



From the Pulpit: January 21, 2024
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Squire Prince

Joshua 2:1–14, 17–18. 21; 6:21–25

Jesus’ Grandmothers, III: Rahab

Today we continue in our series looking at the grandmothers of Jesus. Bill, Katie, Christine, and I are looking at how the stories of the women in the Matthean account of the lineage of Jesus, to inform how we see the gospel message more clearly, and relevantly. Bill calls it bad history, but good theology. And I agree. A lot of what we see sometimes can be bad historical accounts, seen through the eyes of an individual in a space of time with a perspective and a history, but good for honest, authentic God-talk! And Christine reminds us to look for the song-line of hope in this complicated history. Today we look at Granny Rahab and see what she has to reveal to us.

“We all in a sense live in this space of fragmentation, with cracks that dig deep into who we are, distorting our ability sometimes to live into our full selves.”

Now I call this a messy history because if you look at the genealogy of people in the line of Jesus, you would see a rag tag group of ragamuffins and ne-er do wells who have stolen, murdered, lied, lusted, some worked in careers that were deemed questionable and destitute, and much more. But before you bring anybody out to the town square and say stone them, are we any better? We all in a sense live in this space of fragmentation, with cracks that dig deep into who we are, distorting our ability sometimes to live into our full selves. One of the things we talked about in this theology intensive I attended this week was the idea of the fall of humanity being seen in our need to differentiate and subjugate. A part of our messiness is our desire to uplift ourselves, but downplaying, or dehumanizing another. We live into this lineage of messiness. The list starts with Abraham, and I want us to focus there for a second, because it is the promise of Abraham that informs the story of

Rahab. God promises Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Here God promises to Abraham providence (guidance), presence, and provision. God tells Abraham, I have a special land that I will take you to,

and you will be the beginning of a great line of people. And from that utterance of that promise, we see the line of Abraham hold onto it, with very messy hands. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, messy; Isaac, Leah, and Rebekah, messy; Jacob and Esau, messy; Jacob and his 12 sons, one of which who was sold into slavery by the other 11, messy; enslavement; Then you have Moses, this great liberator who was also messy, and tribe of refugees wandering the wilderness, a group of messy people, and now we’ve come to the part of the story where they see the land that they are to possess. The beginnings of this recon mission of spying is assisted by Rahab, who the scriptures refer to as a *zonah*. This word according to Dr. Kimberly Russaw in her book “Revisiting Rahab”, “points to a woman who exists on the margins of acceptable society because she participates in sex work”¹ She is what some today would call a “lady of the night”.

¹ Russaw, K. D. (2021). *Revisiting Rahab: Another Look at the Woman of Jericho*. Wesley’s Foundery Books, 17.

This is questionable because we never see her actually engaging in anything the scriptures would deem adulterous. There is actually speculation that she may have been a widowed innkeeper. But why is she referred to as a *zonah*? Dr. Russaw says “juxtaposition of *zonah* to a protagonist heightens the literary tension by placing the protagonist in question. Readers are left to question if a particular character can be a hero...”² Being given this title creates a question of a person’s morals, ethics, or characters. Russaw goes on “a *zonah* is an individual who is held in contempt by the Israelite community because her presence threatens the patriarchal status quo by pointing to women who control their own bodies in ways that ‘acceptable’ Israelite women do not”³ What do we see? Rahab, this *zonah*, holds something within her that threatens the system that claims her body as property...she held autonomy over her body, and this threatened the system that sought to control her.

“How am I
marginalizing
someone in just my
refusal to see them
as a beloved being
with God’s image?”

I don’t know if any of *y’all* heard of it, but there is a new movie in theatres called “The Color Purple”. This movie is based off of the onstage musical, by the same name, that was based off of the novel by Alice Walker, that saw an earlier cinematic experience, all with the same name. This story tells of a woman named Celie and her journey of finding herself, and her inner beauty, in a world where pressure surrounds her on every side. This is not a plug to go see the movie, but this is a plug to go see the movie. One of my favorite characters in the story is Ms. Sophia, played in the original 1985 movie by Oprah Winfrey, played now by Danielle Brooks. What I love about Ms. Sophia is her strength. She *aint gon’* let nobody push her around. Not even her husband Harpo, and this causes tension in their home. Well Ms. Celie who has in a sense submitted to the ways of her world advises her stepson Harpo to beat her.

