

## NEGLECTED CHARACTERS OF THE BIBLE: RAHAB

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo

Union Church of Pocantico Hills

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Psalm 24:1-10

Joshua 2 and 6 (*passim*)

In these dog days of summer, I've decided to stray from the normal, prescribed readings for a few weeks to bring you a sermon series on some of the neglected characters of the Bible—people who are mentioned briefly in the sacred texts, who walk upon the stage of Scripture for a word or two, and then recede into the background. It's easy to miss them, particularly if we limit ourselves to the standard lectionary selections, if we notice only those characters who merit large blocks of material. Yet, Retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon once remarked that these neglected, “little people” “are a primary reason why the Bible sounds so realistic and believable to us. Our lives are full of little people, [he said,] who touch our lives every day in various ways. We are little people. Most of us are not going to be famous, never grace the cover of Time. And yet [Willimon went on] there does seem to be something about God that loves little people, that enjoys doing big things through ordinary folk like us.”

You may be familiar with some of these neglected characters; others you may be meeting up close for the first time. Frankly, when you do, you may quickly discern why some of these folks have been neglected. It isn't only that they play a rather minor role in the story of God, it's also that the roles that some of them play are...well...questionable. They just don't fit our idea of how religious people are supposed to behave.

For example, the letter to the Hebrews, in the newer testament, contains a chapter of soaring verse—Chapter 11—that exhorts the Christian community to faith and endurance. It's the chapter that tells us to learn and draw strength from the long procession of our forebears in faith—that “great cloud of witnesses” who “died in faith without having received the promises,” who nevertheless looked forward to “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” The writer recalls them for us, name by famous name, a regular pantheon of saints: Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and...Rahab the prostitute. It's in verse 31. “By faith,” we're told, “Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.” Now what is that all about?

Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses—why, yes. But Rahab, the *prostitute*? Hardly a saintly profession. You can imagine “Rahab, the Sunday school teacher,” or “Rahab, the chair of the Property Committee,” among the saints, but Rahab, the prostitute? It takes the honor out of sainthood, doesn't it? How did *she* get on the list?

Rahab's story is woven into the early chapters of the book of Joshua. I read most of it for you a moment ago. We don't often read from the book of Joshua these days. It's a deeply troubling text, for it tells of Israel's bloody conquest of Canaan—Palestine we might say today—following the forty years of wandering in the wilderness after Moses had led the people out of slavery in Egypt. In one sense, Israel's crossing over the Jordan

River into the Promised Land is the culmination of God's promises, back in Genesis, to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Israel's arrival there is a sign of God's faithfulness. Yet it is, equally, a nightmare of terror, violence and mayhem for the men, women and children who are already living there. It is the start, you might say, of the violence in the Middle East that continues even today.

In recent decades we have become sadly familiar with the Islamic idea of *jihad* or holy war, and the horrors that can be inflicted in God's name. Well, it's here in the book of Joshua that we find *jihad's* Judeo-Christian counterpart: the ideology of divinely directed conquest. In the book of Joshua, God is understood to be glorified—and pleased—as Israel exterminates enemy nations in the promised land and Israel's solidifies its claim to the land. The Bible uses the Hebrew word *herem* to describe the natives—the Canaanites, the Palestinians—the men and women and children who are already living there. *Herem* means something or someone hostile to God's plans and therefore intended to be annihilated. In this holy warfare, the total slaughter of the enemy is celebrated as exemplary obedience to God's commands.

Rahab's story unfolds against this background. Joshua—the hand-picked successor of Moses—has led the army of Israel to the threshold of the promised land. He sends two spies to reconnoiter the invasion route and the first big city along the way—Jericho. As soldiers throughout time have been wont to do, these two end up at Rahab's place in a seedy section of town.

Jericho's king gets word that spies are about, and he sends a security detail to seize them. When they inquire at Rahab's, though, she lies. Taking the side of the outside agitators against the heavies from the royal court—a motif in folklore from Robin Hood to Casablanca to Star Wars—the poor working girl bats her eyes at the king's goons and, she says, “True, a couple of Jewish boys were here earlier, but when the gate was closed, at dark, they left. If you go quickly, you can probably catch them.”

The king's men believe her and rush on, while the spies huddle under piles of flax on the roof, where Madame Rahab has hidden them. “You can come out now, boys,” Rahab tells the spies. It turns out she has heard of the mighty works of the God of Israel: the escape from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the victories in the wilderness. “The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below,” she confesses. It seems that even a wily foreigner like Rahab recognizes the truth about the God of Israel, the divine warrior who's given the land to Israel. She's risked her life for God's messengers. All she asks is that the Israelites show her family mercy when the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

Then, while it is still night, Rahab lets the spies down over the wall of the city by a rope, tying a scarlet thread in her window to identify her place for the invading Israelites. When Joshua and his army finally enter the city, the people in the red thread house in the red light district—Rahab and her family—are the only ones spared from the *herem* that levels Jericho.

