



## **Rahab**

### **Joshua 2:1-24**

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December 5, 2021

In this season of Advent, as we await the coming of the Christ child, we are looking back at the women who are named in Jesus' genealogy, which is found at the start of Matthew's gospel. In the 41 generations of Jesus' family tree dating back to Abraham, the lineage is traced through the men of the family. Yet, in the recollection of these ancestors of Christ, five times a woman is named as being the mother of the next generation. We are looking at these five women and what they offer to us today as we once more anticipate and prepare to welcome the gifted child, the Messiah of creation, the light who comes to give new life in the darkness.

Last week we looked at Tamar, the mother of Perez, and learned about her cunning insistence for justice and righteousness. We saw how her persistence exhibited God's grand reversal among humanity, where the powerful and humbled, and the lowly are exalted.

This morning, we are looking at the second woman mentioned in Matthew's genealogy, who is named Rahab.

Like Tamar, Rahab is only known from this one chapter in Joshua 2. Her presence in the Biblical text is brief, but with certainty, it is a powerful statement of God's expansive invitation into faithfulness.

Let's set the stage for our text as we prepare to encounter Rahab's story. Moses has led the people of Israel through the wilderness, and they are now at the precipice of the Promised Land. Moses has turned the role of director and leader over to Joshua. As Joshua is making the final plans to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land, to conquer that which God has promised this covenanted people, he is looking for some final details about how to organize the upcoming attack.

Verse 1 in Joshua (chapter) 2 begins with Joshua sending two spies into Jericho to "view the land." He's looking for insight. The text specifically states that these two spies are making their secret quest from the city of Shittim. It is worth noting that Shittim is mentioned in Numbers 25 as having been a city in which the people of Israel had been in inappropriate sexual relations with the women of Moab. The impropriety had been so bad that God ordered Moses to kill all of the chiefs who had been involved, who had been so lustful for the women that they had given themselves over to the gods of the Moabites. The city from which they travel is a bit of an indication of what happens next.

As these two spies sent from Shittim enter Jericho, the text indicates that the first place they go is to the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and they "spent the night there." It seems some habits die hard.

There are some versions of the Biblical text that try to dance around the language, using phrases such as “they lodged there,” or “they bedded down there.” The Hebrew word is *shaw-kab* (*shaw-khave*), which can mean “to lie down,” but in most of its uses in the Hebrew scripture, it carries a sexual connotation.

And let’s be honest, these two spies didn’t go to the house of a prostitute upon their arrival in town to *sleep* for the night. They weren’t looking for just any bed to lie down in. They were looking for company. The bed they have found is in the house of Rahab.

Now, this is the first text that introduces us to Rahab. Because it is not shared, we don’t know her past. We don’t know what led her into the “industry.” While we don’t know much, what we do know, just as with any one of us, is that Rahab has a story prior to our introduction, and that, for whatever complicated reason (or combination of reasons), Rahab has found herself as the mistress of a house of mistresses. The Rev. Wil Gafney, a womanist biblical scholar, who teaches Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, offers that, while we don’t know how she got into the business, what we do know is that “Rahab is at the top of her game. She has her own house and it is not just a residence; it is her place of business.”<sup>i</sup>

In an attempt to make the story more palatable, some scholars over time have tried to lessen Rahab’s role in the red-light district. Some have tried to protect her, referring to her as nothing more than an innkeeper. Perhaps she was just the one checking people in to their rooms for the night.

But no, the Biblical text will not allow such a cleansing of Rahab’s participation. In both Hebrews and James, in our New Testament texts, Rahab is referred to as “Rahab the prostitute.” While offering some definitive understanding of Rahab’s participation in Joshua, given the direction the story will go, it’s a bit troubling that these New Testament writers can’t embrace Matthew’s recollection of this woman in Jesus’ lineage, acknowledging her name, Rahab, as being sufficient to define her personhood.

Again, Dr. Gafney reminds us that even our Biblical authors weren’t exempt from the patriarchal power that, even centuries after she exemplified faithfulness, still sought to define this Canaanite woman by her failures.

Interesting that the two spies aren’t defined by their sexual impropriety the way Rahab is throughout this text. The story, as offered here in Joshua 2, might invite us to assume these spies were nothing but faithful Israelites, doing the work of God. And yet, as Rahab will soon make clear, only one of the three actually articulates a faithful understanding of God’s work in the world. Not much has changed, as even today men who buy sex are far less likely to be punished than women we sell sex.<sup>ii</sup>

As we go back to the story, we find these two Israelite spies shacking up in Rahab’s house of illicit conduct.

Somehow, the local authorities have found out that these two spies are enjoying themselves at Rahab’s house. It’s possible that Rahab sent word herself. I find it unlikely that in the time it’s taken to

build her business so well, that she wouldn't have serviced a couple of the guards at the king's palace. She has connections. It's also possible that one of the king's men was also at Rahab's house when he saw the two spies, and made sure to report what he found back to the king.

The king, having heard these spies are present, sends orders to Rahab to bring the spies to him, knowing they were only there to glean information that might aid in Israel's attack. However, Rahab hid them spies under stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. It's an interesting note in the scripture. Flax is used to create linen – perhaps along with her evening business, she may have also been a seamstress. Either way, the men are stored out of sight on the roof top.

Rahab chooses to lie to the king's men, telling them that the spies have run out of the city back to the River Jordan. She assures the king's men that should they leave now, they can likely find the spies before they reach the river. The king's men leave the city in search of the spies, and as they leave the city, they close the city doors. Again, this is an important note, because now, the spies have no way to leave the city. They're trapped.

