

Antiheroes: Rahab
Joshua 2:1-21; 6:15-17, 24-25
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Rahab *the prostitute*. It's kind of unfair the way that modifier is always attached to her name. Jacob's not continually referred to as "Jacob the trickster." Samson's not named "Samson the gullible." Eve's not called "Eve the tempted." But Rahab gets her name slandered almost every time it appears in scripture.¹ It's possible that Rahab's line of work didn't seem as negative in her culture or time as it is in ours. A cult of temple prostitution did flourish in a number of ancient religions that elevated the practice to an almost spiritual level. But Israel was characteristically negative on the practice – at least in word. Wages from prostitution were forbidden from being given to the temple (Deuteronomy 23:18), priests were forbidden from marrying a prostitute or allowing their daughters to become one (Leviticus 21:7, 9).² So it's hard not to see this repeated refrain as a put down.

At the same time, it's the Israelites in this text who seem a bit, well, less than righteous. The text says they are on a spy mission, but it's not clear what kind of information they hope to collect from a house of ill repute. They go directly there and spend the night. The only reconnaissance that happens is what Rahab tells them – that the people were afraid when they learned about what happened to other Canaanites who got in the Israelites' way. If Rahab comes off looking bad in this text, then the two Israelite spies are right there with her.³

It's not even clear why Joshua sent out spies in the first place. God told Joshua that no one would stand in their way to the promised land. When God said the same thing to Moses and Moses sent spies into the land just to be sure, Moses and the rest were punished for not trusting God. (Deuteronomy 1:22-44). Right here at the beginning of the entry into the promised land, we get the subtle suggestion that the people entering it don't trust God enough to deserve it.

¹ Rahab the prostitute is not to be confused with Rahab the dragon, a reference that appears in Job, Isaiah, and the Psalms. The two are spelled differently in Hebrew (Rahab vs. Rachab), but result in the same English transliteration. Note, too, that scholars do not agree on whether the Rahab referred to in Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:5) is the same Rahab in Joshua's story. Recent scholarship suggests this is a different Rahab, though it is impossible to rule out the connection.

² Tamar temporarily plays the role of a prostitute with her father-in-law, Judah, but the text places the blame on him for not fulfilling the obligations of levirate marriage. It sees Tamar's actions as "forced" by his disobedience. Judah himself is angry at Tamar not for acting as a prostitute (whose "services" he engages), but causing him to commit incest unknowingly (Genesis 38:14-15, Leviticus 18:15).

³ Jerome F. D. Creach points out the repetition of seductive and provocative images throughout this text. The root of the name Rahab may be "open place." The men entered (literally "came into") and "spent the night" (literally "lay down"), both common euphemisms for sexual activity. Creach, *Joshua*, Interpretation Bible Commentary Series, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 1989, p. 32.

And I'm glad that this subtle suggestion floats its way into this story right at the beginning because the main storyline of Joshua isn't subtle at all. God has given this land to a specific people and God has given them the right to burn, pillage, overthrow, and kill to take it by force. They are commanded to annihilate all the opposition. (Deuteronomy 20:10-20). That's the main storyline: carnage is coming and God has ordained it. God has given the land to a people and any hesitation to take it is a sign of their mistrust of God.

It's the storyline that we find among all kinds of religiously motivated people from fundamentalist Zionists in Israel who believe God gives them the right take all the land to fundamentalists in Iran who believe God gives them the right to wipe Jews from the face the earth. From the terrorists in Syria and Iraq to those who do their evil deeds on our shores. It wasn't that long ago that Christian crusaders claimed their status as the "new Israel" gave them the right to do the same. These are some troublesome texts at the heart of our faith – the ones that justify violence in God's name – except that Rahab find her way into the heart of this one.

It's a shock to find her alive right here in the beginning of Joshua, since the text in Deuteronomy has just commanded the Israelites to wipe out any town where Canaanites are occupying the land. "You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God." Rahab is one of those people. But she lives and goes on living in the land – "her family has lived in Israel ever since," the text says.

