

Her-Story: Rahab

With God, it isn't who you were that matters,
it's who you are becoming.

This is the next sermon in the series called "Her-Story: Women of the bible." Today we look at a very short story about a women called Rahab, and she was a prostitute.

Let's watch a video version of the story, warning there is a bit of killing that goes on but not too graphic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA08bdjdGt0>

SCRIPTURE – Joshua 2:1-24

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. The king of Jericho was told, "Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land."

But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts

melted in fear and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

“Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and that you will save us from death.” “Our lives for your lives!” the men assured her. “If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land.” So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.” “Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.” So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

When they left, they went into the hills and stayed there three days, until the pursuers had searched all along the road and returned without finding them. Then the two men started back. They went down out of the hills, forded the river and came to Joshua son of Nun and told him everything that had happened to them. They said to Joshua, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us.”

Her-Story: Rahab

How quick are you to judge someone? I'd like to think I'm a fairly open-minded and understanding person, but also I know that at times I have the capacity to be somewhat judgmental. Chances are, if we are honest, we all do. For example, when you first heard Rahab's profession, a prostitute, what kind of person did you think she was? As humans we are very quick to put people into categories,

and then make judgments based on those categories. Even those of us who think we don't put people in categories have just put ourselves in a category and those who categorise in another one!

Here's is a story that shows how judgement we can inadvertently be, and this story is too good not to be true.

An elderly lady was in a casino (we have all categorised her now haven't we – a gambler). She hit it big on the pokies and was taking her bucket full of coins up to her room. She got on the elevator, and immediately was joined by two very big black men, who came in and stood behind her. As the doors began to close, the woman realized she and her bucket of money were alone with these guys. Her worst fears were realized when, before the elevator even started moving, one of the men said to her, "Hit the floor!" The woman screamed, threw her bucket of money into the air and fell to the ground, waiting for an attack. Instead, she heard deep belly laughs and one of the men said to her, "No, ma'am, I mean you have to hit the floor button in order to make the elevator move." Legend has it those two men were Michael Jordan and Charles Barkley, and they later sent the elderly lady a dozen roses with a note that said, "Thanks for the laugh!"

As we sit here in this nice comfortable church, it's easy for us to see the humour in that situation. But how would we react if we were in that woman's place? I wonder if I might probably jump to the same conclusion. Which is ironic because I hate it when people do that to me as a Christian, or as a Pastor. When I hear people make generic negative statements about fringe weirdo Christians or manipulative pastors, I want to scream at them like a lunatic, "Not all of us are crazy!"

Seriously if we're willing to admit it, we all have that judgment gene inside of us. Some of us would rather cross to the other side of the street or wait for the next elevator rather than be in close proximity with certain kinds of people. Confession time - for me, it's street sales people and street evangelists!!!

Isn't that our first reaction to Rahab? A woman in her line of work is to be avoided. That's the kind of woman you talk about, not to, especially not in public. Rahab should be held up as an example of what NOT to do, not celebrated for what she does. And yet, right here in the book of Joshua, we have Rahab's story.

But here's the thing: She's not only in the book of Joshua. Rahab is also mentioned three times in the New Testament. Three times! Why would a tarnished woman like Rahab deserve such honour?

The first place she is mentioned is in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Not only is Rahab the mother-in-law of Ruth, who Matt spoke about last week, but she is also an ancestor of Jesus.

The next place she is mentioned is in Hebrew 11, this is a chapter that lists the Spiritual 'A' listers, where the author names several people who are noted for their faith, people like Noah and Moses and David and Samuel – and then Rahab. Who would have thought when you first heard about Rahab's vocation that she would make the Faith Hall of Fame?

The last mention of her in the New Testament is the most surprising for me. In his letter, James writes about the importance of living out our faith. As he says, "Faith without works is dead." He then gives two examples of people who have done this. The first is Abraham, the father of the Jewish and Muslim and Christian faith, he is the epitome of all things holy and faithful. James says that when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, his faith was brought to completion by his works. He was justified by his willingness to live out his faith. What a Godly man.

So, after lifting up Father Abraham as an example, who else do you think James names? Of all the heroic, wonderful people in the Hebrew Scriptures James has to choose from, who do you think he picks to hold up as a testimony to the power of a faith lived out? A prostitute named Rahab. He says,

James 2:24-26

²⁴So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone.

²⁵Rahab the prostitute is another example. She was shown to be right with God by her actions when she hid those messengers and sent them safely away by a different road. ²⁶Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.

Three different times Rahab is mentioned by name for her faith. Who would have thought that when you first heard about her? After all she was a prostitute?

The story

Well, let's look at the story in a bit more detail and see what she does to merit such commendation. The Israelites had been wandering around in the wilderness for 40 odd years and are finally preparing to move into the Promised Land, but in order to do so they're going to have to displace the people who are already there. So Joshua, he is newly in charge after Moses' death, sends a couple spies ahead to the city of Jericho to scout out the situation and report back on what they see. The spies arrive in Jericho and find shelter in Rahab's house.

