

A Advent 2 12.4.22

Joshua 2:1-5, 22-24; 6:1-5, 15-17, 20-25; Matthew 3:1-12

Focus Statement: Jesus' lineage is one of people getting through hard stuff with God against all odds.

Last week we had Jesus the thief, today unquenchable fire. Advent really gives us the snuggliest texts. And we will get to John the Baptist this morning, a little bit. But our main focus is these women of Jesus' genealogy, meaning another Sunday of prostitutes doing sketchy things. Welcome to another week of "if this church attracts children, Pastor Kjersten can't preach on texts like this with quite this much bluntness." This morning we have Rahab. Rahab's questionable sexual history isn't quite as front and center in this story as it was for Tamar or will be for Bathsheba. Here, it's stated more as a character descriptor, to key us in on just the sort of character we are talking about.

Rahab isn't a classic Sunday school character, but the story she comes from certainly is. Many of us, most of us maybe, have rattling around in the back of our heads the old Sunday school song, "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumblin' down." Sunday school has a lot to teach us about Joshua, Moses's second-in-command, whom after Moses's death God turned leadership of the Israelites over to, promising to be with Joshua just as God had been with Moses. Joshua, who oversaw the conquest of the land God had promised to the Israelites. Joshua, who uttered the line that adorns many a wall-hanging, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Sunday school has a lot to teach us about Joshua.

But Rahab, the woman, the prostitute, living in her father's house in the wall of Jericho itself, Sunday school is quieter on this character. And I think it shouldn't be. I think Rahab is another woman in scripture that, despite my earlier PG-13 warning on this Bible text, we should be teaching our children about. Because Rahab, like Tamar, like all the women we are hearing about this season, is another example of a person in Jesus' lineage who faced seemingly insurmountable odds and, with the help of God, stayed true to herself and her sense of her worth in God's eyes, and came out on the other side. And not just came out but brought the whole of salvation history with her, so that we too could stand here today as heirs of the promise of salvation she moved forward.

One reason we don't hear much about Rahab, honestly, has less to do with how she is described in scripture and more to do with, I'll name it, Christianity's historical struggles with outsiders. Which is crazy. We are a faith of outsiders. Look who is in Jesus' own lineage. But the issues the Pharisees and Sadducees had that John the Baptist addressed in our Gospel reading, of drawing carefully prescribed lines of who is in and who is out, making sure to draw ourselves in and those who's lives or experiences make us uncomfortable out, those issue are not unique to Jesus' time. They are the sin of the church in all times. We, the universal we, but certainly if we're not on the lookout for it, the very personal we as well, we still do this. We still say, "all are welcome here, except maybe you..." And when we do that, here comes Jesus, the great-great-great grandson of Rahab, sauntering into our circle to remind us just what his background is and blow open all our carefully constructed ideals.

Who was Rahab? We know she was a prostitute, a detail which honestly was meant to tell us more about her socioeconomic status than her profession. Because, as she herself made clear several times, Rahab was not the head of the household, she lived in her father's house. Which means, under the patriarchal model of the time, her father should have been the provider for the family. That he was not, that Rahab worked as a prostitute, tells us that for some reason her father was unable to work. The text doesn't tell us why. Maybe he was elderly, maybe he was disabled, maybe he had been shamed or shunned in some way or for some action. Whatever the situation, Rahab became a prostitute for the reason so many people in the ancient times and even still today enter the profession, because she and her family were desperate. The social safety nets that should have caught them had failed, and Rahab was left to the only field that remained, the only resource at her disposal, selling her body to feed her family.

Given how the community of Jericho had failed her and her family, imagine the scene through Rahab's eyes when the Israelite spies showed up in her home. Rather than viewing them as invaders, for Rahab here were people from a culture whose laws lifted up the widow, the orphan, the destitute. Whose God urged them, "You shall also love the stranger, for [remember] you were strangers in the land of Egypt." The Israelite God was a God who took care of people like Rahab and her family, and who commanded God's people to do the same. And in fact, the text tells that after Jericho fell, Rahab and her family "lived in Israel ever since." Matthew even indicates that Rahab's children became part of the line that led from the covenant with Abraham—the covenant that led Moses out of Egypt and Joshua back to Jericho to begin with, on through the great King David and to Jesus. Like with

Tamar, in Rahab we see the lineage of Jesus caught and continued thanks to the courage of a cast-aside gentile woman.

Dear people of God, this story of Rahab should both comfort and challenge you. It should comfort you in the same way that Tamar's story did, in reminding you that ours is a God who is for outsiders, that there really are no outsiders in the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel text this morning, John the Baptist scolded the religious leadership, "Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." Hear this text and be comforted that, just as God was for Rahab, just as God was for the Israelites, God is for you. Nothing, not a society that ostracizes and writes you off, not the mighty walls of a fortress, can stand against you, because God has claimed you as God's own.

Be comforted by this text, but also be challenged. Be challenged, like Rahab was challenged, to believe in yourself. To believe in your own dignity and worth regardless of what you may have been told, what others may say, how you may have heard yourself defined. God writes off no one, God has not written off you. Do not listen to the voices of those who would seek to define you. Let this text challenge you to hear only the voice of God. Because if God can raise up stones to be God's children, God has certainly raised up you.

Be challenged like Rahab, but also be challenged like the Israelites were challenged, to see in others the inherent worth with which God sees them. Be challenged to look into the eyes

of those that society might neglect and say not only, "you are welcome here" but more than that "you are needed here." You are necessary here. Without you here, we cannot be complete, we cannot be saved, we cannot be the Kingdom of God. Those whom society has overlooked, whose homes are so tenuous as to be hanging on the outer edge of the city walls, are among those whom God has lifted up as not just also of value, but of integral and essential parts of Christ's own lineage. So be comforted by this text, yes, and also be challenged. Be challenged to believe in yourself and your worth and be challenged to see that worth in others and to never tire of working for everyone's inclusion in the family of God. For just as the prophet Isaiah spoke, "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Thanks be to God, the one more powerful than John the Baptist, against whom the walls of Jericho could not stand, in whose eyes all are beloved children, who is coming. Amen.