**July 22, 2018**

**Joshua 2 & 6**

This story is another dramatic tale destined for Hollywood. (The gossip columns actually report that a Rahab movie is currently in production. Expect it to be rated “R.”) George R.R. Martin’s novel “Game of Thrones” could have been modeled on these chapters of Joshua. From the people living on the wall to the brutal slaughter of Jericho’s inhabitants, there was little good news here. Spies hid in brothels. Townspeople were vulnerable. Kingdoms were overthrown. The savvy alone survived. This was pure conquest. God rolled over one group of people to make room for the chosen people.

God’s people had lived in this area before. Long before they were slaves in Egypt. Abram and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, even Joseph lived in this land of Canaan (which is essentially modern day Israel). The Israelites left Canaan during a famine, hoping to find food in Egypt. Enslaved there, they didn’t leave Egypt until generations later. As they wandered through the wilderness, God talked to Moses about the promised land which would be theirs. This land of Canaan (which included the city of Jericho) were part of the promise. This land was meant for the Hebrew people.

So here was the booming city of Jericho with all of the appropriate political and social structures in place – a king, his guards, skilled craftsmen, inns for travelers passing through, … and prostitutes. Somewhere between a few hundred to a few thousand people lived in the town. Tucked amongst its inhabitants was Rahab, who stood out for being an unmarried woman AND running a business.

Preachers – Jewish and Christian – have loved and hated Rahab. Jewish legend awarded Rahab one of the 4 most beautiful women in the history of the world. The very reading of her name was said to incite lust and pleasure amongst listeners. Christians have patronized her by discussing her various bad behaviors that were never actually reported in scripture, but implied because of her job. Christians usually tell of Rahab as a black-hearted sinner, proving that God redeems the very least of people. The truth is that her character was veiled in mystery like every other biblical figure. We do not know much about her.

Rahab was probably a young woman. Her parents and siblings were all alive and living within the city. She probably didn’t have a husband; none was ever mentioned. She defied social norms in these few facts. Rahab was a liminal character who lived an edgy existence – literally and metaphorically. She lived on the City Wall, watching the people inside the city of Jericho. She enjoyed the protection of these boundaries. *And* everyday she looked out her window and saw the world outside Jericho. She saw caravans coming up the road. She saw storms on the horizon. She readied herself to deal with whatever was coming. And in doing so, she danced between two worlds everyday – inside and outside.

Undoubtedly, Rahab owned and managed a public house – perhaps an inn which also served as a brothel. Rahab’s business served everyone from the random traveler to the king’s men. With the constant stream of people through her doors, her house was a source of information. She heard the local and far-away news. Among the news from beyond was word of these Israelites. The tales of their escapes and conquests – without any military to speak of – had already become legendary. Stories of their religion and their God were entwined with their power. When these Hebrew spies came to her house, Rahab knew who they were and what was coming behind them. And she was ready.

It has been said that Rahab and the Israelites delivered each other. Rahab saved the Hebrew spies from the hands of the king. She hid them and protected them, and even helped them find safe passage from her house. In return, the spies promised that anyone in her house would be saved when they attacked Jericho. They warned that everyone else would be slaughtered. From the walls to the livestock, the city would be destroyed. Rahab’s house alone would be unharmed. Rahab was then empowered to protect whomever she invited into her house.

The day of the battle arrived. The Israelites marched around the city of Jericho. (“Joshua fought the battle of Jericho…”) The walls fell down. The Israelites attacked. Everyone was killed. Except Rahab and her family. They were sent behind the army to a safe place with the rest of the Hebrew people.

What does God have to tell us about Rahab and her family? What does Rahab have to tell us about God?

Whoever she was, whatever she had done, Rahab was a spiritual woman. Although she didn’t follow the Israelite’s God, as she spoke with the spies, she called God by God’s Hebrew name: YHWH. She told the stories of how God had saved them in their passing through the Red Sea, and the triumph over other peoples. Rahab admitted the fears of the Jericho people in the face of such a God. Then she professed faith in their God. “YHWH your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.” The spies hadn’t come to convert her or bring her into their tribe. The spies were blessed to witness how God introduced God’s self to the world beyond their chosen people. Rahab didn’t need ritual or theology to believe in God. She only needed testimony. Even 3rd and 4th hand! Hearing the stories were all Rahab needed to believe in God.

We are Christians living in a non-Jewish state. When we read Rahab’s story, we cannot read ourselves into the place of the Hebrew spies. We are not God’s chosen people. We are outsiders, like Rahab. We have heard tales of God’s salvation through the ages. We received testimony from countless saints. We know the names and times of people God has saved. And yet we still live on the wall, watching both inside the church and outside into the larger world. We can choose what stories will shape us. We can choose who will rule over us, and to whom we will give our allegiance.

There are many, many stories of people who have disobeyed their state to act according to their heart and faith. There are many, many stories of people of different faith traditions who go out of their way to protect those of another faith group. The Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations is a park in Jerusalem that commemorates non-Jews who risked their own lives to save Jews during World War II’s Holocaust. 26,513 people (from 51 countries) are currently listed in the park. Among them are people like Varian Fry, an American who organized the French resistance, saving between 2-4,000 people. Hugh O’Flagherty, an Irish Catholic priest stationed in Rome who saved over 6500 people over the course of the war, earning him the nickname “the Scarlet Pimpernel of the Vatican.” And of course, Oskar Schindler, a German who bribed Nazi officials to allow Jewish prisoners to work in his factory. And Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch watchmaker who sheltered refugees in her own home.

These people followed Rahab’s model. They heard of this people whom God had saved so many times in so many ways. They made a safe place when the world threatened danger. They opened their lives and homes and vocations to preserve life and save life.

So we sing today, “Give thanks for those whose faith is firm when all around seems bleak: on God’s good promise they rely, so while they live and when they die how forcefully they speak: the strong, who once were weak!” (Hymn text by Martin Leckebush)

Rahab’s future was bleak. She relied on God’s good promise to bring life.

As do we. Our world often feels bleak. We see storms on the horizon and lament that we are too weak to do anything. We see countless people whose lives and beings are threatened. From our position on the wall, we can throw them a rope and pull them to safety. We can share the stories of God’s salvation. We can write letters. Serve food. Shelter in place. Listen. Help. Act. The Sanctuary movement is growing within our Presbytery. Environmental stewardship and climate protection actions are gaining traction within our denomination. There are always hungry to feed, grieving to comfort, and lost to guide. There are things we can do. There are ways we can help. There are people who yearn for life, and we can help from our place on the wall.

Life begets life. God saved Rahab’s life, who then saved those in her family. Rahab eventually married a Jewish man. They had a family. One of her children had a son named Boaz, who married Ruth (who was another outsider). Through this family tree, Rahab was an ancestor to the great King David. This family tree rooted in Canaan, and later in Bethlehem, eventually bore Joseph, the husband of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus Christ, who brought life to the world.

May we be so bold to share our faith and bring life with our own. Amen.