

November 28, 2021

“www.ancestry.com or ‘Who’s Who in Jesus’ Family Tree?’”

Part Three: Rahab’s Roost

A Sermon Based on Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Joshua 1:1-2,6; 2:1

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Rahab, by Marc Chagall

Jeremiah 33:14-15 (NRSV) ~ ¹⁴ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Joshua 1:1-2,6; 2:1 (NRSV) ~ After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying, ² “My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. ... ⁶ Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. ... ² Then 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.

Today we begin the season of Advent, a period of watching and waiting for the birth of the Messiah, the one whom the Hebrew peoples had been expecting for generations, who would be a descendant of King David. Today's Old Testament lectionary passage from the prophet Jeremiah (33:14-16) clearly captures the mood and theme of this season when he says: ¹⁴ *The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.* ¹⁵ *In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.* ¹⁶ *In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."*

Jeremiah's prophecy, describing the period between 597-582 BCE, spoke to a time of acute anxiety and fear when the Israelites were ruled by the Babylonians and Assyrians, outside forces over which they felt they had no control. While the outward circumstances might be so different than today, we all know what anxiety, fear, and helplessness feel like, having just undergone twenty months of living through a pandemic where we have been quarantined, sick, have lost loved ones, not knowing whether we may be facing yet another variant sweeping through our community. Like those whom Jeremiah was addressing, things can seem so out of our control. We all so long for a word of hope that the tides will turn and things will get better. The prophet Jeremiah was such a voice of hope speaking into a situation of insecurity by prophesying that the days were indeed coming when God's promise to Israel would be fulfilled as God would send a descendent of King David do what was right and just in the land: *I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land.* ¹⁶ *In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. (CEB)*

A righteous branch from David's lineage. Today we are in the final part of a mini-sermon series called www.ancestry.com or 'Who's Who in Jesus' Family Tree?': Part Three: Rahab's Roost. We recall that Matthew defies convention and shocks his readers when he includes five women in Jesus' family tree: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. Three of them non Jews, a fourth married to a despised Hittite, a fifth an unwed mother, and all of them the victims of a patriarchal culture and seemingly unworthy of ever having mothered sons who would lead to King David and then on to Jesus. So far we have looked at Ruth and Tamar. I'll let you read the story of Bathsheba on your own and later during Advent of course we will be talking about Jesus' mother Mary. Today we will take a deep dive into the story of Rahab as told in Joshua.

First, let's set the context. We remember that Moses (refusing to heed his wife's advice to ask for directions) led God's people from an escape from slavery in Egypt to forty years of wandering in the wilderness. When he was 120 years old, he died before reaching the Promised Land but with God's assurance that his successor Joshua would complete his mission. After the death of Moses, the Lord said to the mighty warrior Joshua: ***"My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. ...⁶ Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them.*** (Josh 1:1-2,6) We stand at the river Jordan. On one side we find thousands of Israelites encamped—men, women, children, livestock, all their possessions that they have been lugging around for the past forty years. On the other side of the Jordan river stands Jericho, known to be the worst of the Amorite cities, a wicked and dangerous place. Joshua, listening to God's orders, called his officers and asked them to get the message out throughout the camp that everyone had three days to pack up and get ready to finally begin their entry into the Promised Land.

From his officers Joshua chose his top two men, the equivalent of the best Mossad agents he had, men skilled in espionage and reconnaissance missions. Their job was to stake out the territory, assess the dangers and the best way to conquer the city. We imagine them stealthily making their way toward the walls of the city in the darkness of night, perhaps hiding in a hole in the city wall and making their way silently to the city gate. At the city gate they looked up and saw what appeared to be an inn, since male travelers and residents seemed to be gathering there. Perhaps they saw a female enticing a male customer toward her through the window. They realized that it was a brothel. The absolute perfect place for them to enter the city of Jericho since they could blend in with other travelers passing through. Since there would be lots of wine poured and tongues loosened because of it, the two spies would be able to listen into lots of conversations and perhaps assess the best way to conquer the city. And who knows but that they might not also want to partake of the merchandise offered in this brothel! So they made their way ***"into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there"*** (Josh 2:1)

So who is this Rahab? She has come down to us through history as "Rahab-the-harlot" almost as if "the-harlot" was her last name. We have tried to sanitize her through history with both Jewish and Christian commentators speculating that she was more of an "innkeeper." But no matter how much we might try to tweak the translations and interpretation, the Hebrew term *zoonah* and the Greek word *porne* simply don't allow for

us to use the term “inn-keeper” to describe Rahab’s profession. We might, however, translate these words as prostitute, hooker, Madame, whore, woman of the night, call girl, escort, woman of the streets, lady of pleasure, tart, coquette, floozy, in addition to harlot. So, yes, Rahab was a harlot. My sense is that she probably was the Madame of a brothel that served meals, abundant alcohol, and also serviced men with a number of other women working there.

