

“Red Thread”

Joshua 2: 1 – 21

Makemie Presbyterian Church

August 23, 2009

1 Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho."

So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. 2 The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land."

3 Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land."

4 But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, "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."

6 She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. 7 So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut. 8 Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof 9 and said to the men:

"I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. 10 For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. 11 As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. 12 Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith 13 that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death."

14 The men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

15 Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. 16 She said to them, "Go toward the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterward you may go your way."

17 The men said to her, "We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you 18 if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. 19 If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. 20 But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you."

21 She said, "According to your words, so be it." She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.

This ends the reading.

What's the difference between doing the easy thing & doing the right thing? How does culture & language shape this difference? And is the red thread an awesome metaphor for the bloodline that continues with the story & that leads to the Messiah? These are the questions we will explore this morning from the great story of Rahab; read just a moment ago by Pat.

When I was a girl a family moved in down next to the fields used to grow corn. There were two little girls, a passel of boys, a mom & no dad. I went with my mom to call on them. When we got home my mom got down all my dresses from the year before; washed & ironed ten of them & delivered them to the family. A week or so later we went back to visit & as we walked up to the porch, underneath their hound dog you could see a couple of the dresses. Yes, this family had decided to make the dog's bed with my hand-me down dresses. I won't share what my mother said, it is Sunday after all & we are in church but a lot of it had to do with "It's not right."

Another time I remember Mrs. Leps who I lived with while I worked at the mission for migrant families making an apple pie for Janey & Guy, my friends who lived around the island from her.

Guy told her, “we left the pie on the kitchen counter & our dog Buttercup, ate the pie.” The look on Mrs. Leps face, ooohh. Janey & I said to Guy, “that’s the last pie you’ll ever see.”

To try to find some answers, for this question of easy vs. right, I've invited Rahab the prostitute to join us today. I think Jesus would want her to be here--after all, he was often found eating with prostitutes & sinners. Maybe he'd invite Rahab for a Big Mac after worship.

But first, let’s see if we can get our bearings. If we had one of those maps that you find inside the mall--there'd be a big red arrow saying: "You are here." Here, as in the EAST side of the Jordan River. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel are waiting to cross over into the land of milk and honey. Moses had died at the top of Mt. Nebo. Moses, God commanded would only see the Promised Land from afar.

Now Joshua has been called to lead the Hebrew people where Moses couldn't go. But it wasn't as simple as crossing the river! There was a problem: Canaan, "the Promised Land," was not deserted. Canaan was already somebody else's home: Canaanites, Jebusites, Edomites and Hittites lived on the far side of the river. They tended flocks, grew grain,

built cities. Cities like Jericho, twenty-three miles east of Jerusalem, near several fords in the river, gateway to Canaan from the east.

It's a problem when you believe you've arrived at the Promised Land and discover someone else is already there. It was a problem for Joshua, a dilemma to realize that the land beyond the river was not empty. So before crossing the river, he sent out spies: "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." Find the weak points. Count the troops. See if there is any way to penetrate the city walls. The spies slipped inside the city and entered the house of Rahab the prostitute. (That seemed to be her whole name: Rahab-the-Prostitute.) She was a woman who lived on the very edge of the city--so far on the edge that her house was built into the city wall. She lived in the wall between her people and their people, in a space that divides insiders from outsiders. Which is which? Who is who? It depends on where you stand, I mean, doesn't it always?

Why did the spies enter this particular house--the house of Rahab the prostitute? Was it God's planning...or their own longing? Perhaps they came to her house first, just inside the gates. Perhaps they knew they would hear soldiers' stories at the house of a prostitute. They spent the night. Actually, the Hebrew text says they "lay there" --perhaps mixing

business with pleasure. Now the fact that many scholars argue that a brothel would have been the best place to secure information about the city well I don't know, but the spies neither ask questions nor eavesdrop on any conversations.

Anyway, the next day the king sent orders to Rahab. (Perhaps he, too, had spent the night in her house.) "Bring out the men who have come to you," the king ordered. What is she supposed to do? Who is Rahab to defy the king? What is the value of a prostitute who lives in the city wall?

In spite of obvious dangers, Rahab took the two men and hid them up on her roof. Then she said to the king's messengers: "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where they went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them."

Even as she spoke, she thought of the two men up on her roof, hidden among the stalks of flax bundled for drying. What if the king's men insisted on searching her house? But they took her at her word. Perhaps they knew her well. She heard the gate close as they went out to into the night.