And it makes sense to me that Rahab would be the one to figure out how to survive. Rahab *the prostitute* – the Bible won't let us forget. I had a friend once who preached about this line of work that seems to be so much in the news the last few years – the plight of mostly young women, often abandoned by their families, or running away from them, with few economic or trusting supports, who find themselves caught up in a trade that puts them at great physical, emotional, and mental risk of abuse, exploitation, or worse. My friend, on the other hand, wrote a paper that was rooted in all the Hollywood-infused stereotypes about women who supposedly choose this line of work. And our preaching professor called him on it. Had he ever spoken to anyone involved in this line of work? No. Did he know why they got into it? What they felt about it? No.

To my friend's credit he sought out someone in the trade. Like most women caught up in it her options were limited. "Choice" would be too strong of a word. Over a cup of coffee she told him what her life was like. "You know what I think about whenever I'm with a customer," she asked him? "I think, if he tries to hurt me, can I take him? Will I be able to survive?" Rahab, like most women in her situation, is a survivor. She doesn't have the privilege of living in a safe world but she's developed the tools to survive in one. She doesn't have the luxury of living in a secure world, but she's got the street smarts to survive in one. She's not born into a family, or a nation, or a world that she would ever choose to live in – not as she finds it – but still, she learns how to operate within it to carve out some safety and security for herself and her family.

True, we could judge her for saving *only* her own family. The rest of her town perishes. This is true. Maybe she could have done more in her time. Maybe she could have changed more than just the destiny of her own family. Maybe she should have. History can second-guess her just as it will second-guess each of us. The church could have done more to ensure that black lives matter in Baltimore, they could have done more to ensure that education is funded to bridge the gaps in their times, they could have done more to stop violence against the poor, or the LGBT community, exclusion of people with disabilities. Yes, history is right to ask if Rahab should have done more, just as history will ask the same of each of us, a collectively of our church.

But Rahab does more than just save her family. She opens the door of possibilities for a future for anyone who is named other – whose exclusion or worse is explicitly authorized by any tradition, text, or ruler. Not all outsiders have to be in opposition to God’s chosen people. Not every text has to be followed through completely to its end. Rahab’s very existence and that of her family undermines God-ordained violence in the Joshua conquest because she proves there can be exceptions to biblical rules. There are more alternatives to be investigated and pursued. There are other possibilities to be attempted. There are more imaginative ends to be sought.

And I find it incredible that her example wins her a starring role not only in this book that authorizes the destruction of people like her, but in the rest of the Bible where her faith is never sanitized or separated from her line of work. It’s as if the tradition that assembled these stories knew that her experience – even the part of her experience that no one would choose - is what gave her the skills to squeeze as much justice out of the injustice she was delivered. Her constricted choices gave her the wisdom to know when and how to push a system that had never and would never benefit her.

We need the faith of Rahab most especially when the world seems out of God’s hands, when the moral arc of the universe doesn’t seem to bend toward justice, when violence enacted in God’s name seems to have the upper hand. We need Rahab, yes Rahab *the prostitute*, who teaches us that some of the best acts of faith come from the very people who the church or the culture is afraid to even acknowledge from our pulpits. From people who probably don’t even consider themselves all that religious.

We need to learn from those who have been through divorce and learned what it really means to lean on God’s grace when your own love has failed you. We need to learn from those living on public assistance among us who have learned what generosity really means when there’s not much to share. We need to learn from survivors of abuse, or alcoholism or depression who can teach us where true courage and strength comes from and how to reject the church’s history of heaping on shame. We need to learn from brothers and sisters who have come out of the closet what it means to choose to accept yourself exactly as God wanted you to become. We need to learn from people of color all the slights, the micro-aggressions, the fear of black bodies – how to confront our own racism and change the future together.

We need the Rahabs not only of the Bible but of the church today to how to live in the midst of a world of injustice and bend it a little more in the right direction. We need to learn how not to give up hope when the odds are more than stacked against safety in our streets, or division across our races, or inequality across our wealth and station. We need to learn how to survive in a world where every tweet seems deliver another bit of news about how governance isn't working in Europe, or the Congress, or the city or the church. We need the streets smarts of Rahab and people like her. I wonder who God is calling this morning among us, what person among us – who might not even think of him or herself as religious. I wonder who God is calling next.