

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“God’s Imperfect Family: Rahab’s Commitment to Peace”
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Joshua 2:1-14; Luke 1:68-79

This advent we are looking at the women in Jesus’ genealogy as recorded in Matthew’s gospel. But in Matthew’s recording of Jesus’ heritage he mentions only a couple women. There are lines and lines of men, this guy is the father of that guy who is the father of that guy. In the midst of all these male names there are only a few women. But why choose these women? They must be prime examples of something. Matthew breaks up his rhythm of father and son to bring attention to these mothers, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary. They are held up as women worthy of being connected to Jesus. Worthy to be mentioned as branches on his family tree.

Last week we heard how Tamar held on to hope, showing that Jesus’ family tradition was to believe in the power of hope. This week we are looking at Rahab. A woman we know only a few verses worth about but is for some reason important enough to make the cut for Jesus’ genealogy. To know about Rahab we have to dig a little deeper and open our net wider. It has been a journey to piece together her life this week, through historical records and writings about similar women of the time period. What we can be sure of is what scripture records. Rahab lived in Jericho before the Israelites invaded. In any introduction of her she is linked to the profession of prostitution. We also know her home sits on the outside wall of the city, and that she has family that she cares deeply for. The rest of the details we must piece together.

Tradition holds that Rahab was beautiful. Jewish communities speak of Rahab’s beauty much like the beauty of Queen Esther. But if she is living on the outside wall of the city beauty was the only thing she was rich in. The community along the wall was a slum. It was the most dangerous part of the city, because if anyone attacked, they would be the first to die. The rich lived in the center, the poor along the wall. The fate of a beautiful poor girl is not hard to guess. The word we translate as prostitute more closely describes a temple sex worker. The Canaanite gods accepted sex offerings, so girls would serve in their temples for worshipers to give these offerings. Necessity must have driven Rahab into this profession too.

Some scholars believe her beauty attracted the attention of the King of Jericho and his gifts to her at the temple allowed her to buy a home and start a business. The business was similar to our wild west saloons. An Inn, bar, and brothel in one convenient location. It was also a hot bed of information, which men in authority would also pay well for. So Rahab has earned her way into a little bit of power and money. Her hard work and smart planning has put her in the position to learn things from travelers and pass along the information to the city guard and even the King. Tales are told at her Inn. Tall tales of a group of slaves who escaped Egypt. The God they serve bringing horrific plagues on their enemy, even drying a path in the red sea for them to escape safely from their slavers. These are old tales and they have grown more fanciful over time. Then Rahab begins to hear new tales. Stories of great battles. Of the Israelites defeating great powers in Sihon and Og. Travelers are saying these are the same people in the stories about Egypt. The slaves that escaped. The God who scared pharaoh. Travelers begin to show up who say they have seen these battles with their own eyes and Rahab begins to wonder if the old tales are true. The battles they have seen had outrageous odds against the Israelites but somehow, they keep winning. The battles are getting closer to Jericho, so Rahab alerts the guard and the King. Tries to tell them these Israelites have a great God and Jericho must be prepared to offer peace or they will all die.

Her warnings are ignored. She is poor, and a sex worker, she is an outcast. A slave to the system she was born into. A thought grows in her mind, the Israelites made it out, their God does not ignore outcasts, their God listens and sets slaves free. As her allegiances are being tested she looks out her window in the outer wall and sees the Israelites set up camp on the other side of the river. They are here.

SO Rahab is poor, scrapping together a living. But her profession means she is well connected with the men in authority, and it allows her to know things before they are well known in the city. The spies know this too. Brothels and poor inns are a great place to gather intel. Buy a few rounds and you can get people talking about anything. Poor brothel owners are easily paid off if needed, so Joshua’s spies head to Rahab’s place to gather information. While they are there

the word gets out that some Israelites have been spotted at her place. When the knock comes to her door Rahab thinks fast. She hides the spies under the barley she is letting someone dry on her roof and calmly answers the door. She knows the men and she knows how to lie to them. The guards know Rahab has always been a reliable source of information, so they believe her words and move on. The spies are shocked, this Canaanite woman helped them without even taking a bribe. They are thankful but skeptical. That is when Rahab reveals her intentions.

“I am an outcast in this country” She says “but I heard your God does not turn away from outcasts. All I want is peace. Peace for myself and for my family. All I ask in return for helping you is that you do not bring this battle to my house. And if your God will have me I will become a follower of the God of Israel.” That is who Rahab is, a woman committed to peace. Peace was not an easy choice for Rahab. She had to betray the people she grew up with. The only culture and country she had never known. That is a hard thing to do. To look at the only world you know and see that it is corrupt, to recognize the other side is the good side. That is the hardest part of peace, realizing we are not always the good guys. Every one of us has been the bad guy in someone’s narrative. We have cut someone off on the road, we have broken someone’s heart, we have betrayed someone’s trust. We have used harsh words when we talk to ourselves and to others. Our commitment to peace wans.

When the dust had settled on Jericho Rahab and her family joined the Israelites. Salmon, one of the spies, marries Rahab. It was probably the first time any man did right by her. This offering of love inspires her to repent and give her life to God. The Talmud, Jewish oral tradition, that recounts a prayer Rahab said soon after joining the Israelites. She is believed to have prayed: “Master of the Universe! I have sinned with three things, with my eye, my thigh, and my stomach. By the merit of three things pardon me: the rope, the window, and the barley. Pardon me for engaging in harlotry because I endangered myself when I lowered the rope for the spies from the window in the wall.” Her prayer recognizes that she is a sinner in need of God’s grace. A sinner who upon recognizing their fault did all they could to turn towards God’s peace and do what was right. She prays this prayer to shed all guilt and shame over her past and begin anew with a new life, a new community, and a new God.

She gives birth to Boaz, the man who is able to look past the fallen nature of Ruth and redeem her. When I realized Boaz’s mother was Rahab, a fallen woman, it made so much more sense why he loves Ruth. Rahab must have raised her son to respect all women because Rahab was so disrespected by men. She must have instilled in Boaz an esteem for the laws of the Israelites because that was the community that showed her mercy. She must have raised Boaz to honor God in everything, because the God of Israel had finally brought her peace.

Rahab’s inclusion in Jesus’ genealogy shows that Jesus is just as committed to peace as she was. It’s a family tradition. Pasted on from generation to generation. It shows that Jesus will be committed to bringing peace to this world, a peace that passes all understanding.

Our verses from Luke today are a prayer Zechariah prays over his son John. We know John as John the Baptist. Zechariah says that John will “go before the lord to prepare the way, to give knowledge of salvation to the people.” He prays for God to turn our feet towards peace. The Hebrew understanding of peace means more than just freedom from trouble it means wanting everything that leads to the highest good. And because we are sinners that means facing the bad in ourselves and repenting. John the Baptist’s job was to help people repent so they were ready for the peace Jesus was bringing. God can turn our feet toward peace but there is a mirror in that direction. A mirror that will force us to see things in ourselves we would rather ignore. SO we turn away, and stumble as we try to walk towards peace without facing peace. John was the one to hold up the mirror to the world. To show us where their lives were not aligned with God’s peace. We can pray for wars to end, for our family to heal, but until we examine our role in those competitions, we are only guessing at the direction we should be walking.

John encouraged people to look in the mirror, Rahab’s example tells us to look in the mirror. To clearly see when we are not on the side of peace and do all we can to change that. Looking in the mirror is hard but trying to walk in the opposite direction we are facing is harder, and frankly makes us look ridiculous. Face peace so you can walk in the way God has guided your feet.