Naomi told me to be friendly to him; she didn't say to propose, she just said be friendly. I guess she wanted me to wait for him to make the proposal. Common sense says that what I've done can only lead to disaster. I don't know what got into me. But in this moment while I'm awaiting his reply, I thought I'd write you again, diary. Imagine my surprise when I found out that Boaz is a relative of Naomi's family. How fortunate—or is "fortune" the right word? She says he's our nearest kin.

That sounds very important.¹⁶ I was flabbergasted—Naomi, sweet Naomi, telling me to do—what she told me to do. Sneak down to the threshing room floor? Uncover his feet? Come on, Naomi—I know what that means. What do you want—for me to validate all of those jokes they tell about Moabite women? Do you know the price an unchaste woman might pay? Death—that is the answer. Death!! They could take me, and break me, and use me, and spit me out and leave me dead, and no one would even care. Yet, up to this point, Naomi has been right. She has not steered me wrong. Somehow, despite the heartbreak and the long days and the uncertainty, her wisdom has prevailed. So I went for it.

I felt positively like a thief as I sneaked around all of the people. I sure didn't want to get caught. No telling who or how they might have helped themselves to a woman they thought was proving herself promiscuous. So I waited. After a long day, I knew that Boaz would imbibe, even if just a little. I waited until the moment was right. As quiet as a church mouse, I slinked into the room. I'd never done anything like this before. This was pure seduction, though Boaz seemed quite willing to be seduced.¹⁷ I knew it could blow up in my face. But, after I had come this far, I had to complete my mission. He looked so surprised. He waked up acting like he didn't know I was there. Is there any way that he didn't hear me, or feel me? He inquired, and I identified, and then I went for it. "Spread your cloak over me," I said. I can't even believe I went there. Naomi hadn't suggested it—heck, I hadn't even of thought about it until just then. It came to me, and before I knew it, it was out there. "Spread your cloak..." I might as well have gone down on one knee and pulled out the ring.¹⁸ The meaning is clear—I had just asked one of the richest and sweetest men in the land to marry me—a widowed, broken-down Moabite woman without a penny to her name. I, who am nothing special and who should expect nothing special. Oh what have I done? Again, my fates are in his hands. If he rejects me, I'm a goner. If he yells out, all of those men sleeping out there will wake up. They will find me here, in this compromising position, and nothing would stop them from being very friendly, or, actually, very unfriendly, to me. If he tells what happened, I'll be blackballed from the community and labeled a harlot. I could end up being passed back and forth in the local gambling ring. I don't know the laws, but they might be able to take me out and stone me like an adulterer. Or they might have their way with me and send me packing into the wilderness. As a foreign woman with only one friend, I know there would be no one to stop them. What is he going to say? Please, please say "Yes."

I'll write later,
Ruth

Entry 4

Dear Diary:

My life is, it always seems, in the hands of another. I'm standing here staring at the city gates, looking at all the important people dressed up in their fancy outfits discussing important topics. I'm not going up there; I don't know that I'd be welcome, plus, today, I am the topic of conversation. There they are by the goats, bartering over my future like I was a piece of property. Thank God that Boaz took me up on my proposal. Then, he tells me there is a closer relative that we have to worry about. Who is this guy? I've never met him, never heard of him. I don't know what kind of man he is or how he treats his women. I don't know if he is filled with the kindness of Naomi

and Boaz or whether he is filled with the evil of so many other people. I don't know if he has many wives and wants me just to keep their kids. I don't know if he is a drunk or an abuser. What if my "friendliness" with Boaz has created a baby? What will this man do if I have another man's baby when he marries me? I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't torture myself. But I can't help it. What if he is scum? I could easily find myself as his sixth or seventh wife, relegated to hauling the water and caring for the animals and raising the kids of the other women. I could easily find myself beaten beyond all recognition, with no one to whom to complain. I could easily find myself sold into slavery with no hope of ever finding health and happiness. I could easily find myself the victim of rape, and violence, and hatred. I'm still a Moabite woman—no one has a reason to treat me with respect. Oh, this is terrible. I feel like when I was a little girl and my brothers would aggravate me. While one acted like he was giving me some candy, the other would sneak up behind me with his head ducked low. With my head turned, he slammed his shoulder into the back of my knees and stood straight up, lifting me onto one shoulder. I would feel my feet leaving the ground, and I would feel that moment of panic. I would stretch my leg as far as it would stretch, all the way down to the tip my toe, trying desperately to maintain contact with the ground. If I had one foot on the ground, I had at least some control. What would he do with me? Would he toss me into the prickly haystack or into a muddy puddle? Would he just let me fall? No matter what, there was nothing I could do about it. It seems like my whole life is full of that feeling of panic and helplessness.