Why did Rahab lie in order to save the lives of two Hebrews? Why did some people lie to hide runaway slaves in the Underground Railroad? Why did some people lie when the Gestapo came knocking at their doors looking for Jews hidden in the attic or under the floorboards? There are times when bearing false witness is the only way to save your neighbor. But these men on the roof were not Rahab's neighbors: they were outsiders to her. She was an outsider to them. Yet on the rooftop of her house the distinctions blurred. Rahab had not stood at the foot of Sinai, nor had she been numbered among the tribes of Israel. Yet her testimony is bold: "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."

She has heard what happened at the Red Sea. How could she have heard? (This was, after all, long before email, Blackberries or blogs!) Who brought that message to Jericho? Do you think God has been places we have never visited? Speaks languages we have never heard?

Oh, she is a daring woman, and she is nobody's fool. "Swear to me by the Lord," she says, "swear to me that you will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to me."

Before she lets them down by a rope from her window, she asks them for a sign. (She learned long ago not to trust the men who came to her house!)

"Tie a crimson cord outside this window," they told her. "Gather all your family in your house in the wall. And you and all your household will be spared."

Could she trust them? Would they bother to tell anyone to save the life of a prostitute?

"She sent them away....Then she tied the crimson cord in the window."

God's own sign of Passover; the slash of red, is now the crimson cord, the blood-red sign at the window in the wall. Would anyone look for the red cord at the window when the attack began? We wait as the army surrounds the city. Joshua tells the two spies to bring Rahab and her family out of the city. Then they burned the city to the ground, "But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel ever since." Like the Hebrews saved by the blood on the doorposts, Rahab was saved by the blood-red cord. The forces of

death passed over her house, and the walls between insider and outsider crumbled in her presence. The red line, perhaps a metaphor for a blood line.

Is that why Rahab is here--to remind us to beware of making distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders"? She is the first person encountered in the land of promise--a foreigner to the spies, but at home in her own land. Rahab is curious ethically: but she has mixed allegiance: she betrays her own city (which may or may not be ruled by a tyrant); and she buys favorable treatment for her own family by doing so. And because of this act, she gains a place of honor in Scripture cited twice in the NT for her faith (Hebrews 11:31) and for her good works (James 2:25).

Rahab was not an Israelite, so she did not come from the same religious background. She is also a prostitute, which was an important separating factor in her situation. However, the important message of the story was the fact that the spies and Rahab had something in common. They were both desperate for God. The spies were dependent on God for their safety and their victories in battle. Without God the Israelites were completely powerless. Rahab was desperate for some hope of a better life outside of her poverty.

Under the many stories of battle, of walls that came a-tumbling down and whole cities burned to the ground, Rahab stands watch at her window in the wall. She is remembered for centuries. She's there as the New Testament begins. Do you remember? In the very first chapter of the gospel of Matthew, the very first book of the New Testament, there's a long genealogy of Jesus' ancestors. The oddest thing about Matthew's list is the four women who appear there: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and the wife of Uriah (that is, Bathsheba). All of them are a bit suspect for one reason or another. Rahab and Ruth are both foreigners and the other two are unfairly portrayed as being sexually promiscuous. There she is--Rahab the prostitute in Jesus' family tree!

Don't overlook the red thread in the window. It is connected to situations of birthright, bloodshed, sacrifice, atonement, redemption, and Protection, and it appears in situations where the boundaries must be asserted between sacred & profane, forsaken & redeemed, those destined to live & those destined to die, those who belong to the Hebrew nation & those who do not.

The first appearance of the red thread in the Hebrew Bible is in the form of hut hashani in the tale of Tamar & Judah in Genesis. Yes the same

Tamar that appears in the genealogy of Jesus. When Tamar gives birth to twin sons the midwife ties a scarlet thread around the first baby's wrist, the baby Perez. The red thread is woven throughout the tapestry that tells God's story. Without it we might see only a story of conquest and holy war. But the red thread draws us to the window where we see Rahab's face. She bids us to be attentive to those who live in the margins of life: those who live in the walls of the city, under its bridges and in the doorways. She pleads with those who would conquer any land in the name of God--for she knows that the Lord is God of heaven and earth and will not be held captive by any nation.

Rahab sits at her window in the wall, the window between insiders and outsiders. The red thread must not be forgotten. It is a sign of life saved in the midst of holy war, a blood-red sign tying Hebrew to Canaanite, binding insider and outsider together. Today she comes among us, begging us to remember; We are joined together, one body, one God. Amen.