

November 4, 2018 - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Women of the Old Testament: Rahab -- The Art of the Deal

Scripture: Joshua 2, 6

Rahab is one of the five women mentioned in Jesus' ancestry in the Gospel of Matthew. We have already heard about Eve and Tamar. Genealogies in Scripture serve a different purpose than they do for us. In Scripture, genealogies are meant to resonate with stories about the people mentioned. The names in a Biblical genealogy are a little bit like song titles. If I say to you, "*I Can't Get No Satisfaction*", the name refers to the whole song by The Rolling Stones. Or if I say, "*Psalm 23*", I am referring to the whole Psalm, not just its title. The same is true for a genealogy. The story of the person is what is being referred to, and it is that story that is important as to why the name was included in the first place. So when Matthew includes Rahab in the genealogy, there is something important about her that informs our understanding of Jesus.

Rahab, we learn in Joshua 2, is the madame at what was probably the Pussycat Ranch of Jericho in the day. She is a prostitute and apparently runs a house of prostitution in the wall by the gate that leads into and out of Jericho. There is, like so many of our stories in Scripture, a lot going on here and where we get hung up can tell us a lot about who we are, rather than what is really going on in the story. So, to begin, we recognize that Rahab is not saved from prostitution - that is an accepted and understood designation of her work and what she does. The text offers no judgment one way or the other. What Rahab and her family are saved from is the destruction of Jericho. She is saved from Jericho because she makes a deal with the spies of Israel after she helps the spies avoid detection by the King of Jericho.

This story resonates back through the first five books of the Bible, and also forward all the way through the New Testament. The imagery evokes and pulls us in many directions, but continually refers back to God's radical grace, which is also called *chesed*, or loving-kindness, in the Old Testament. Rahab is like a tuning fork that vibrates through Scripture in many ways. So let's follow some of those vibrations through Scripture.

VIBRATION 1

Let's begin with where Rahab lives. She lives in a wall by the gate of the city. Her parlor is close to the pass-through point of Jericho, where the inside of the city meets the outside of the world. In other words, Rahab lives on the boundary and she is a boundary keeper. Several of our prior Old Testament women have been boundary crossers, and Rahab will not be the last. In Rahab's brothel, she clearly served both those in the city and those outside the city. She is also a gatekeeper. By profession, Rahab is on the boundaries of

what is acceptable, then and now. By ethnicity, she is on the boundary for who is 'allowed' to live in the land given to God's people. And by ancestry, she crosses the boundaries of purity in Jesus' lineage.

Boundary crossers and gatekeepers are unusual people because they know stuff. Of all the places for Joshua's spies to stay, isn't interesting that they choose a brothel? Especially a brothel right at the entrance and exit of the city. The spies know something we all should know. They know that Rahab, because of what she does for a living and where she lives, is at the center of the hub of the flow of information about what is happening inside the city and what is happening outside. This is why she knows the people in the city are panicking about the Israelites and their scrappy army that is racing across Canaan to claim the land God has given them. This is also why she was able to negotiate an exceptional deal with the spies for the sake of her family.

Here is the teaching from the walls of Jericho and the inhabitant of those walls: The people who hold the wisdom and knowledge of people and places are often the people we would instead reject. When we reject the prostitutes and sex workers, or any of those our culture chooses to exclude - addicts, ex-cons, whomsoever it may be for you, we also reject the vast reservoirs of wisdom and knowledge these people hold for us. This is why Jesus hung out with people like this, and had a reputation as a boundary-crosser.

VIBRATION 2

Rahab was able to make a deal with the spies to save her family and herself because of the knowledge and wisdom she was able to provide. The spies could not say no because the information was crucial to their mission. That, and she saved their lives by lying to the king of Jericho.

Rahab loves the God she does not know more than she fears the destruction of her city, and so when she makes a deal with the spies, she does so by putting all her confidence in this unknown God. Often it is said that we shouldn't make deals with God, but what then do we do with stories like this, a story where deals are made with God's people for material and earthly salvation from destruction? Is this not also a deal with God? Part of the reason we say, "*Don't make deals with God*" is because it gives us the opportunity to 1. Not be disappointed if the deal doesn't work out, or 2. Give us an exit strategy to protect a fragile faith.

In Rahab, though, we have an example of someone who only knows about the God of the Hebrew people because of what she has heard from clients in her place of business. She says,

*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. ¹¹**As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, 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.** (Joshua 2:8)*

When I was coming back into the faith, I decided to read the Bible from start to finish with one view in mind - to find examples of God's grace, especially in the most difficult places in Scripture. This story of Rahab was the standout story in the Book of Joshua, which is a hard book to read, because the call for Jericho and all the cities that follow is essentially an account of genocide.

