

Good morning!

I want to quickly recap what I said last week about my July summer sermon series, for anyone who wasn't here last week.

This month, I am preaching a series called, "Four Stories of Faith."

Each week, we will learn about a different character in the Bible who put all their faith in God and ended up doing something heroic.

This reminds us that even when things seem really bleak, and we feel despondent, that nobody can take our faith.

We can lean into our faith in God, which will hopefully compel us to be Christ-like in our words, actions and thoughts

No matter what happens in the world around us, we can always turn to God, which we've seen countless times before from people throughout history who were faced perilous circumstances.

This morning we will hear about another such person.

Last week, we learned about the story of an 11-year-old boy named Samuel.

Today we hear about an adult woman named Rahab, but she wasn't just any woman.

She was a prostitute.

This is an important detail of the story that we'll get to later.

So, for those of you who missed all the details of the plot, because it is a long story, I will quickly recap.

So, in this story, Joshua is the leader of Israel.

Joshua and the Israelites were hanging out just across the Jordan River from Jericho, which is a Canaanite city.

Joshua wants to overtake Jericho and conquer it, but before he does this, he sends some spies there so they can check out the city and see what its military strength is.

He is assessing the power of his enemies, it's part of his military strategy.

It will help him determine whether Israel has the capacity to overtake Jericho and how they'll do it.

So Joshua sends these two spies into Jericho and they immediately go to Rahab's home.

Some scholars think that she ran an inn, and offered extra services.

So Rahab welcomes the spies and she immediately knows that they are up to no good.

However, because of Rahab's allegiance to the Israelite God (which we will get more into in just a minute), she decides to harbor these spies.

She hides them on the top of her roof under a bunch of stalks of flax, which were up there because it was harvest season and they were drying out.

So right after she hides the men, the King of Jericho sends soldiers to Rahab and they instruct her to release the men.

Now here is where Rahab becomes quite the trickster.

She immediately says, *“True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from.*

⁵*And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out.*

Where the men went I do not know.

Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.” (Joshua 2: 4-5)

This is a lie, because, of course, the men are hiding on her roof.

But the soldiers believe her lies and they go on their way, in search of the spies.

After this, Rahab goes up to the roof and tells the spies, listen, I saved your lives, now you save mine.

She knows how powerful the Israelite God is, she heard that God parted the Red Sea and she knows that the Lord their God is indeed God in heaven above and in Earth below.

And she knows that God is going to help the Israelites destroy Jericho, so she wants some protection.

The spies tell her to hang a red cord outside her window, and to gather all her family members inside the house and they would be spared.

A quick side note that I want to mention is that there is a lot of symbolism in the red color, think about the red lamb's blood being smeared on doorways so the angel of death would pass over the Jewish people, think about the red light district and Rahab's profession.

So, in the end, Rahab and her family are spared because she hangs the red cord outside the window.

They are brought outside the camp of Israel while the Israelites burn down Jericho and everything in it.

Now, I know this story has some problematic aspects that involve death and destruction, but Rahab is heralded as a hero in the Jewish faith and she's even listed in Jesus' genealogy.

In the Gospel of Matthew, she is only one of a few women who is listed in Jesus' ancestry.

So, she's important, and we should know about her.

But this story is not in the 3-year lectionary rotation, so if I hadn't chosen it, we would presumably never hear it on Sunday morning, which is another reason why I wanted to highlight Rahab in our "Four Stories of Faith" series.

Despite the complications of the story and the problematic fact that the Israelites came in and wiped out the city of Jericho, Rahab still took a huge risk and acted on her faith in God.

If the King of Jericho had found out that she lied and that she actually hid the spies, she could have easily been killed.

So why did she take the risk to hide the men?

She could have closed the door in their faces and sent them on their way.

While you could argue that she did it just to save her own family, that doesn't hold much water.

When the spies came to the door, she didn't know what Joshua and the other Israelites had planned.

She didn't know the lives of everyone in her city were at risk.

I think she hid the men because she had an allegiance to the Israelite God, and she didn't know what the future held but she wanted to be on the side of that God, not the Canaanite gods.

They were a polytheistic people and so they had gods and goddesses who each oversaw many different aspects of the Canaanite's lived reality.

By aligning herself with those spies, she was acknowledging that this God that she had heard about was the one and only true God, the only one who was worthy of worship and allegiance.

She was essentially telling them that yes, she lived in Canaanite land but she wanted to worship the God of Israel and she was willing to risk her life in order for this to be so.

In fact, she's mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament as a being a person of deep faith.

Chapter 11 says, *“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.*

By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days.

By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.”

(Hebrews 11: 29-31)

Let us not forget that Rahab wasn't exactly a political insider.

For her to hide those men was, in part even more risky because of her profession.

She was a prostitute who presumably owned her own business.

There were several references in the story to her house.

If she had a father or husband or some other male in her life, then the house would have been associated with them, as was societal convention.

But it's Rahab's house, she's the matriarch and the owner of this illicit business.

In other words, she was a troublemaker.

Powerful, sexual women were a threat, she wasn't staying in her place, she was setting a bad example for other women.

I can imagine that the king of Jericho was just looking for a reason to lock her up.

It was interesting in the story that right after the king got word that spies had entered the city, the *first* place he sent soldiers was to Rahab's house.

Why?

Well, let's think about her profession.

In houses of prostitution people did not take offense at one's otherness, and being different was not deadly.

The spies, the foreigners would have been conspicuous anywhere else in the city.

"The only place where people did not all act alike and talk alike was not the house of prayer, but the house of prostitution.

The combined desires for sex and money were forces strong enough to cut across social, economic, religious, and national barriers.

Any other places, including religious institutions, were too homogeneous for strangers to find haven in them." ("Contemporary Heroes And Heroines Day," www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org. Feb 3, 2011.)

The king of Jericho presumably knew that strangers were often welcomed at Rahab's house, so that's where he sent his men to look for the spies.

The irony is that Rahab, who was shunned by the rest of society was open and accepting, welcoming of strangers.

It's easy for hurt people to hurt people, for oppressed people to oppress others.

It's in our nature to want revenge, to perpetuate the evils that happened to us.

But Rahab refuses to do that.

She decided to extend caring hospitality to people, who, if the tables were turned and she went Israel, they probably would have rejected her.

But this is her land, these are her terms, and she won't shut the door on them because of commitment to God.

I don't know if she necessarily cares about the two spies, but she does care about the God of Israel whom they represent.

She makes an instantaneous decision to take a risk and help these men because of her faith in God.

I don't think she woke up that morning and decided to be a heroine that day, that's not how it works.

Opportunities to make a faithful decision can come in an instant, and they can come to the unlikeliest of people.

I doubt this prostitute ever thought that she'd be given the chance to save herself and her family and to join the people of Israel, and yet, the opportunity knocked at the door.

Any of us can be presented with a situation in which we have to decide whether we are going to make the faithful decision.

The question is, will we be ready when opportunity knocks?

Amen.