

## 2024 08 18 – *Rahab*

**Scripture:** Joshua 2:1-24; 6:22-25 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

It's the sixth Sunday of our *Women of the Hebrew Scriptures* summer sermon series. Today we are exploring the story of Rahab. This woman's story is not particularly well-known. How many of you had heard of Rahab before today? These scriptures readings are not a part of the lectionary that we normally read on Sunday mornings. But I think it is safe to say that she is one of more interesting and possibly even controversial characters that we will meet in the Bible.

Thanks to Maxine, you've now heard Rahab's story at least once. Just from that first reading, what do we know about her? What words would you use to describe Rahab? (wait for answers: innkeeper, Canaanite, single, smart, conniving, loyal to family, traitor to state, brave, hero, faithful.) She is a fascinating woman, but she's really not very easy to categorize is she?

And yet, there is a label, a stereotype that is often used for Rahab. The authors of the Inclusive Bible, the version that we read today, chose to leave this label out of their translation. But most versions of the Bible don't introduce Rahab as an innkeeper. The New Revised Standard Version says in the first verse, "So they went and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and spent the night there." It turns out that "prostitute" is an accurate translation of the Hebrew word that is used in this verse of scripture. So how does this new label impact your image of Rahab? Would you still describe her in the same way that

you did before? What are the words that we would typically associate with prostitutes? (criminal, diseased, dirty, trafficked, call girl, abused, oppressed etc).

That is the problem with labels, isn't it? They can give us a pre-conceived idea about someone before we meet them or hear their story. A few weeks ago, I was listening to Q, on CBC radio. Tom Powers was interviewing a famous rapper and singer called Jelly Roll. Jelly Roll was involved in an armed robbery when he was 16 and he ended up being charged as an adult. As a result, he spent several years in prison. Jelly Roll has now totally turned his life around; but the label of "ex-con" follows him wherever he goes. Tom asked him, "What does being called a felon do to your ability to dream? Jelly Roll replied, "It's a dream-killer." He went on to describe how this label has impacted many aspects of his life including: increasing the cost of all types of insurance, making international travel very difficult, and limiting his choice of careers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZ7G8NRYXig&t=888s>

It's interesting to note that there is at least one another place in the Bible where Rahab is mentioned. In the New Testament, in the Book of Hebrews, the author is discussing the importance of faith and arguing that, "Because of faith, our ancestors were approved by God" (Hebrews 11:2). He goes on to list many of the icons of the Hebrew Scriptures and how their faith gave them favourable status with God. In this list he mentions Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Moses and David. And the author includes Rahab, saying, "By faith, Rahab the prostitute didn't perish with those who were disobedient, after she welcomed the spies in

peace” (Hebrews 11:31). The author is including Rahab in this illustrious list of faith-filled people and yet also uses the label of prostitute. It’s interesting to note that he doesn’t include any negative labels for the other people in the list.

Despite the fact that many of them were adulterers, liars, and even pimps. So, in the same sentence Rahab is labelled both as a prostitute and as a faith-filled person who has favour with God. Obviously neither of these labels, positive or negative, describe her completely.

Let’s take a closer look at her story. We will begin by giving it some context. In my last sermon, I preached about the daughters of Zelophehad. That story took place while the Israelites were situated on the east side of the Jordan River, waiting to cross the river and colonize the land that YAHWEH had promised them. While the Israelites were there, Moses died and Joshua, son of Nun became the leader of the Israelites. After a thirty day mourning period, the time came for the Israelites to cross the Jordan and Joshua ordered the young men to prepare for battle. This brings us to today’s story, the story of two spies and their interactions with the fascinating and controversial, Rahab.

Joshua’s two spies stop at Rahab’s house. It’s possible that her home was both an inn and a whorehouse. We are told that the two men “spent the night.” We just don’t for sure whether they were there to do more than just eat and sleep. What we do know is that the ruler of Canaan had his own version of “homeland security” and knew right away that the spies were in town. He sent his messenger to Rahab saying, “Bring me the two who are lodging in your house, for they are here to spy on my land.”

This is where the story gets interesting because Rahab, a Canaanite, decides to lie to her ruler in order to save the Israelite spies. She hides the spies under the flax straw on her roof and tells her ruler that they left before the town gate was closed for the night. At this point it is clear that Rahab is betraying her ruler and her country.

Once the ruler's posse has left the city in search of the spies, Rahab goes up on the roof and explains her reasoning to the men whose lives she has just saved. She says that her people have heard of the Israelites, how they got away from the Egyptians and destroyed the Amorite armies. She says "We heard all this, and we lost heart. Because of you, no one has any courage left." Because of the Israelites' success against their enemies, Rahab now believes that their God, YHWH, must be the one true God. She asks for mercy for herself and her family: "her mother and father, sisters and brothers and all who belong to them." The spies agree to save her family as long as she remains quiet. In the second part of today's reading we learn that all of her family survive.

It's true that Rahab did what she needed to do to save her family. To them she was, no doubt, a hero. It's true that it took cunning and courage for her to lie to her ruler and to hide those men on her roof. It's true that she believed in the Israelite God and that she had faith in YHWH's power. It's true that Rahab was an innkeeper and a woman with her own property and wealth. It's also true that she was also probably a prostitute. And it's true that her actions may have been a contributing factor in the death of all the other inhabitants of Jericho. Rahab

became complicit in the genocide of the Canannite people and the colonization of her own country.

Rahab was a survivor. Whether you choose to describe her as hero or traitor, Rahab was much more than a prostitute just as Jelly Roll is much more than a felon, just as we are all much more than the good or bad choices that we make in our lives. Just as we are all much more than one single part of our identity: more than our race, our culture, our status, our income, our gender or our sexual orientation. Each one of us is a complex human being, a beloved child of God. Every person on this planet, even the ones that we would call enemy or weird, are complex human beings and are also beloved children of God. May we recognize the fullness of all human beings. May we see as God sees. May we love as God loves.

May it be so. Amen.