Radical grace - the kind we know through the story of Jesus Christ - is not possible without stories like this on in the Book of Joshua. God's grace is not that valuable when things are going well, when destruction is **not** imminent, when we are **not** being stalked by death and despair. The value, the gold, and the revelation is when we, like Rahab, know very little about God and act anyway, relying on what we pray and hope and desire to be God's unfiltered grace for us with no indication this may be true. This is the essence of Rahab's deal; this is what she goes all in on and bets against the house. She has no idea whether the spies will uphold their end of the bargain, but she trusts that the God she does not know will see the deal through to the end.

I am reminded of the lyrics from one of my favorite songs from the early 1990s, from Kate Bush's song "Running Up That Hill":

*And if I only could,
I'd make a deal with God,
And I'd get him to swap our places,
Be running up that road,
Be running up that hill,
With no problems.*

It is worth noting that the words Rahab used to seal her negotiation with the spies are the same words Mother Mary used to acknowledge her being chosen by God to carry Jesus. *According to your word, so be it.* Another translation would be, *Let it be so according to your word.*

VIBRATION 3

The Mishnah and Aggadah, which are the stories told in between the stories we receive in Scripture, say that Rahab was the mother and grandmother of five prophets, including Jeremiah. Her good works resonate through the New Testament. In Hebrews, Rahab is held up as the the capstone of the story of the Exodus from Egypt. In verse 29-31, Hebrews says,

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

The name Rahab is the poetic name the Hebrew people used for ‘**Egypt**’. Thinking this through should be a mind-blower for us.

Follow this thread with me:

The final symbol of God to the people of Israel during their slavery in Egypt that they would be rescued was to place the blood of a lamb on the lintel of their doorway. Exodus says,

*21 Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and told them, “Go at once and select for yourselves a lamb for each family, and slaughter the Passover lamb. **22 Take a cluster of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin, and brush the top and the two side posts of the door frame with some of the blood. None of you shall go out the door of his house until morning. 23 When the LORD passes through to strike down the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the top and the two side posts and pass over the door; so He will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down....(Ex 12:21-23).***

The red blood on the door is the sign that the Israelites are the ones to be saved from destruction, that the Lord will *pass over* them.

Rahab is told by the spies to hang a red cord out her window when the armies of God’s people arrive. The red cord is the sign that Rahab and her family will be saved from destruction, that the Lord’s people will pass over her and her family.

Rahab, remember, also means Egypt. What does it say about God’s loving-kindness, God’s *chesed*, that freedom from destruction is also available to those who wished to destroy God’s people? God’s intention is not to just free God’s people, but to free **all people**. When Rahab is dealing with the spies, she says to them,

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.'

That phrase "since I have dealt kindly with you" uses the word *chesed*. "Since I have shown you the loving-kindness of your God..." would be the better translation. Perhaps the freedom shown God's people is also the freedom available to those who would oppress the freedoms of those who do not know God. As Paul says, *Wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

The blood of the lamb on the lintel of the doorway that saved the Israelites from destruction and the red cord in Rahab's window that saves her from destruction reaches forward to the Cross of Christ. I am not one to talk much about the blood of Christ, except in the context of the Lord's Supper, but today, the blood of Christ on the Cross does for us what that same symbol did for the Israelites and for Rahab's family. As Ephesians 2 says,

12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

14 For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility

Our salvation, our sense of closeness and connection to God, is often dependent more on what we do not know than what we do know. We share this with Rahab. Furthermore, our relationship with God and Christ has very little to do with our present or our prior deeds. Rahab becomes an honored and recognized matriarch of the Jewish people - even though she is not an Israelite or from an honored profession. But notice our story has nothing to say about where Rahab is from or what she does for a living. This story has everything to say about the loving-kindness she showed to God's people, and the loving-kindness shown to her.

This is what we learn when we follow the symbols and signs of Scripture through the arc of the story. By trying to follow the crooked and winding path of the signs we learn that God's loving kindness, God's *chesed*:

- works through people on the boundaries to fulfill God's desires for God's people, and also for people who do not consider themselves part of God's people. Wisdom resides deeply in those who live on the boundaries.

- and our experience of it is not nearly as dependent on knowing stuff about who God is as it is in trusting that the God who frees is also a God who can free you as well, *whether you believe or not*.
- provides us with symbols and signs of the faith which always point to God's grace, love, and hope for each of us and all people.

This is the art of the deal when we are dealing with God and God's people. As one writer said in a blog post I read about Rahab, "*Toss out that scarlet thread and say with conviction, Here I am, Lord! Save me!*"¹

Let us all tune our souls for the resonances and vibrations of God's loving-kindness and the example of Rahab in our lives.

Amen.

¹ Liz Curtis Higgs, <https://www.lizcurtishiggs.com/blog/>, in her series 'Bad Girls of the Bible')