

EVERYDAY HEROES: THAT 'OTHER' WOMAN

October 15, 2017

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Text: Joshua 2:1-16

SCRIPTURE

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. The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." Then 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." But 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. And 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." She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. So 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.

Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and 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. 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. Now 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 that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." The 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." Then 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. She 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."

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

There are questions that some people have a difficult time answering, even though they are just meant to provide content to a casual conversation. I think I have told you I sometimes am hesitant to answer when a stranger asks me what do I do for a living? This is because when I reply that I am a pastor, I often have to listen to a long story about how once some pastor or congregation treated them terribly and that is why they don't go to church any more. I never know quite what to say to stories like that. I just sort of shrug and pretend to be interested and sympathetic.

Another question I have a hard time with is: Where are you from? For most people that is an easy enough question, but not for me. I was born in Rochester NY, but my parents were missionaries in Sierra Leone, West Africa and we had moved five times by the time I was twelve. I have now lived longer here in Iowa than I have lived anywhere else in my life. So does that make me from Iowa now? For many years when I was a teenager, I wasn't even sure what country I was from. I looked and talked like an American, but I didn't feel like an American, at least not like other kids my age. I didn't know anything about the music, the TV shows, the sport teams, and all the other things they were interested in. But at the same time I wasn't really an African either. So who or what was I? Where was I from? How was I supposed to answer those questions?

I did not know what to call it at the time, but I was, and still am to some degree, what is now called a third culture kid or a TCK. We are people whose parents are from one country but lived and worked in another country. It is not a permanent move. Our parents did not immigrate, but while we were growing up we lived in this other country. As a result, we often do not feel entirely at home in either culture, but find more in common with others raised in a similar situation. Hence we become our own third culture. We are third culture kids.

Like anything, there are both disadvantages and advantages to being a TCK. We do have a hard time answering the question “Where are you from?” Home is not a place for us. It is not a particular house or town. Home is relational. It is wherever family and those we love might be. Some would see that as a disadvantage. On the other hand, TCKs have a rich variety of experiences that enable us at times to appreciate and understand what others might miss. This is because we know, first hand, that different does not mean wrong, that our way is not always the best way, that there can be many different perspectives on the same situation. So TCKs are often more open to change, to new opportunities, to taking a risk.

Today we are continuing our Fall sermon series on the Everyday Heroes of the Bible. Last week we talked about the father-in-law of Moses, Jethro, who was concerned about the way Moses was leading the Israelites. I said that because he was an outsider he was able to see things that were oblivious to Moses and his people. Today, we have the story of someone who literally lived on the border, neither an insider nor an outsider. Her name was Rahab, and she was very much a part of the day to day life of the ancient city of Jericho. But at the same time she did not exactly fit in with “polite” society as they say. She was one of those “other” women that are pushed to the margins of the community. They are tolerated as long as they “keep in their place,” and do not step out of line.

In this series on everyday heroes, we are looking at various individuals in the Bible who did not perform some spectacular miracle like parting the Red Sea or walking through a fiery furnace. They were ordinary people who nevertheless served God and often demonstrated great faith. Rahab is a wonderful example of such an everyday hero. Our story begins shortly after the death of Moses as the Israelites were about to enter into the territory promised to their ancestor Abraham. Joshua is now the leader and he wants to know what he is getting into. So he sends in two spies to check things out and report back to him. They must not have been very good spies because it does not take long for word to get to the king of Jericho that two Israelites are in the city nosing around. So these two men go to Rahab asking for help. She hides them up on her roof and sends the Jericho counter espionage agents off on a wild goose chase. When the coast is clear, she sneaks the two out of the city and they are able to safely return to Joshua. While it was a daring thing for Rahab to do, it is a very credible story that could have happened to anyone at any time, in any place.

But Rahab is mentioned three times in the New Testament. She comes up in the very first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, one of four women mentioned as ancestors of Jesus. Yes, the Son of God when he was born on this earth, he was a descendant of this “other” woman, who wasn’t even an Israelite. Rahab is also mentioned in the letter to the Hebrews and in the letter of James. In both places she is offered as an example of the right kind of faith we should try to imitate.

This all may seem rather surprising when we consider her profession. In a number of places she is referred to as a prostitute, and the word used in both Hebrew and Greek is the usual term for a sex worker. But, I think we can safely infer that she was more than just a street walker. For one thing, the implication is that she owned the house where she hid the spies. So she must have had some financial resources. Then we are told that she hides them under bundles of flax drying on the roof of her house. Fibers from flax are spun into threads and then woven into linen. So the sex trade was not Rahab’s only line of business. She was also into textile manufacturing.

I think perhaps Rahab was a successful business woman trying to get by in an extremely male dominated, and often very violent culture. She did what she had to do and seized whatever opportunity came her way in order to do more than simply survive. I was trying to think of someone who might be like Rahab, and Miss Kitty on that old western TV show “Gunsmoke” came to mind. Some of us remember that old show about Marshall Matt Dillon maintaining law and order in the frontier town of Dodge City. Anyway, Miss Kitty owned the Long Branch saloon and was, shall we say, a good friend of Marshall Dillon. In the show, she was always just trying to run her business, and while it was never explicitly stated what kind of business she was in, she was not welcome among the more respectable society of Dodge City.