So many images come to my mind when I think of Rahab’s line of work. I was to learn something about harlots when we were living in Germany during my middle school and early high school years. Often when we got school breaks we would get on the train and go visit other countries, staying in inexpensive youth hostels. One weekend we took the train over to Amsterdam. We passed through the notorious “red light district,” where scantily dressed woman actually stood like merchandise in shop windows (some of which had cages in them), parading and selling their bodies to locals and the many tourists who traveled to Amsterdam for such purposes. It really freaked me out and I was repulsed by the men who leered. Was Rahab like one of those women, I wondered? Did she stand in the window of her house and parade her body?

I had another eye-opening and sobering experience of what a harlot might have been when I was in graduate school at Drew University when I lived in graduate housing at Wendell Hall. A very beautiful and intelligent grad student, who will remain nameless to protect her identity, lived on my floor. She was a political science major, and came from a pretty wholesome all American middle class family in the Midwest (Indiana if I remember correctly). I early noticed that she seemed to have a lot more money than the rest of us students who were struggling financially as we worked our way through grad school as lowly paid graduate assistants. She had expensive clothing and jewelry and a sport’s car. She would disappear for weekends and sometimes would even be gone for a week at a time. One night she confessed to me that she worked for a wealthy, much older gentleman. Her job was to accompany him on business trips and occasional cruises and she was paid a considerable amount of money to do so. She didn’t want to take out any more student loans and so this was financing her grad school. I wonder if Rahab was engaged in a high class escort service like this grad student?

Then there was the period of time when I worked with Healthy Start, a social service agency working with pregnant teens who were seen to be at high risk because they had been abused as children or were heavy drug users in an area of rural east Tennessee country where meth labs burned during the night in garages and trailers and many women

who became addicted while still young resorted to prostitution to support their drug habit. In fact, friends of mine opened a Christian ministry center for youth called “Rahab’s Roost,” the name of which will become self-explanatory as I move forward in my sermon. Anyway, I wonder whether Rahab was a harlot because she was desperate for finances?

And then there was our later experience in northern Thailand in 1997 where we visited some of our Disciples of Christ missionary friends, the Eubanks, in Chiang Mai. Part of the Eubanks’ ministry was working with young women who were involved in servicing the many European men who traveled to Thailand on expensive sex vacations. These young women certainly did not want to sell their bodies for sex, but they did so either because they were forced to by the men who had somehow enslaved them, or reluctantly did so out of love of their families who were living in poverty. There are many groups in Thailand trying to help young Thai prostitutes. After today’s sermon you should not be surprised to hear that one of them is called “Rahab Ministries Thailand” (www.rahabministriesthailand.com). Was Rahab forced to become a harlot to help support her family?

But don’t for a moment think that human sex trafficking just took place in past eras or only overseas. It presently takes place in our own country. Listen to this statement by an organization called—yes you’ve guessed it—RAHAB: “Over the past 11 years RAHAB has encountered hundreds of women who have been trafficked into prostitution in Akron, Ohio. RAHAB seeks out girls who are being coerced onto our own streets as prostitutes. RAHAB is a non-profit Christian ministry of staff and volunteers devoted to rescuing and restoring these women. ... Our vision is to open a Safe House for women to heal and recover from the atrocity of human trafficking.” (<http://www.rahab-ministries.org/>)

Anyway, I wonder if Rahab started out like these young Thai women or the young women who have been trafficked into prostitution in Akron, Ohio, or Louisville, KY? During the original Rahab’s time (1500-1200 BCE) there were really only two kinds of harlots or prostitutes. There were the Canaanite temple prostitutes who were engaged in religiously mandated sexual rites. Then there were those impoverished women who resorted to prostitution for survival after finding themselves at the margins of society, perhaps widowed and then discarded by their husband’s family, childless (and hence without financial support). Rahab may have fit into this second category.

So what do we know about Rahab? As already stated, we know for sure that Rahab was a harlot. Liz Curtis Higgs, author of *Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn*

from *Them*, has said that Rahab’s “establishment, situated as it was by the city gates of Jericho, undoubtedly served many a weary traveler. The difference was, for the price of clean sheets, a guest found a woman waiting between them.”¹ We learn that because Rahab’s house was actually embedded right in the walls of Jericho beside the gate leading into the city, she would have had windows that looked out in both directions. She could see not only into the city but also may well have been able to see the Israelites camped off in the distance. We know her house was multi-storied because the spies needed to hold onto a rope to be able to get to the ground below to escape. We can only imagine that many other men including cheating husbands had escaped down that wall too! We know that her house had a roof because it was there that she hid the Israelite spies under flax. Perhaps she dried out this flax to make linen as a little side business, which she could then sell to make some extra money. We also know that she did not live with her family but rather alone. Perhaps, like Tamar, she was a widow who had been rejected by her husband’s family because they did not want to support her. Yet we learn from scripture that she had a relationship with her biological family and dearly loved them because she worked hard to negotiate a bargain with the Israelite spies to spare both her and her family in exchange for her protecting them. Finally, we learn that, even though she was a Canaanite, she had been introduced to Judaism and had come to believe in their God, professing her new-found faith by stating ***“The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below”*** (Josh 2:16). Perhaps some of her customers had told her about the Israelites whose God had saved them by parting the Red Seas and also about their military conquests.

