

Cindy Voth  
Waterford Mennonite Church  
Joshua 2:1-24, 6:22-25  
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*Hesed: Covenantal Loyalty*

Purpose: To reveal to the congregation the ways Rahab testifies to God's hesed and is used as part of God's unfolding plan for God's people and for all people of all time.

This summer we are spending each Sunday looking at a different biblical character. As we sit with their stories we discover the ways that their lives intersect, impact, and may be influential in our own lives today. Perhaps the stories depict attitudes or choices we are called to emulate; or we use their stories as a way to learn what it means to be faithful and therefore make choices that are different from those chosen by the character we are studying. In all the stories though I am struck by the humanity of the characters, and the ways we are able to resonate with themes within their stories.

A couple months ago we finalized the preaching schedule and I thought it would be interesting to ask some random people at church which biblical character they would be interested in hearing a sermon on. I wasn't sure who I was expecting they would say; however, in the process I realized who I had *hoped* people would not suggest! Well, after the third person named Rahab I said, "Okay, Cindy, you asked, people responded, let's look at Rahab." I must admit that my colleagues withstood some grumbling from me and would hear me say things like "Why not Ruth? Why didn't people say, "Wow, I would love a sermon on Ruth? Or, what about Lydia? Or I know, Joanna? Rahab, really? Really?" Perhaps the people who requested Rahab knew something I didn't know, or perhaps they wanted to see their pastor write a sermon focused on someone who made a living as a prostitute. Regardless I now believe that Rahab's story needs to be told. Furthermore, I challenge us all to become more like Rahab. As we sit with her story

we will see that she gets it, with “it” being committed to hesed, living in and out of covenantal loyalty.

I invite you to join Rahab’s story by turning to Joshua chapter 1. Here in the beginning of Joshua we read of the Lord commanding and commissioning Joshua to finally lead the people into the Promised Land. Moses has died and now Joshua is being commissioned to carry out the task of leadership. Throughout this command chapter one is the repeated reminder and promise that God will never leave nor forsake them. We also read the repeated command to be strong and courageous while obeying the laws Moses gave to them. As Joshua readies the people to prepare for the last leg of their journey, the people also declare their willingness to follow and obey Joshua as they ask for God to be with him.

We then come to chapter two and learn that Joshua secretly sent two spies from Shittim. They were tasked with going to look over the land, especially Jericho. At first reading perhaps it does not strike us as interesting that it is noted that the two spies are from Shittim. Do you remember what happened in Shittim? I had to do a little digging myself. It ends up that I do not think that it was just happenstance that the spies are noted as coming from Shittim. Back in Numbers chapter 25 we read the account of the people of God staying in Shittim. While there they engaged in practices and worship of other gods as they forfeited their faith in Yahweh alone, and therefore demonstrated a lack of covenantal loyalty. In and throughout this account is also woven sexual immorality. They found themselves in a foreign land, surrounded by worship of foreign gods, and new temptations that beckoned them to forfeit their previous loyalties and covenants. In the face of that culture many chose to yoke themselves with Baal, the god the locals worshiped. The Israelites were invited to worship services to Baal and we are told that the followers of Yahweh went, bowed down before these gods, and yoked themselves to them. It

was as if as they were surrounded by the other and the other's gods, they lost their understanding and practice of monotheism – **one** God in heaven above and on the earth below.

So these two spies are from Shittim. The people of God would have remembered what had happened in Shittim. This correlation would have also spelled out the repeated temptation of settling into a new land and the real and viable threat of losing their faith, identity, and calling as God's covenantal people. In verse one we are told that they entered the house of the prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. Different commentators try to make this story sound better than it does. They try to rationalize that the word translated as prostitute or harlot could also possibly be translated as innkeeper. On one hand perhaps at first glance we anticipate that her status in life will prohibit or limit her engagement with the Yahweh God. Perhaps we assume this because we know from our own personal experiences of being placed in a box, or placing others in a box. However, we will see that even while holding this title she experiences liberation as she alone proclaims faith in a monotheistic God who invites her to covenantal loyalty. But alas, I am getting ahead of myself. Suffice it to say though that trying to minimize or weasel our way into any other type of interpretation cheapens the story and contorts it in a way that states one must be worthy enough before they may be used and accepted by God.