I bring all this up because we are so prone to putting labels on people and then being unable to see beyond that label. We are told Rahab was a prostitute and we make all sorts of assumptions about what she must have been like. We do this all the time, day in and day out. He is the janitor in this building, someone says, and we think we know all about him. She is a single mother getting by on food stamps. He is an addict. She is an undocumented alien. He is HIV positive. She struggles with a mental illness. Those are all labels that blind us to who this person really is, to their whole story. There is much, much more to Rahab than what she did for a living.

I mentioned that she was neither an insider nor an outsider. This was more than her social status. Our text states that her house was in those high defensive walls of Jericho. There is no way of knowing the exact architectural layout, but she was able to help the spies escape by climbing down a rope hanging from one of her windows. This is significant. She literally lived on the margins of her community. Go out her front door and you are in downtown Jericho. Go out her back window and you are out of the city entirely. So if you asked her where she was from, I wonder if she would have answered, “I don’t know how to answer that. I work in Jericho, but it is not like that is home.”

So she was aware of things that were oblivious to others. There must have been a lot of patriotic pride among the citizens of Jericho that prevented them from seeing what was really happening in their world. Many in the city, while concerned about the nearby Israeli encampment, were not really worried about them. Their walls were tall and thick and had withstood many attacks in the past. What could a ragtag bunch of escaped slaves do against a formidable city state like Jericho? It might be inconvenient for a while, but nothing would come of it. Let them try. Let the Israelites bash their heads against the Jericho walls. What could possibly happen? After all Jericho was the greatest city in the world.

But Rahab knew differently. She knew about the strengths of the city, but she also knew its deep flaws. When you read this story you wonder why did she help these enemy spies? I think it was because she knew Jericho’s time was limited. She knew it was going to fall. If it wasn’t from some external threat it was from the corruption within. Furthermore, she knew who the Israelites were really. She knew of their reputation. Even though it had happened forty years before, she knew of how they had escaped from Egypt and what had happened at the Red Sea. She also knew of their victories since then, of what happened to various political and military powers that had tried to stand in their way. This was not a ragtag bunch of escaped slaves. This was a nation, that had become shrewd and tough, hardened by years in the desert. Jericho would dismiss the Israelites at its own peril.

But she knew something more. She also knew of the spiritual force that united the Hebrew people. The ancient Jewish rabbis had a lot to say about Rahab. They said that she was one of the four most beautiful women of all time. The other three were Sarah, the wife of Abraham, Abigail, the wife of King David, and Queen Esther who saved her people when they were exiles in Babylon. The rabbis said Rahab was the ancestor of a priestly line, among them the prophet Jeremiah. But they wrote a great deal about her profession of faith. They compare her with two other non-Jews who also proclaimed the God of Israel as the one true God.

The first we talked about last week, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Jethro was a Midianite, not a descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Yet, when he came to Moses he declared, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because he delivered the people from the Egyptians.” While it does imply that there could be other gods, and the Lord was just greater than any of them, even so the rabbis thought this was a good statement, that Jethro was on the right track.

The other non-Jew was the Syrian general Naaman who was healed of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Once he was healed proclaimed, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.” The rabbis felt this statement was better than Jethro’s because it was more monotheistic. There is only one God, the God of Israel.

But the rabbis believed that the best of the three was the statement of Rahab. Before she sends the two spies on their way she says, “The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and in the earth below.” She declares that there is only one all-powerful God who is the God of all the universe. This is not the God of one nation or one people, but the God of all humankind, the God of all that has been created.

This then ties in with why Rahab is then mentioned in the New Testament. In the early years of Christianity, the followers of Jesus felt something like TCKs, third culture kids. If you asked them where they were from they would have had a hard time answering the question. By the time the gospels and the epistles were being written, most Christians were not originally Jewish. They were from a wide variety of ethnic groups scattered across the ancient Roman Empire. But here they were, following the teachings of a crucified Jewish rabbi, worshiping one God, who they claimed to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were not really Greek or Roman or Egyptian or Syrian because they no longer worshipped the gods of those nations. But at the same time they were not Jewish. They were not accepted in traditional Jewish synagogues, mostly because they did not follow the strict Jewish laws about the Sabbath and a kosher diet. They were living out on the edges of society, neither insiders or outsiders, not really certain of who they were or where they belonged.

Rahab, then, was a hero to them. She was included among the ancestors of Jesus because she was evidence that the Son of God was not just from one pure Jewish line, but was a mixture of races and cultures like them. But she was lifted up as a strong example of faith in the letter to the Hebrews and the letter of James in part because she proclaimed a universal God of all nations. The God that Rahab believed in was the God of Jews and gentiles alike. This was a God who loved and welcomed all. This was a God who showed how much he loved by becoming a human like us, dying a cruel death, but rising again. This was a God that wanted all to live together in love and peace, and did not care about labels. Rahab may not have known all the implications of what she was saying, but she proclaimed the One True God that all could believe in, love and follow. That is who we belong to. That is who we are. That is where we are from.

Next week, Pastor Beth will continue our sermon series looking at the story of Deborah from the book of Judges. I hope you come back to hear about this everyday hero. In the meantime, let’s throw out the labels and stop getting hung up on whether we are in or out or somewhere in between. For the God of Rahab, the God in heaven above and in the earth below, the God of all humankind, loves us and watches over us. Thanks be to God that in this love we know who we are. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.