

"Bible Heroes: Rahab"
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 23, 2017

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 107:1-9

¹O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. ²Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble ³and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. ⁴Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; ⁵hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. ⁶Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; ⁷he led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. ⁸Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind. ⁹For he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things.

Second Scripture Reading: Joshua 2:1-21

¹Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. ²The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." ³Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land." ⁴But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. ⁵And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them." ⁶She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof ⁹and said to the men: "I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. ¹⁰For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. ¹²Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith ¹³that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." ¹⁴The men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land." ¹⁵Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. ¹⁶She said to them, "Go toward the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterward you may go your way." ¹⁷The men said to her, "We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you ¹⁸if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. ¹⁹If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. ²⁰But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you." ²¹She said,

“According to your words, so be it.” She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.



Sermon: “Bible Heroes: Rahab”

In a book entitled “All the Women of the Bible,” written in 1967, the author describes Rahab as a “‘Harlot’ ... who yields herself indiscriminately to every man approaching her.” The author goes on to say that “Rahab indulged in venal wantonness as travelling merchants came her way and were housed in her ill-famed abode.”¹ Since the Bible provides no details about Rahab’s life, we can safely assume that the author derives his opinion of her from his own ideas about people of her profession. She carries a label so she gets painted with pretty broad strokes.

But Rahab is also mentioned in the New Testament books of Hebrews² and James³ where she is listed among those who are models for our faith. So, is she saint or sinner? Let’s find out.

Scripture at times, takes a dim view of prostitution.⁴ In Leviticus, we are told that prostitution is something that profanes or defiles the women who engage in it.⁵ Proverbs describes a prostitute in decidedly negative terms⁶ and the prophet Amos condemns Amaziah by predicting that Amaziah’s wife will become a prostitute.⁷ Paul chastises people in Corinth who frequent houses of prostitution⁸ and in the gospels, prostitutes are often counted with tax collectors as the worst of sinners.⁹

It’s worth noting that the men who visit prostitutes are not condemned nearly as often or as harshly as the women themselves.

But in the gospel according to Matthew, in the long list of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, we find the names of two women with connections to prostitution.¹⁰ One was Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah.¹¹ When Tamar’s husband (Judah’s son) died, the law required that Judah provide one of his other sons to be her husband. This would allow her to bear children who would be the rightful heirs of her deceased first husband.

Except, either through negligence or forgetfulness, Judah did not keep his responsibility to Tamar. So, she took it upon herself. She dressed as a prostitute and waited near the town where she knew Judah must travel to have his sheep shorn. When Judah came that way, he “went in to her” but because she wore a veil, he did not recognize her. She then tricked him into leaving his staff and signet with her as payment for her services.

¹ Lockyer, Herbert. “Rahab.” *All The Women of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1967, p. 131.

² Hebrews 11:31, NRSV

³ James 2:25, NRSV

⁴ Ackerman, Susan. “Prostitution.” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, Me-R, Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 650.

⁵ Leviticus 19:29, Leviticus 21:9, NRSV

⁶ Proverbs 23:27-28, NRSV

⁷ Amos 7:17, NRSV

⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:15-20, NRSV

⁹ Matthew 21:28-32, NRSV

¹⁰ Matthew 1: 3 & 5, NRSV

¹¹ Genesis 38-39, NRSV

Some weeks later, when it became clear that she was pregnant, Judah demanded that she be put to death for “playing the whore.” But when Tamar produced Judah’s staff and signet as proof of who had made her pregnant, Judah stood convicted before the community. Her apparent transgression was rooted in his refusal to live up to the requirements of the law.

Which brings up an interesting point. Though prostitutes are counted among sinners, the choice to enter into the “world’s oldest profession” is not always made from among a list of more favorable options. You see, in the time of Tamar and Rahab, women had few rights and fewer options for self-sufficiency. Without a husband to provide for and protect a woman, there were few avenues for her to earn a living. And while her family would have taken her in and provided for her, if they found themselves in debt or other dire straits, there were only a handful of options to help them get out of it. One was debt slavery. Another was prostitution.

Contrary to what our unnamed author of 1967 asserts, Rahab does not “yield herself indiscriminately.” That implies that she *wants* to be a prostitute or is indulging some sinful desire. Rahab only “yields herself” to those who can pay her. She is in this not for personal enjoyment but for survival. It is a fine distinction to make, but an important one.

Because we see her family, including her father and brothers, are still alive and living in the city, it is likely that Rahab has been forced into prostitution for economic reasons, probably to pay off family debt. Old Testament scholar Jerome Creach asserts that “Rahab was the victim of an economic system in which women had no opportunities to earn a living; women like her sometimes found themselves on the edge of life, with slavery or prostitution their only options.”¹²

And when we scroll through the long list of Jesus’ ancestors, we find Rahab, also named among them. Just two weeks ago, we counted Samson’s visit to a prostitute as a strike against his character. Today, the prostitute is the hero of the story.

At first glance, it would be easy to see this as another case of God using unlikely people for God’s kingdom purposes. But as we explore her story, we find that she is more than what we might assume her to be because of her stated profession; she is actually the most intelligent and faithful person in this story.

As she appears in the narrative, we find that Joshua has decided to send spies into the Promised Land to take stock of it, especially the city of Jericho. When these two spies enter Cana, they proceed to the home of Rahab, the prostitute. Historically, religious leaders have had a difficult time casting a prostitute as an instrument of God’s will and they’ve *really* struggled to explain why these spies “on a mission from God,” would visit one. So sometimes she is described as an innkeeper. The two spies stay with her because, well, where else would weary travelers sleep than an inn?