The king of Jericho is told that some Israelite spies have entered their land and that they were being housed by Rahab. "We are not surprised that a king should have an interest in maintaining state security, nor that he is able to discover the spies' presence. Imperial powers have eyes and ears in unlikely places."<sup>i</sup> So the king contacts Rahab, but she replies that yes the men had been here, but they left before the city gate was closed. But if you hurry you might be able to catch up with them! It is the proverbial "They went thataway!"

However, the truth was that Rahab had hid them on her roof under the stalks of flax. Flax was a plant used to make linen. It had to undergo quite a process to break down and separate the fibers. The flax was soaked in stagnant water, then laid out to dry. It was here under these soggy, stinking pieces of flax that the spies were hidden.

The story continues then in verse 8 where we are told that before the spies lay down for the night Rahab went up on the roof. Now, I do not know what the spies had anticipated when they heard Rahab's footsteps approaching them on the roof. Did they fear that she brought with her some of the king's guards? She was harboring the enemy after all. Did their breaths hitch in their chest as they were filled with fear of being discovered? This text is like a good novel in that it keeps us all guessing as to what might happen next. There is irony and reversal of expectations and a play on loaded words. I have to imagine though that they were not prepared for what actually happens. There are no guards. Instead in the person of Rahab they receive a powerful, moving, and theologically rich testimony of faith in Yahweh. She said to them:

I know that the Lord has given this land to you 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.<sup>ii</sup>

Here from a foreigner, from an outsider, from a woman, from a prostitute, from a native in a land that worshiped different gods and was bound by different theological understandings

and implications... here we hear this riveting testimony and understanding and allegiance to Yahweh, the one true God. I am not sure what the spies anticipated as Rahab emerged on the roof. However, I am quite confident that they had not expected the testimony and proclamation that she delivered.

Now, perhaps you find yourself being a little skeptical about dear Rahab and her motivations. Perhaps you try to rationalize that she knew the end was coming so let's try to get on this bandwagon as a means to save ourselves from the impending disaster and doom. Perhaps you find yourself critical of Rahab saying that's fine but you don't really get it. You don't really understand what it means to make this type of proclamation of allegiances. Kind of like saying "Rahab, I'm sure you are nice and all in some way. But you are an outsider. You don't get it. You can't get it." Furthermore if we are honest, which I know can be painful to us, we are not sure we want her to get it. But friends, she does get it. Do you know how we know that to be true? It is not just what she says, but it is in the very language she employs to communicate her proclamation of allegiance.

How many times in the Old Testament do we read a recounting of the Exodus experience? This Exodus experience becomes the framework for how the people of God begin to recount the role and presence of Yahweh God in their lives. It is a pivotal, transformative, foundational story. Here Rahab draws attention to the Exodus and the ways the LORD, Yahweh, dried up the water of the Red Sea. Oh, she has heard about the God of the Israelites and what this mighty God has done on behalf and for God's people. But then Rahab takes it a step further and declares that the Lord your God, Yahweh, is God in heaven above and on the earth below. **This is monumental.** She lived and dwelled in a polytheistic environment and culture. There was not one god, there were many gods. Her statement is one of a radical belief in a monotheistic God

which is as counter cultural that she could have possibly stated. Her words remind us of Moses' exhortations from in Deuteronomy and Exodus.

As I was sitting with her words this week the familiar words of the Shema came to mind "Hear of Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Somehow these words had reached Rahab, a Canaanite woman. The one perceived as most unlikely to do so, is in fact the first one in this book of Joshua to pledge allegiance to a monotheistic God.

