

Women of the Genealogy: Rahab

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

December 8, 2024 AM Sermon

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Joshua 2:1-21

I read the genealogy last week, but I won't read it again this Advent. I don't want to subject you to that torrent of names more than once. But I will read the verse where we hear the name of the woman whose story interests us today. It's found in verse 5: "Salmon was the Father of Boaz whose Mother was Rahab." Rahab is the second woman of Matthew's genealogy. Her story is found in the opening verses of Joshua chapter 2. Read Joshua 2:1-19

That's the story of Rahab. Why does the Holy Spirit cause Matthew to place her story in this genealogy? Out of all the women of the Old testament, out of all the other stories of the Old Testament, why does the Holy Spirit zoom in on her? Again, it's a surprising choice. I mentioned last week that most genealogies were meant to bring prestige to the family name. Rahab is not a person who brings prestige to Jesus' family name. Quite the opposite. Last week we heard about Tamar, a foreigner who pretended to be a prostitute; this week we have Rahab, a foreigner who really is a prostitute. And yet the Holy Spirit zooms in on her.

AND...this isn't the only time the Holy Spirit zooms in on her. Did you know that Rahab is mentioned two more times in the New Testament? Did you know that Rahab is in the New Testament more often than Joshua? Joshua is a big player in the Old Testament. He's got a whole book named after him and he's the main character of dozens of stories. This is Rahab's only story, and yet she is mentioned three times in the New Testament compared to Joshua's 2.

Do you know either of the other 2 Rahab references? A place in the Bible Nerd Hall of Fame for anyone who can guess even one of the other references. One is in Hebrews. Hebrews 11 to be precise. That's the great chapter on faith. Rahab is listed among the heroes of faith. Hebrews 11:31 says, "By faith the prostitute Rahab (notice how they don't hide her profession), because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient." And then in the book of James she is celebrated again, this time as an example of someone whose strong faith included actions: "Was not even Rahab the prostitute (again, no soft-peddling of her profession) considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies? (James 2:25)"

So, why is Rahab in the genealogy? Why does she receive so much attention in the rest of the New Testament? I've spent all week with this question and I think there are a couple of things to say:

First, I think that Rahab's story is referred to in this genealogy because it speaks to the power of the gospel to create hope in the most desperate human lives. Let's think about what Rahab's life would have been like. She's a prostitute in a Canaanite city. What kind of life was that? A terrible life. It would have been a life of fear, a life of shame, a life of powerlessness. It's the kind of work you do when all your other options are gone. It's a job you do when you're out of hope. Every day a stream of men come into Rahab's apartment and they use her. And every time they use her body, they take a little bit of her soul.

But then one day in the streets of her town she hears a story, a kind of gospel story. Maybe she meets a Canaanite trader who's gone to Egypt to sell some of his goods, and now he's back home, bringing news from that distant land. "Strange news from Egypt," he says. "Mighty Pharaoh had enslaved a whole nation of people. He used them to build his cities. They were a strange people who worshipped a strange God, a God they called Yahweh. Well, they called out to their God, and this Yahweh sent signs and wonders and he delivered them from their slavery. They say that this God even dried up the Red Sea so that they could pass through, and then when Pharaoh tried to follow, the waters closed up and he was drowned. The slave people triumphed over mighty Pharaoh!" The merchant drops his voice and Rahab has to lean in to hear him: "They say Yahweh has been guiding them through the desert. They say that they are coming here to our land, to Canaan!"

Can you see how Rahab would have been drawn to this story? Can you see how it would have made her heart pound? A God who can deliver slaves out of captivity into new life? A God who hears the cries of desperate people? A God who lifts up the lowly? And this God is coming here?! She wasn't sure she actually believed it, but in the darkness, after her clients had left and she was alone with her pain, she told herself the details of the story over and over again.

And then this nation of former slaves shows up outside Jericho! In the flesh! Not only that: two members of this nation show up at her front door! You can imagine her heart pounding wildly. It was all true, every word of it! This Yahweh was real! Do you have a sense how this would be enough to make her stand up and say, "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and the earth below!" Do you see how the story of what God did for Israel would mean for this enslaved prostitute?!