So back to our story. The two spies entered Rahab’s Roost, settled in, and likely listened in on tipsy conversations and gossip between customers drinking wine. We don’t know what these two spies told Rahab about themselves but Rahab helped to hide them. And thank goodness she did because word had gotten out that they were there. No sooner had she come back downstairs after hiding them underneath the flax that was drying on her roof, when officials sent by the King of Jericho arrived and demanded to know where they were. In response, she told an important and, in my view, ethically permissible lie when 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.”*** (Josh 2:405). In other words, “They went thataway!”² The men believed her and went rushing

¹ Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible And What We Can Learn From Them* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 1999), p. 156.

² Higgs, p. 158.

off to search the area for the Israelite spies. Then she went to the spies and negotiated a deal. First, after proclaiming her faith in their God, she asked that, just as she had shown compassion to them by hiding them, that they reciprocate by showing compassion to her by sparing her and her family. They replied that they would as long as she did not betray them, saying: ***“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.”*** (Josh 2:14) To protect her, they asked her to gather her family into her home and then hang a scarlet cord from the window as a sign to the Israelites of their promise to spare them. She let them down the side of the wall with a rope and then tied the scarlet cord in the window.

Scarlet! Higgs says that: “Now that’s a color that makes a statement. *The Scarlet Letter*. A scarlet woman. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet ...’ (Isaiah 1:18) Scarlet reeks of fallen women, of red-light districts, of Scarlet O’Hara sauntering into Miss Melanie’s party in a shocking red gown that launched all of Atlanta into a social tailspin. If you were playing the part of a shameless hussy, what color nail polish would you wear? Of course. Rahab’s sins were as scarlet as the thread that draped from her window and every bit as obvious. Oh, can I identify with that! That’s why God’s grace is so amazing. When we confess our sins—literally let them hang out like Rahab’s red thread—and repent, leaving the old life behind as Rahab did, we are forgiven and washed clean, without a spot or blemish left. We no longer look like scarlet sinners; we look like grateful grace-bearers. On Rahab—on all of us—red is a very becoming color when it signifies a confession of our sins and our desire to trust God.” (Higgs, p. 161)

Rahab kept her end of the bargain. She gathered her family into her home, hung a scarlet cord from the window, and did not tell a soul about the spies. And the spies kept their side of the bargain for, when the Israelites came and massacred the entire city of Jericho and all its inhabitants, they did so with the strict order that ***“only Rahab the harlot and all who are with her in her house shall live, because she hid the messengers that we sent”*** (Joshua 6:17, RSV).

And spare them they did! You remember the phrase that “the walls came tumbling down”? Well, Rahab’s house was embedded in those walls but they were preserved along with Rahab and her entire family! The scripture continues by telling us the following startling piece of information: ***“But Rahab the harlot, and her father’s household, and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive; and she dwelt in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho”*** (Josh 6:25, RSV).

What does it mean when it says that *“she dwelt in Israel to this day”*? It means she left the Canaanite people behind and joined the Israelite community. We know that she was considered to have become part of the Jewish people because, according to rabbinical tradition in the Midrash, Rahab is named as one of the four most beautiful women the ancient world has ever known, along with Sarah, Abigail, and Esther. Tradition and scripture further says that she married one of the spies, whose name was Salmon. And she *“has dwelt in Israel to this day”* is substantiated because from the union of Rahab and Salmon, would come Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth (whom we talked about in part one of this sermon series). Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David, from whose lineage Jesus was to come (Matt 1:5-6).

But that’s not all! Rahab is not only important because of the role she played as a righteous branch in Jesus’ family tree but also because of what she has taught the Christian tradition about faith. Indeed, in Paul’s honor roll call of those who triumphed by faith, in the great cloud of witnesses that includes Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David, only two women are mentioned: the great Matriarch Sarah and, guess who? Rahab-the-harlot. Just listen to this passage from the book of Hebrews! ³⁰ *By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.* ³¹ *By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies.* (Hebrews 11:30-31, RSV).

But that’s not all! She is not only remembered for her faith but also for her works. Listen to what the Apostle James says: ²⁴ *You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.* ²⁵ *Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?* (James 2:24-25)

Rahab: an exemplar of both faith and works. I’m sure that the prophet Jeremiah never could have imagined that Rahab-the-Harlot would be one of those from whom a “righteous Branch” would spring up for David, from whose lineage our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ would come. But that goes to show that people with shameful histories need not wear a scarlet letter for the rest of their lives. For, as Higgs says, “if God can turn a harlot into a holy vessel, entrusting her with the very genes that would one day produce the King of kings surely those of us with a past can leave our shame in the rubble and walk away, fixing our eyes on the One who washes us white as snow.”³

Let us pray ...

³ Higgs, p. 166.