So what can we say about Rahab? A prostitute, a liar, a traitor to her own people—what a seedy sort of saint! And yet, if you think about the Bible's story, Rahab is not alone in her seediness. There's drunken, naked Noah; Abraham with his squabbling

family; old, conniving Sarah; Moses the murderer; lustful David; bigoted Paul: it's a regular rogues' gallery, isn't it? If people like them can be saints, anybody can.

Who is a 'saint'? Israel is called a nation of saints: "You are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth."

Why should God choose Israel? Was it because Israel was greater or more religious than other nations—more pious? No. The Bible is clear; it says: "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you."<sup>1</sup> It was out of love that God chose Israel. Biblical writers bend over backwards to say that Israel's election was not due to any achievement on Israel's part. Israel played the prostitute many times. Waywardness, infidelity, idolatry, pride, were among the sins charged to Israel's account. Whatever is meant by "a people holy to the Lord," it means something other than a people pure and spotless.

A biblical saint is not a nation or a person who lives a virtuous life. No, biblical saintliness is a matter of what God does with people. A person is called saint in the Bible because God wants that person to do something holy, not because that person is holy. Saints are people who are called by God to do God's work.

The great theologian Karl Barth put it this way: a person is sanctified in the Bible when that person is "dedicated to the service of God" by God's "separation, claiming, commandeering" for service. That's what happened to Rahab. On a typical day, going about her typical business, in the world's oldest profession, this ordinary woman got "commandeered" for God.

The New Testament shares this definition of saints. Peter wrote to the early Christians, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. God's own people."<sup>2</sup> Why? Because God has work for them to do—"That you may declare the deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." God wants to make something out of them: "Once you were not a people but now you are God's people."<sup>3</sup> That's why the New Testament refers to the whole church—all of us—as saints. Like Israel before us, out of nobodies we become somebodies, made saints by God's gracious choice.

What looks like seediness to us more often looks like potential saintliness to God. And I even think that, sometimes, God passes over the nice, pure people, the ones we regard as so saintly, because nice, pure, sweet people can't always get the job done—especially when the jobs that need doing are as tough as the ones God takes on.

We may be inclined to question Rahab's sexual morals, but poverty was by far the most common cause of prostitution in the ancient world, as it is in our own. You remember, Rahab bargains with the spies for the lives of her entire family—"my father and mother, my brothers and sisters." Most likely she's been acting out a tough bargain on their behalf for some time—doing what she had to do to support them all. One way or

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:9.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Peter 2:10.

another, she's a survivor. She wasn't born yesterday. Rahab's been in business long enough to know how to take care of her own, and therefore, she proves quite helpful in looking after God's own.

Who do you think about when you hear the word saints? Perhaps you think of some sweet, pious Sunday school teacher who taught you in the third grade, whose memory challenges the Rahab image of sainthood. But I submit that any person who is capable of running a third-grade Sunday school class without receiving or administering bodily injury and still is able to convert a few eight-year-old pagans along the way has got more to commend him or her for God's work than sweetness.

This is how saints are made. Saints are made by listening to God and saying, "yes," trusting God to know who ought to be saints.

Rahab was minding her own business, looking after things in her place in Jericho when the Lord, through two frightened spies, asked her to mind God's business. She used her disreputable profession to cover her claim of innocence and protect the spies. She said yes and thereby is justly listed among the heroes of faith. The Epistle of James says that Rahab got to be a saint by her good works.<sup>4</sup>

That's part of the story. But I think the author of Hebrews is more correct in saying that it is by faith more than good work that she entered sainthood, faith that God could use even an impoverished prostitute like her. Whatever misgivings Rahab had, she put them aside and went on about God's business. With prudence she saw the coming crisis and seized the opportunity of the moment to overcome it. Her story gives notice that sometimes God's will is accomplished not by the glorious institution of divine war or by military superstars, but by the quick-thinking, perceptive faith and decisive action of the bit players in the drama: an alien prostitute, the mid-wives in Egypt, a nomadic housewife, a migrant farm worker from Moab, a pious widow named Judith.

As one of Rahab's great-grandsons<sup>5</sup> said to his own unlikely, ordinary, disciples many years later, "You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit."<sup>6</sup>

Thank God for the saints—all of them, including the good ones, the unlikely, unsuspecting ones, the Rahabs, the Abrahams, the Sarahs and all the rest, who listened and said yes, and thereby point the way for the rest of us. If they can be saints, anybody can.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever.  
Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> James 2:25.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matthew 1:5.

<sup>6</sup> John 15:16.