Now this is the first question that I had. Why? The movie writers portrayed the spies being forced in to Rahab's place by running from soldiers, but that is not what the scripture says. Scripture just says *So they went (to Jericho) and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.*

Why would these nice Jewish boys arrive at Jericho and head for the red light district. What were they thinking? Were these guys being tempted and God rescued them, despite their weaknesses, or was it a word from the Lord, or were they forced there by soldiers? Or maybe, as one commentator said, they were clever - no one would question a couple of strangers going into the house of a professional like Rahab. It was actually the perfect cover for them to do their work.

Except the mission was over before it ever started. Or maybe they weren't quite as clever as they thought, as when these guys walked into Jericho. They must have been wearing James Bond suits with wraparound sunglasses carrying a sign that said, "Hi, we're spies!" because the next verse tells us that the king of Jericho was told that two spies from Israel had come to scout out the land.

So the king sends some soldiers to get the intruders, but Rahab lies to them, telling them the men have already left, when they were actually hiding on her roof. The themes of hiding and a woman outwitting the king take us back to the story of baby Moses, when two midwives lie to Pharaoh and then baby Moses is hidden in a basket to save his life.

I find it interesting that the king's men didn't question Rahab on her lie. Why didn't they conduct a search to make sure she was telling the truth? But they didn't, maybe because they didn't believe Rahab was either clever enough or brave enough to fool the king. After all, women who do what she does aren't worth our attention.

- Forget that she was probably forced into her profession out of poverty.

- Forget that her only choice was either this line of work, or her whole family being taken as slaves.
- Forget her strength and her courage and her love for her family. After all, she's just a prostitute.

That's all we need to know about her to make our judgment, right?

After the soldiers leave, Rahab goes to the roof and strikes a bargain with the spies, a bargain based on faith in God and faith in each other. Rahab tells them that she knows of their God and the powerful things God has done. Even if the rest of Jericho doesn't believe, she does.

So, she says, "I have dealt kindly with you, so swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family." The Hebrew word for "deal kindly" here is "hesed," which means the responsible caring of one another in a covenantal relationship. It's the same word that the word 'Grace' is translated from. A covenantal relationship based on loving kindness. It's what we mean with the words on the wall – Love without measure.

The spies agree to this bargain, and tell Rahab to mark her house as a safe place by hanging a scarlet cord out of the window of her house. What an interesting choice. Our modern minds might first compare the scarlet cord with the red light, the colour red signifying the sin that takes place in that house. But ancient readers would have heard something much different. When God was rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, the people were instructed to paint lamb's blood on the doorframes of their houses so God would pass over them and spare their lives. The scarlet cord is the same kind of sign, indicating that the person inside is a child of God to be spared.

A child of God. That's a far cry from the names that Rahab was probably called by those around her. She would have been seen as a morally disgraceful, an untrustworthy character. How can a whore be a child of God? This was such an issue that earlier translators of the Bible tried to soften the language here and make Rahab an innkeeper instead of a 'women of the night'. After all, a woman like her can't really be in Jesus' genealogy, can she?

The fact that she is has profound implications for us. There are Rahabs all around us. While we are here in nice little Tauranga away in NZ, on a global scale, human trafficking and forced slavery are still huge and urgent issues to be dealt with. We as a church support NZBMS.Tranzsend, and this is a major area they are working in. I don't know if it is a fact or not, but it seems like the

overall value of human life in our world seems to be plummeting. And even in NZ, a place that feels isolated from many of the vulgarities of the world, there are Rahabs, people who have been cast aside by society. Do we see a child of God? Or do we see “one of those people”? And we as Christians can be just as guilty of these judgements.

So what does this story tell us? I hear Rahab’s story as a warning and a sign of hope. **With God, it isn’t who you were that matters, it’s who you are becoming.**

One of the questions I occasionally ask a person when I am chatting with them about their relationship with God and I encourage you to ask yourself this question every now and then.

Where are you at with God? If there was a continuum with God at one end and self or Satan (depending on your theology) at the other, where would you be? But more than that what way are you looking and what direction are you moving?

Just as it isn’t who you were that matters, it’s who you are becoming, I would also say; it’s isn’t about where you are on the line but what direction you are moving! Our goal in live should be the take one step closer to Jesus, a helping others take one step closer to Jesus.

We may be tempted to give up on people, but God never does. In God’s world, there’s no such thing as a lost cause. If there were, some of us might not be here today. God has the power to transform people like Rahab into examples of faith. God did it then, and God is still doing it today. For God, there’s no such thing as “those people.” There is no “other.” There is only us, each of us and all of us, made in God’s image and called to live out our faith while practicing “hesed.” Not all of us will do this. Some will make bad choices; others, like Rahab, might be forced by life’s circumstances into ungodly ways of life, so much so that people will give up on them.

The next time we feel ourselves passing judgment on someone, may we remember the story of Rahab. That person we are so quick to write off has the potential to do great things in God’s name, because God hasn’t given up on them. God never gives up. Every person, no matter their station in life, has the potential to become a force for good in this world.

And what is potential? It's hope, hope that God's work in a person will come to completion. May we have hope: hope for ourselves, hope for each other, and, maybe most importantly of all, hope for the Rahabs in our world.

Others might give up on them. But we are going to strive to Live like Jesus, to love without measure, to learn our faith and to lead to make a difference.