And if we had any remaining doubt that she gets it, the doubt should melt away as we come to verse twelve and see that Rahab employed the one word that is only used in connection to covenantal loyalty – hesed. My translation translates the word was kindness. This is a difficult word to translate and there is not one English word that fully captures the meaning of this Hebrew word. Often it will be translated as loving-kindness, kindness, or loyalty, or covenant love, or steadfast love, or loyal love. "Every occurrence of the words for "covenant/treaty" and "loyalty" speak of God's characteristic actions. In Deuteronomy the word hesed is used exclusively to describe God's loyalty to those who love God and keep the commandments. Thus Rahab recognized that her actions have been consistent with covenant loyalty, which binds her to the spies" and to the people of God. <sup>iii</sup>

The spies respond with the same vocabulary, binding together with her as God's covenantal people. They instruct Rahab to tie a scarlet cord to her window and to bring her family into her house and together they will be saved from the upcoming destruction. Flip ahead several chapters to chapter 6 verse 22. The walls of Jericho have come down after the seventh day of marching. Here Joshua gathers again the two spies and tells them" Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance to your oath to her." So the

young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.”<sup>iv</sup>

Now, if the story ended there we might still say it was a good story that depicted the importance of seeking God in the other, even or perhaps especially in the foreigner. Or what a story of God using an unlikely candidate to proclaim and call for commitment to Yahweh as the one and only true God of heaven above and earth below. Or, what encouragement for us that God uses us amidst our imperfections and shortcomings, while we are still a work in progress! However, there is more, much more to Rahab’s story, and to ours.

Turn with me to Matthew chapter 1. Here we find the genealogy of Jesus Christ. While many of us have not studied our own genealogies, at least not through so many generations, during the days of Jesus genealogies mattered. Here we read of the lineage of Abraham that led all the way to the birth of Jesus, the Savior of the World. Look with me at verse 5.

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.<sup>v</sup>

Whoa. First there are only four women are included in the genealogy. It was not normal practice to include women in Jewish genealogies. And these four women are not the matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel or Leah we might have thought would be included. Instead the four women named are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba who is named as the wife of Uriah. Not only are these *women* but they are not Jewish. Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite, and Bathsheba was the wife of a Hittite. God used Rahab, an outsider, a foreigner, a woman, a prostitute in bringing about God’s plan and God’s kingdom, and God’s son to earth!

Turn with me to Hebrews chapter eleven. This chapter is filled with stories of individuals who lived by faith... stories of people who made choices out of and through and by faith in God. We read of individuals such as Enoch, Abraham, Jacob, Moses. And then we come to verse 29

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned. (See the retelling again of this identifying story). By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army marched around them for seven days. (Now in verse 31) By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.<sup>vi</sup>

Rahab made it into the faith hall of fame! Of all the stories that could have been selected, Rahab is selected and lifted up as a model to emulate and celebrate. And here they do not minimize the label she was given, but we see that others have allowed her to move beyond that, and are able to celebrate her faith and confession we read in Joshua chapter two.

Finally turn with me to the next book, James, chapter two. Here James is articulating the needed connection between both faith and deeds. Faith propels out into actions and the actions we engage in are formed and informed by our faith in God. It becomes a cyclical process where both are needed and celebrated. After talking about the details James provides examples from two Old Testament characters. We pick it up in verse twenty-one.

Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?<sup>vii</sup>

I feel like the story of Rahab has been sensationalized by the church and many pastors, including myself, have avoided it for the complexities that are found. And yet, I now believe that



her story is one we need to hear, to dwell with, and I would go as far as to join the authors of Hebrews and James to lift up Rahab as someone we would do well to emulate. We too find ourselves in a land and in culture where there are a variety of gods we could serve. Gods of money, fame, success, independence, fear, violence, self-gratification, pride, envy... and the list goes on and on. In a time where we too are pulled in different directions may we remember the words of Rahab as she helps reorient us to this truth that we serve a monotheistic God, Yahweh, who is the God of heaven above and on the earth below. And like Rahab, may we join in embracing and experiencing God's hesed, while too joining in living out our faith through covenantal loyalty.

Thanks to God for using Rahab in the story of God's faithfulness. Thanks to God for calling and using us in the ongoing, unfolding, story of God's steadfast love and covenantal loyalty.

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<sup>i</sup> Gordon H. Matties, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Joshua* (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, Virginia), 71.

<sup>ii</sup> Joshua 2:9-13.

<sup>iii</sup> Matties, *Joshua*, 73-74.

<sup>iv</sup> Joshua 6:22-23.

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 1:5-6a.

<sup>vi</sup> Hebrews 11:29-31.

<sup>vii</sup> James 2:14-25.