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Joshua 2

Joshua sends spies

2 Joshua, Nun's son, secretly sent two men as spies from Shittim. He said, "Go. Look over the land, especially Jericho." They set out and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab. They bedded down there.

² Someone told the king of Jericho, "Men from the Israelites have come here tonight to spy on the land."

³ So the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab: "Send out the men who came to you, the ones who came to your house, because they have come to spy on the entire land."

Rahab takes action

⁴ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. Then she said, "Of course the men came to me. But I didn't know where they were from."⁵ The men left when it was time to close the gate at dark, but I don't know where the men went. Hurry! Chase after them! You might catch up with them."⁶ But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the flax stalks that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷ The men from Jericho^a chased after them in the direction of the Jordan up to the fords. As soon as those chasing them went out, the gate was shut behind them.

Rahab sets terms

⁸ Before the spies bedded down, Rahab went up to them on the roof. ⁹ She said to the men, "I know that the Lord has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Reed Sea^b in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. ¹¹ We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below. ¹² Now, I have been loyal to you. So pledge to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal loyally with my family. Give me a sign of good

faith.¹³ Spare the lives of my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, along with everything they own. Rescue us from death.”

¹⁴ The men said to her, “We swear by our own lives to secure yours. If you don’t reveal our mission, we will deal loyally and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.”

The spies escape

¹⁵ So she lowered the spies on a rope through the window. Her house was on the outer side of the city wall, and she lived inside the wall. ¹⁶ Then she said to them, “Go toward the highlands so that those chasing you don’t run into you. Hide there for three days until those chasing you return. Then you may go on your way.”

¹⁷ The men said to her, “We won’t be responsible for this pledge you made us swear ¹⁸ unless, when we come into the land, you tie this red woven cord in the window through which you lowered us. Gather your father, your mother, your brothers, and your whole family into the house with you.¹⁹ Those who go outside the doors of your house into the street will have only themselves to blame for their own deaths. We won’t be responsible. If anyone lays a hand on those who are with you in the house, we will take the blame for their death. ²⁰ But if you reveal our mission, we won’t be responsible for this pledge you made us swear.”

²¹ She said, “These things will happen just like you said.” She sent them away and they went off. Then she tied the red cord in the window.

Mission accomplished

²² The spies went out and entered the highlands. They stayed there for three days until those chasing them came back. Those chasing them had searched all along the road but never found them. ²³ Then the two men came back down from the highlands. They crossed the Jordan and came to Joshua, Nun’s son. They told him everything that had happened to them.²⁴ They said to Joshua, “The Lord has definitely given the entire land into our power. In addition, all of the land’s population has melted down in fear because of us.”

In this passage today we hear the story of the two spies sent from Joshua to spy out the land of Canaan. As I hope was evident from our skit, the two spies are not very good at their job. They are told by Joshua to spy out the land of Canaan, but instead go straight to Rahab’s house. Why? We don’t know. We don’t know whether they already knew her, whether they meant to go on to their spy mission afterward or not – there are many unanswered questions.

In any case, they go to her house, and she promptly assumes leadership. She displays great cleverness in handling the soldiers who come looking for the spies. Instead of denying that the spies had visited her, which would have resulted in a search and the discovery of the spies, she tells the soldiers that the spies have left already, throwing them off the trails.

Then she makes a deal with the spies: in return for keeping them safe, they will spare her life and those of her family when the Israelites arrive. Why? Because she knows they will be victorious. This is important.

In verses 9-11 of this chapter, Rahab says the following:

“I know that the Lord has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Reed Sea¹⁰ in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. ¹¹ We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”

These are not random words; they are very specific echoes of Israelite scripture, and they reveal that Rahab is doing a much better job than the spies of trusting the Lord. She might be a Canaanite, she might be a woman, she might be a prostitute – three things that should make a triple outsider – but she is the one who understands what is happening and displays appropriate faith in God and God’s work. She understands that the victories the Israelites have enjoyed are because God is with them.

It’s also significant that Rahab is named, while the spies are not. When this story was told and then eventually written down for followers of God, it was understood that it was important to preserve Rahab’s name. We do not know whether she is a historical figure or not; we do know that generations of people have honoured her story.

Not only that, but Rahab is listed in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. She is understood by Christians to be an ancestor, a foremother, a grandmother of Jesus. I think it is telling that Jesus-followers honoured an outsider prostitute in their telling of the story of God.

After making the bargain with the spies, Rahab lowers them down out the window – and only *then* do the spies try to talk tough! Once they are safely out of her house, they tell her that she has to keep her family safely within doors when they invade; otherwise they aren’t responsible for what might happen. They certainly didn’t try to do this kind of negotiating when they were inside, entirely dependent on her!

One detail worth noting: Rahab lowers the spies out the window with a crimson cord, which they then tell her to tie in her window as a sign that she should be spared. This is an echo of the

Passover story in Exodus, in which the Israelites smeared lamb's blood above their doorways to keep the angel of death from killing their first-born when God killed all the first-born in Egypt.

Finally, Rahab tells the spies to hide out for three days in the hills before returning to Joshua – which, of course, they do! So in the end, the spies do no real spying. They hide at Rahab's house and they hide in the hills, and then report to Joshua that the Canaanites are scared.

Was this part of God's plan all along? I don't know. The text doesn't tell us. It might be, but it also might mean that God works with all our mistakes, failures, and bumbling efforts to bring about God's will. God is always working in the work to fulfill God's purpose, and however much we seem to get in the way, we cannot fully derail God.

It certainly does indicate that we are called to question our assumptions about who's in and who's out; who is an insider and who is an outsider. Rahab's story seems to say that we cannot assume we're in without a genuine, faithful effort at trusting God. We will not have rock-solid faith every day of our lives, but we keep turning back and coming back. In the meantime, God is welcoming, including, and calling many whom we overlook.

Thanks be to God.