Now they seem to be taking off their shoes and throwing them at each other. It looks like the fate of my life has again been determined by others, while I stand to the side and just wait for what the fates have for me. Yes, it could end up bad. But, wait a minute, Ruth. Take a deep breath. Think back over the years. Naomi and her family happen to walk into my village. Was that just coincidence, or was it the hand of God? What if the parents hadn't arranged the marriage? Was that just coincidence, or was it the hand of God? What if Naomi had rejected me on that trail and sent me back to my family, to my people, to the laughter and the scourge of the woman who had shackled up with the Israelites? But she didn't. Was that just blind luck, or was it the hand of God? What if I had gone gleaned that day in some other field, if I had never met that man named Boaz, if I had just scrounged from sunrise to sunset, barely bringing enough grain on which to live? But I didn't. Was that just happenstance, or was it the hand of God? What if he had said, "No," if he had kicked me off of that threshing room floor and out of his life, if he had spread my name through the mud of that community, if he had turned me out to a life on my own? But he didn't. Was that just pure good fortune, or was it the hand of God? Why have things turned out as they have? Even through the heartbreaks and the wanderings, when I've felt so out of control, I wonder if someone has been in control. I wonder if it has been their God.

I wonder whether God has had a plan the whole time. I think that, somehow, this has all been a part of God's plan—my whole life—all of the ups and the downs, all of the decisions and plans, all of the good people. So I feel good about Boaz' chances of succeeding in his negotiations. I think everything will be okay. You know, I think God might have something special for us to do even yet.¹⁹

Thanks again,
Ruth

Notes

1. "Second Helvetic Confession," *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Presbyterian Church (USA), 1996), 5.037.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.
3. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 3-4.
4. *Ibid.*, 85.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Dana Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990).
7. *Ibid.*, 19.
8. The Moabites were ancestors of Lot, so they shared Abraham as a common ancestor with the Israelites. See Genesis 19:30-37.
9. The Moabite dialect was the Semitic tongue prevailing in Palestine.
10. For example, during the time of the Judges (the proposed historical setting of Ruth), Eglon of Moab, along with Ammon and Amalek, oppressed Israel (Judges 3:12-14). During the monarchy, Saul attacked Moab (1 Samuel 14:47). David was friendly with Moab for a while (1 Samuel 22:3-4), but later defeated the country (2 Samuel 8:2).
11. This was the primary deity of the Moabites.
12. See 2 Kings 3:27.
13. Leviticus 19:9-10 states the law: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God." Also, see Deuteronomy 24:19-20 for another statement.
14. See Deuteronomy 23:3.
15. Sadly, this story, while fictional, is all too appropriate. The Bible contains many "texts of terror," to quote Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), and these texts fit this story well within Ruth's imagined world. Genesis 16 tells the story of Hagar, a woman of a non-covenantal people who is tossed into the wilderness to die when she is no longer useful. 2 Samuel 13 tells the story of Tamar, who is tricked, raped, and turned back out on the street by her own brother. Judges 19 tells the horrible story of a woman who is raped, tortured, murdered and dismembered. Judges 11 tells the story of a daughter who is apparently killed by her father as a part of a perverse agreement with God. Even the ultimate book of love, Song of Solomon, alludes to the abuse of the woman, "Making their rounds in the city the sentinels found me; they beat me, they wounded me, they took away my mantle, those sentinels of the walls" (5:7).
16. In fact, "nearest kin" (go-el) is the same word as "redeemer," a word sometimes used to describe God (see Psalm 19: 14).
17. This interpretation fills in the "silences" left open by the text.
18. The meaning of "spread your cloak" is unclear. But, elsewhere in the Old Testament, this act seems to be a part of an engagement ritual. See, for instance, Ezekiel 16:8: "I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine."
19. She was right. See Ruth 4:21-22.