

## Rahab: On the Margins

Matthew lists five women in his genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary.<sup>1</sup> Last week we heard Tamar's story. This week we focus on Rahab. Matthew's listing is brief. *Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.*<sup>2</sup> Boaz is a familiar name. We'll hear more about him next week when we talk about Ruth. But this is the only place in the Bible that mentions Salmon.

Rahab is listed along with Noah, Abraham, and Moses as an example of faith in Hebrews 11. The writer summarizes the series of events found in the book of Joshua this way. *By faith Jericho's walls fell after the people marched around them for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute wasn't killed with the disobedient because she welcomed the spies in peace.*<sup>3</sup>

James also compares Rahab to Abraham when talking about faith in action. *So the scripture was fulfilled that says, Abraham believed God, and God regarded him as righteous. What is more, Abraham was called God's friend. So you see that a person is shown to be righteous through faithful actions and not through faith alone. In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute shown to be righteous when she received the messengers as her guests and then sent them on by another road? As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.*<sup>4</sup>

Rahab helps us to think about what it means to live on the margins. Rahab literally lives on the edge of the city. Her home is built into the city wall. Rahab also lives on the margin of society. Her occupation prevents her from being fully included in mainstream culture. Both her physical location and social status make it difficult for her to function. Both serve to disconnect her from the community.

But Rahab's position on the edge gives her advantages as well. Her unrespectable occupation affords her the freedom to have a house of her own and to talk freely to men outside her household, even foreigners – something other women cannot do. Living on the margins means she has little to lose and is willing to take risks others would not dare to do.

I wonder if you've been there too – living on the edge or feeling cast out completely. How has this disconnection hindered or harmed you? What advantages has it given you?

I wonder who in this town could identify with Rahab – living in a location that makes it difficult to access the products and services they need for daily life or having an occupation or some other factor that prevents them from being fully included in community life. Who in Salina do we completely overlook? Who should we be listening to?

Rahab helps us to think about what it means to live in the midst of uncertainty – having to choose among several potentially devastating alternatives. Should she remain loyal to the king of Jericho and risk being killed by the Israelite army? Should she interact with the Israelite spies and risk being killed by the king for treason? Should she trust the spies and risk being double-crossed by them and dying anyway? Was Rahab a courageous, faithful, godly hero who acted to

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon draws heavily from Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 33-48.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:5a, *Common English Bible*.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 11:30-31, *Common English Bible*

<sup>4</sup> James 2:23-26, *Common English Bible*

save her family or was she a conniving, selfish, treasonous, villain who acted to destroy her people? It's complicated. All of those are true. Rahab was put into a difficult situation and did the best that she could with what she had.

I wonder if you've been there too – living in the midst of uncertainty, having to choose between several impossible choices. What have you done to find a bit of control in the situation?

I'm certain there are many people in Salina who face impossible choices every day: whether to pay for medicine or pay their rent; to take a low-paying job and pay for child-care or stay home and take care of the kids themselves; to buy food at the nearby convenience store or pay for transportation to the cheaper store at the other end of town. Who is forced over and over again to hope that the people and systems who potentially could help them will honor their commitments? How often have they found those people and systems to be untrustworthy? It's easy to judge people's choices from the outside, but most people's lives are more complicated than we can imagine.

Rahab helps us to think about what it means to be stuck with a label – one that may be true but is meant to diminish. We could assume that as her status in the community grew, her story might have been cleaned up a bit. Matthew identifies her as Rahab, the wife of the Israelite Salmon and the mother of Boaz, but both Hebrews and James identify her as Rahab the prostitute. None of the other names of the faithful are followed by any other qualifier. Even as Rahab is highlighted for her faith in God and the courageous action she took, she continues to be identified by a label she has long since abandoned.

I wonder what labels people have given you. What labels have you given others? What labels have you given yourself? What is the difference between an identity and a label?

When traditionally marginalized people are included in more mainstream contexts, there often continues to be a tendency to qualify their identities. I might be described as a woman pastor while a male colleague is simply called a pastor. Descriptions are more likely to begin with the words "black" or "Hispanic" than with the word "white." Those with physical and mental differences often receive qualifiers with their identities. For example, the blind singer, the handicapped athlete, the autistic student, or the gay teacher.

The story of Rahab reminds us that our central identity is found in our relationship with God. Each one of us is God's beloved child. Even with our imperfections, even with our mistakes, even with our inconsistent choices, we are worthy of God's love.

When you are pushed to edges,  
may you insist on your own story with such grit and grace  
that they have no choice but to tell it.

When you are far from center,  
may you know the power and freedom  
that God grants to those on the margins.

When you face impossible choices,  
may you act with integrity and courage,  
resting in the shield of God's grace.

When others dismiss you with a label,  
may you claim your deep identity  
as a beloved child of the Creator.<sup>5</sup>

And may you do the same for the marginalized, labeled children of God you encounter each day.

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<sup>5</sup>From "Rahab's Blessing," Harader, p. 48.