But there is no way around this, she is what the text says she is, using the Hebrew word for prostitute three separate times. Why the spies stop at her house is never explained in the text and we will leave discussion of our opinions on the matter for another time.

But the author tells us that it doesn’t take long before the King in Jericho discovers that there are spies in the land. His response is to send his soldiers to find them. When the king’s men come to Rahab, they know

¹² Creach, Jerome F. D. *Joshua: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2003. p. 33

the two Hebrew spies have recently been guests of her establishment and demand that she bring them out.

But in the face of royal authority, Rahab does something remarkable: she lies to protect foreigners who are preparing to invade her country. Actively working to aid an enemy of the state is the very definition of “Treason,” which according to US Code Title 18, is punishable by imprisonment or death.¹³

She sends the soldiers looking in one direction while she has every intention of sending the Hebrew spies in the other. And then there is a small detail that you might not notice, but which is tremendously important for what happens next. The text tells us that after the soldiers leave in pursuit of the spies, the city gates are closed. The spies are safe for the moment, hidden beneath stalks of flax up on Rahab’s roof, but with the gates closed, they won’t be able to leave the city without help.

And here is where Rahab’s wisdom and intelligence shine. You see, we tend to read this as a story about Rahab saving the spies, which she does. But the welfare of the Hebrew spies is secondary to what Rahab really wants. She explains to the spies that she understands the situation. The Israelites are coming and the God of Israel has already acted to wipe out the nations and kings that have stood in their way up to this point. She understands that Jericho can’t hope to stand against such a mighty God and that when the Israelites come, they will kill everyone and destroy everything in the city... including her and her family.

But Rahab recognizes that she holds the lives of these two spies in her hands. She can either continue to protect them, or she can go back to the authorities and explain that she thought they had left the city but, “lo and behold, they were hiding on my roof!” And the spies know, that if she chooses to do that, they will die. The penalty for espionage is death. That’s been true since people fought wars with sticks and rocks.

Rahab has leverage in this situation, and she knows it. And here’s where that closed city gate comes into play. Because of the location of Rahab’s house in the city wall, her window opens out onto the wide-open countryside... and freedom. Not only has she been hiding the spies, she is the owner of their best route of escape.

She uses all this to her advantage and makes a deal. If they will promise to spare her life and the lives of her family during the invasion that is coming, she will allow them to use her window to escape the city.

Faced with no better options, they accept her terms. “Our life for yours.” The rest of the story is just a fulfillment of that promise. They instruct her to hang a bit of crimson cord in her window so the invaders can identify her, which she does. And when the city falls, and all its residents are slaughtered, Rahab and her family are spared. And we are told that “her family has lived in Israel ever since.”¹⁴

And we are meant to remember her because, as the author writes, “she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.”¹⁵ But her story reminds us that our assumptions about people based on the convenient labels we attach to them do not always or even often, define who and of what that person is capable.

¹³ “Treason Laws in the United States.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 7 July 2017, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treason_laws_in_the_United_States.

¹⁴ Joshua 6:25, NRSV

¹⁵ Joshua 6:25, NRSV

When we hear that Rahab was a prostitute, like our author of 1967, we might think her to be a sinful person. But when we examine the lives of similar women throughout history, we come to find that prostitution, while a dangerous and undesirable profession, is often the result of unavoidable economic circumstances. When people are left with few choices, they sometimes choose a path you and I would not.

But Rahab is a hero of the Bible because she sets an example for us as disciples. That's right, the prostitute is our role model. And if that sounds strange to our ears, then we need to reconsider the way we label people.

Rahab shows herself to be brave, intelligent, and shrewd. She is brave in that she stands before the royal authorities and, with her life on the line, straight-up lies to them. She is intelligent in that she knows how and where to hide the spies where they will not be found, and to send their pursuers in the opposite direction. And she is shrewd. As a woman with little or no power in the society of her day, she recognizes that she has tremendous leverage in this situation. The spies are completely at her mercy and she uses that to negotiate an arrangement with them that will ensure her own safety and the safety of those she loves.

But perhaps the most important way that Rahab models what we should be as disciples is that she has more faith and trust in God than the Israelites in this story.

You see, in the first chapter (which we did not read), God spoke directly to Joshua and told him that God would give them the land. That is the same promise God made to Moses. Yet Joshua still sent spies to make sure that Israel could, in fact, win. Moses did the same thing years earlier. And that time, Joshua himself had been one of the spies.

But while Joshua might have had his doubts, Rahab had none. She had heard about God's power and God's favor for the Israelites, and she believed it. That night on the roof, as she strikes her deal with the Hebrew spies, she says to them:

"I know that the Lord has given you the land... For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below..."¹⁶

She believes that God will do what God has promised. And that belief drove her to risk her own life to commit treason to help the people of God.

Faith that springs forth into action is the very essence of what it means to be a disciple. Just knowing that God is God isn't enough. When we come to a raging river that must be crossed, there is a difference between knowing that the bridge will hold us, and stepping out onto that bridge. The believer knows. The one who has faith, walks across.

¹⁶ Joshua 2:9-11, NRSV

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So when we started I asked the question is Rahab saint or sinner? Well, of course, she is a bit of both. I would not encourage anyone to emulate her profession, but I pray that we can do better in this world than allow people to fall into the misery of conditions that make such a profession a reasonable choice.

But her courage, her faith, and her willingness to act decisively on what she believed about God make her a faithful disciple and servant of God; and one of our models for faith.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come, Amen.