Some time has obviously gone by, for verse 8 says that Rahab goes back to the spies on the roof "before they went to sleep."

As she speaks to the men, she offers what is deemed some of the best theology in the entire Book of Joshua.<sup>iii</sup> This Canaanite, non-Jewish woman, says to the spies, "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. ..." She continues, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below." It's a power statement of faith.

In fact, it seems she has more faith that God will secure the Promised Land for the Israelites than even Joshua, who is still weary enough and unsure enough that he's sent spies into the land to glean just a bit more information to aid in the attack. Rahab, this Canaanite, one who is by association the enemy of the Israelites, declares a knowledge of and faith in the power of God that surpasses every Israelite in this story.

For someone who is given all the wrong descriptors: Canaanite, prostitute, gentile, woman ... she is a person of faith, and a woman who understands her situation and the situation facing her people.

She knows these spies are at her mercy. They are trapped inside the city walls and the king's men are out searching for them. So she uses their situation to bargain for the safety of her people. She's willing to let the spies go, but not without a promise – not without a pledge.

She offers, "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 my mother, my brothers and sisters, all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." Dr. Gafney says that Rahab didn't just look out for herself, "She said I need to get my people out. I need to right by them." Rahab

understands the value of community, and she will not trade her life for the lives of these two men. She wants to save *all* her people – every one of her kinfolk.

In an act that goes against the commands of Moses, who had declared that there could be no protection of the Canaanites upon entering the land, these two spies agreed to Rahab's provision. They said to her, "If you do not tell anyone we were here, then we agree to deal kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the Land."

Well, it just so happens that Rahab's house was on the outskirts of the city. Her house was abut to the city's external walls. So she threw a rope down the outside edge of her house and was able to lower the spies down from the roof to safety. She gave them instructions to go hide in the hills for three days until the king's men returned to the city, at which time the spies could return to their people without fear.

The men realize they are free and immediately regret the deal they made with Rahab. Had they known how easy an escape was available, they likely would have just jumped from the roof to safety in the first place. Trying to walk back their agreement, they offer a few stipulations on Rahab's pledge. They say to her, "We will be released from the oath you have made us swear if you do not mark your house with this crimson cord, and if you are not gathered in the house with your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. If anyone is out in the street, they will be killed, and we shall be innocent."

The men left, found safety in the hillside, and after three days, crossed back to Joshua reporting back what they had found. "Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands;" they said, "moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us." Their report is interesting, given the entirety of their time in Jericho was spent in Rahab's house – much of it spent hiding on her roof. In fact, the words they use, if you look back, the report they have to offer back to Joshua comes entirely from Rahab's profession of faith. All they've done is quote Rahab, without giving her credit – plagiarism at its finest.

One may wonder, how does a woman like Rahab make her way into Jesus' lineage? What is it about this woman that necessitates her name being named as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

One might consider her profession of faith sufficient for such recognition. She put her trust in God, "and was rewarded with the faithfulness of God."<sup>iv</sup> Yet, there are two other points that I think make her story more significant in the marking of time leading up to Christ.

First, Dr. Gafney draws our attention to Rahab's pledge. Rahab insists that the Israelites protect her father, mother, brothers and sisters. When the Israelites respond, they say they will provide safety for her father and mother, her brothers and her family. ... Did you catch what was missing? ... Rahab's sisters have gone missing by name. In fact, even in Joshua 6, where it speaks of the Israelites conquest of Jericho, it again says, "The young men who had been spies went in and brought Rahab out, along with her father, her mother, her brothers, and all who belonged to her – they brought all her kindred out." Dr. Gafney highlights that had Rahab not mentioned her sisters, we would not know she had any. Someone had to ensure the protection of those the society cared least about. Though the Israelites

seemed to care little about them, Rahab wasn't going anywhere without offering safety for her sisters. This is the promise of the advent of Christ, that those whom society often forgets will be remembered and offered salvation by the Lord.

Finally, Rahab's story is a reminder that Christ comes to make all things new. Dr. Gafney offers, "Some folk will continue to tell your old stories, but if God has brought you out there are new stories to be told. ... Rahab saved her sisters and everyone who belonged to her, and it didn't matter what she did or had to do to build that house." Dr. Gafney concludes, "She turned her whorehouse into an ark of safety."<sup>v</sup> God can use all things for divine glory, sometimes turning what is worst in us into a saving grace. Rahab is often remembered by her professional title, but her inclusion in Jesus' story tells us she is more than any title we assign her.

Having been spared in the slaughter of Jericho, Rahab continued to live in the land of Israel all the days of her life. With Salmon as the father, she gave birth to Boaz, marking another branch in the path to Jesus.

Rahab is a prophet, who proclaimed the promise of God, declaring that God would lead the people of Israel in conquest of the Canaanites. She acted as a savior, declaring that as the world around her crumbled, she would not just protect herself, but she would look out for her community as well – even the least and most forgotten. Rahab may have been scandalous – just as you and I have stories that are full of scandal - but God is not ashamed of us for our worst. Instead, God sends Christ to bring new life into the darkness, to shine light on the truth, and to declare justice for all of creation. God's love and light are bought forth through some of the most unexpected people in some of the most unexpected places. This is the promise and good news of Advent, for Christ is to come, offering love and life for all. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Wil Gafney. "Remixed Gospel of Rahab: Who are You Calling a Whore." May 21, 2016. <https://www.wilgafney.com>. Retrieved December 1, 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> Gafney.

<sup>iii</sup> Tom Fuerst. *Underdogs and Outsiders, A Bible Study on the Untold Stories of Advent*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Gafney.

<sup>v</sup> Gafney.