Well for anyone who hasn’t seen the movie, that doesn’t go well for Harpo, and Ms. Sophia sings a song, confronting Ms. Celie, and she says,

“I feel sorry for you to tell you the truth
You remind me of my momma
Under your husband’s thumb
No, you under your husband’s foot!
What he say goes
Why you so scared, I never know
But if a man raise his hand
Hell no”⁴

Ms. Sophia to some may present as problematic. Why? Because she poses a threat to the system of female subservience. Ms. Sophia threatens the system that says to subjugate the woman by force and fear. So does Rahab.

Whether Rahab was an actual lady of the night or not, I am not sure, but what we do see is her character being perceived as dangerous, and a threat.

Hospitality workers were required by the monarchy to report any individuals who came in and were suspicious of possibly causing trouble; and to subvert this responsibility or avoid it was seen as an act of treason and was punishable by death⁵. Rahab in this moment of deception stands against the threat of death, for the ethics of upholding the loyalty that is felt in this moment to the Israelites. As the kids from JYG might say, she’s standing on business.

But another way we see Rahab as threatening the system is the way her emergence across gender roles when she enters into a coventicle treaty with the Israelite spies. There entered a suzerain treaty which was a treaty established by two parties that were not of equal standing. When Rahab enters this verbal treaty, she has the upper hand because she holds the safety of the Israelites in her hands.⁶

² *Ibid*, 17–18

³ *Ibid*, 28.

⁴*The Color Purple*. (n.d.).

⁵Russaw, K. D. (2021). *Revisiting Rahab: Another Look at the Woman of Jericho*. Wesley’s Foundry Books, 38.

⁶*Ibid*, 70.

So now Rahab is not just standing on business, risking death for loyalty, but she is transcending gender norms and entering into a covenant in which she is the dominant figure. You can see why the storytellers would deem this a threat to the patriarchy.

But why does she risk all of this?

(Joshua 2:13) that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them and deliver our lives from death."

For her family to take care of the very people that were supposed to be taking care of her, she sounds like Granny Tamar.

Rahab and Tamar both lived into this reality of "by all means necessary" to provide for their families. One thing I know about Kina Prince, my mother, is that she would give everything she had, even her very life if it meant that my sister and I could have a better chance at survival. So in this way, Rahab preaches us the good news of the gospel of motherhood.

But what about when that gospel contributes to a system of violence and death? We've talked about almost every person in this story except for the Canaanites. In this system of differentiation, we have this distancing of the Israelites from the Canaanites as an unholy people who are deserving of death. This picture of a people so vile, that God has condemned even the babies to die, or accept enslavement. Albeit the Canaanite people were imperfect, with their child sacrifice, and idolatry, but these measures seem extreme and incongruent with the understanding of a loving God.

Here we have the Israelites conquering a land that they say is their divine right. Now we must be aware when we encounter scripture. We are not encountering the very direct words of God written down in real time, but we are encountering the experiences of humanity and divinity as told through generations and generations of oral tradition.

These stories are coming through differing context and perceptions.

Why this ancient genocide? One of the main reasons why we are focusing on the Canaanites here is because they inhabit the land that God has ordained for the children of Israel; and there is a fear here that the Canaanites will affect the Israelites and convince them to worship their Gods.

"She [Rahab] begins the process of widening the gates of the 'Kin-dom' of God that is open to all people."

Does this sound like the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God who loves and calls all towards Godself, or does this sound like the fear of a people with fickle faith, who are unsure about themselves and their faith, and so they paint God in their own image, in their own understanding, to compensate for their shortcomings?

Whatever the case may be, Rahab is a part of this system. She is a part of this messy history, because she opens the door for the Israelites to come in.

Our ancestors, those who have come before us... guess what?!? They are imperfect. Sometimes they stand saying they come in the name of God, but sometimes it is really this idea of God they have painted for themselves, and that can bring more harm than anything. But... They hold lessons on what to do and what not to do because of the experiences they have gone through, and what they have experienced. And guess what, our family histories aren't that pure either. There are some that may have families who have participated in racism, antisemitism, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, and many more of the forms of fear and discrimination; the question is what do you do with what you've learned from those ancestors? Before we bring Rahab out and castigate her, readying our "holier than thou" stones for her death, are we living in a reality that creates our success by the dehumanization, or the marginalization of another?

How does my reality create the literal, societal, or figurative death of another? How does my upward progression cause the downward mobility of my neighbor? How am I marginalizing someone in just my refusal to see them as a beloved being with God's image?