The name of Rahab in this genealogy is a signal, right at the beginning of the New Testament about what kind of Salvation Jesus was bringing to this world. In the early church there were many middle class people and there were many wealthy people, but what was really remarkable was how many people from the lowest parts of society were drawn to the gospel. Slaves and the poor. People whose lives were more or less like the life of Rahab. But then these people hear the story of a God who is born in a stable and who suffers the shame of a cross and who creates a community where there is no distinction between rich and poor or slave and free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. Can you see how, just like Rahab, these slaves would lean forward when they heard about Jesus? How their hearts would pound? Can you see why they would open their hearts to this Jesus and his salvation?

Most of us are not in a particularly low place right now. We are not prostitutes. We are not slaves. You ask us how we're doing and we say "fine" and we mean it. But someday all of us will find ourselves at the bottom, and when we get there we will realize that the hope of Jesus is all we have.

I always think of a story that Neal Plantinga told in one of his devotionals. It's a story about some POWs during the Vietnam war. These were young men who'd grown up in the church, and had gone to Sunday School. These were young men for whom church and faith were just one of many activities in their life. They hoped in Jesus, but they hoped in lots of other things too. But then they found themselves in a Vietnamese prison camp and, suddenly, they were at the bottom. Guess where their hearts turned? To the promises of the gospel. They would try to bring to mind the bits of scripture they'd learned in their Sunday School classes. They would tap these verses out in Morse code through the walls of their cell so other prisoners could hear. One prisoner knew the beatitudes. Another knew John 3:16. Another knew Psalm 23. They tapped out their hope on the walls of the cell and it kept them alive. The fear and terror of that place blew out all the other candles. Only the candle of the Savior who was born in a stable and died on a cross could keep burning in a place that dark and that cold. The name of Rahab in this genealogy reminds us that the hope of Jesus can find us even when we are at the bottom.

There's a second thing we can say about why Rahab's name is in the genealogy. Rahab is included in Matthew 1 (as well as in James and Hebrews) because of the quality of her faith. Rahab is mentioned in this genealogy because she's a person for whom faith wasn't just a nice warm feeling of assurance that comforted her in times of trial; her faith became courageous action. I was struck this week by the first words she spoke to the spies up on the roof: "I know that the Lord has given you this land." Did you notice how she speaks in the past tense? "I know that the Lord has given you this land." That's Advent faith. She is so sure of God's future, she is so sure that the Lord will give Canaan to Israel, she speaks of it as though it's already happened. It's a done deal.

When she spoke these words, Rahab was still a prostitute. Rahab was still living in a city that treated her badly. Rahab was still at the bottom of her society. But her actions were not governed by her present reality; her actions were governed by the future she saw coming, her actions were governed by the promise that the Lord had made which for her was more real and more certain than the misery of her circumstances.

Do you know who she reminds me of? Mary. Another woman who speaks of God's future as though it has already arrived. She's only three months into her pregnancy, she's still enduring the scorn of people who

thought her pregnancy was a scandal. Nevertheless, she breaks into song at her cousin Elizabeth's house: "He has brought down rulers from their throne and lifted up the humble! He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful!" Another poor woman singing a bold song of God's deliverance before it has even happened.

I found myself thinking of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* this week. In that book, the land of Narnia is locked in a perpetual winter; a season where it is always winter but never Christmas because the world is under the evil spell of the White Witch. But as the story unfolds, in the midst of the evil, a spirit of Advent emerges. The characters in the story sense the coming of Aslan who is the Christ figure in the story. And as they sense his coming they say to one another: "Aslan is on the move." They are having dinner together and they say to each other, 'Aslan is on the move.' They gather around a fire together away from the witch and her spies and they say, 'Aslan is on the move.' They pass each other on the road and they say, 'Aslan is on the move.' In the midst of the long winter their hope rises when they say it.

That's the Spirit of Rahab when she tells the spies how she's heard about the drying up of the red sea and the defeat of Pharaoh. Aslan is on the move. Something is happening. That's the Spirit of Matthew when he includes Rahab's name in this genealogy; Aslan is on the move, something is happening. The world is about to change. That was the spirit of the Christians gathered in their house churches, surrounded by Roman power, sharing the bread and the wine: Aslan is on the move, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ shall come again. The world will never be the same.

And that's the message I bring you here this morning, you who are mostly comfortable, you whose expectation has maybe been dulled by your comfortable life and 2000 years of waiting. I wish for you a faith that is more than just a warm feeling. I wish for you a faith that is not governed by the difficulty of your present circumstances, but is rooted in the reality of God's future promises, the reality of his coming. Because Aslan is on the move. The living God is moving. So get up, come to the feast, lift up your hearts and lift up your heads, because, at this table your salvation isn't just coming, it's already here.

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