As we trickle down the line of Granny Rahab we see that the door of Colonialism isn't the only door she opens. She does in fact open the door for Gentiles to be folded into the people of God. She gives birth to Boaz, who marries Ruth the Moabite, a gentile. Rahab, in her imperfection, opens the door. She begins the process of widening the gates of the *Kin-dom* of God that is open to all people.

Rahab: means wide or broad....She foreshadows her great, great, great...grandson who would open wide the fate and say to all "come on in, we have room for you"

And finally we have this chord. This chord that she had to place on her house, so that when the Israelites did come, Rahab and her family would be safe. This foreign woman of strength, courage, and determination saved her family with this one chord. This woman who lived on the outskirts, the margins of her society, who the system deemed was a threat and pushed her to the side, she in her wisdom transcends the gender roles of her day, and she saves her family. Albeit full of mess she opens the door for her family and their people, so that one day Jesus, truly God and truly human could enter into our existence and extend the hands of divinity to humanity. Rahab did it with a chord, and Jesus would go and do it with a manger, a sinless life, a cross, and an empty tomb.

Rahab an unlikely prophet, follows in line with the people who foreshadow the story of grace and salvation. Salvation for me has come to be, not this sav-

ing from God's anger, but the redemption and healing of humanity to God's embrace, to life **in** God. Those fragmented cracks are filled with love, care, and grace. Those wounds are bound up in God's healing salve. We are saved not from something, but for something. For God. To God!

How is God wanting to manifest salvation, that saving grace through you today? How is God wanting to pull you from the margins, and place you in the center of the story? How is God wanting to pull you into the greater story of healing of God's creation? Who on the margins, is God calling **you** to see, and pull them into the center with you?

(I Corinthians 13:11–13) *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.*

Come 'round children and listen, Granny Rahab wants to tell the story of her scarlet chord, the chord that saved her family's life, but at such a great cost. She tells the story to remind us...now that we have been known by the great love of God, now that we can see a bit more clearly than before, now that we've been welcomed into the family, welcomed into the house of grace and healing, let us love better. Let us be better. Let us do better. Let us learn from Grannie's story.

What Rahab began, Jesus healed, and now we get to carry on this legacy, to call more into this beautiful space of love, grace, and mercy. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen!

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—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Rock, O Redeemer, meet us
O Ground of Our Being, greet us
O Ultimate Mystery, find us
O Lord of Consolations, be kind to us.
For the “bruising assault of zero weather” (Donald Hall)
has returned.
And the wool socks and warm scarf seem inadequate,
as we seek the warmth of your presence.

So draw us in.
Draw us into community,
into sacred places.
Meet us under the canopy of this holy rotunda,
Where with our whole bodies, we praise you.
Be not the intangible God, who is hard to know.
Embody your love within us.

May your presence be our natural habitat.
May your spirit be our innate desire.
May your ancient self be our freedom today,
our broad, wide open space where life can flourish.
Tune us to the tenderness of your spirit.

And bear the rhythm of our lives,
urgent and sometimes just a little bit unmoored.

In times of challenge, our prayer is simple:
God, help me.
God, be with me.

Even still, our prayer tells the truth:
God, this is hard.
God, this feels impossible.
God, nothing is going as I might have hoped.
God, I don't want to.
God, I can't believe it's going this way, unexpected.

On days like today, our prayers are for ourselves and for
those we love:
for those who seek a place of healing,
for those who feel the weight of responsibility,
for those who feel there is less room for intentionality,
the rush of life overwhelming,
for those who find “the ghost of loss” (John O’Donohue)
is near,
we pray to you, O Lord.
Hold every wordless prayer.
Receive every breath within us.
God, Ruach, Spirit, Breath.

In seasons like this, our prayers are for those across the
globe,
nations and leaders, soldiers, and civilians,
children and parents, vulnerable and misunderstood.

Let your wisdom be not just found but sought.
Let your strength be not just available but received.
Let your justice not just be longed for but revealed.
Let heroes rise up unexpected.
Let the weak, the overlooked,
the stranger, the unexpected,
be the ones who make possible,
what seems impossible.

Be our North Star.
Be our guiding light.

Be and abide with us and the global community,
in the hard and holy work of transformative peace,
possible not because we say it must be,
but because you know it is the only way.
And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us:
Our Father... Amen.

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