

Hebrews 11: 29-35 "The Scarlet Rope" Rev. Janet Chapman 8/21/22

Being reminded that next Sunday we resume Sunday School, I was drawn back to all the wonderful stories I have heard about Sunday School kids. One children's Sunday School class in the midwest was learning how God cares for us in times of trouble. The teacher asked the class to draw pictures of things that make them afraid. After they finished, each child explained to the others what he or she had drawn. Five-year-old Scott had created a vivid looming funnel cloud, a car, and a man. He described how the man could not get his car started and a tornado was coming towards him. The teacher responded, "The man really needs to pray, doesn't he?" "No," said Scott rather disgusted, "He needs to run!" There is certainly a time for prayer and a time for deeds.

The faithful witnesses the author of Hebrews names in this text understood that well. I want to focus on one particular individual in that list that doesn't get a lot of attention across the scriptures but she definitely should. Rahab is one of only four women listed in Matthew's gospel as an ancestress of Jesus of Nazareth. Rahab lived in the city of Jericho in Canaan at the time when the Hebrew people have arrived at the Canaanite border. Some of you may remember that this was the Promised Land that was promised 40 years ago by God to Moses, but Moses would not live to see the day they entered it. Joshua has taken over leadership of the Israelites and is plotting an attack on the city of Jericho. Luckily for him, the Canaanite city states were not particularly thriving at the time. Jericho's glory days were over; the walls had fallen into disrepair and most of the houses weren't much better. Like I discovered in my visit to Assisi in Italy, the city had an outer wall which surrounded the whole city, protecting it from foreign intruders, and then at least one inner wall, which enclosed the central administrative

compound. It was within that inner-most wall that the well-to-do people lived. The poor people like Rahab lived in the outer compound, and in Rahab's case, within the outer wall itself. Her story of faithful deeds is found in the book of Joshua, chapters 2 & 6.

One of my favorite authors, who just passed away just this week, Frederick Buechner shares a summary of her story with imagination and creativity. Rahab and family ran an unpretentious establishment in the red-light district of Jericho, what we would call a brothel, and she was known for, among other things, her warm and generous heart. Jericho sends in two spies to case out Jericho before attacking and as soon as they reach the city, they make a bee-line to her front door. Why is it that when some folks are turned loose to do something important, their first thoughts are not guided by the mind or spirit but by their genitals? Not surprisingly, the King of Jericho found out they were there, so he rings up Rahab and tells her she is to turn them in on the double, if not quicker. Rahab replies that it was true some customers fitting his description had been there, and she figured they were just looking to get laid, so when they were done she sent them on their way. If he got a move on, he could probably still catch them. She then went up to the roof where she had hidden them away under stalks of flax and told them what had happened. She relayed how she had heard of the great things that their God had done for them in safely leading them out of Egypt and slavery. She displayed what Augustine calls the definition of faith which is "to believe what we don't see with the reward of this faith being to see what we believe." Hebrews puts it this way, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." So Rahab, who has not personally seen the works of God upfront, says, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. 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.” They promised her if she kept their secret, her whole family would be protected when those Jericho walls came tumblin’ down. Then she let them down with a rope, maybe it was a crimson or scarlet rope she offered, that let them escape back to safety. She reassured them with God as their guide, Jericho would be a pushover and all she wanted in return was when the boys came marching in, she and her family would be spared. Rahab not only saved the lives of the Israelite spies, but she professed her faith in their God, which went against everything the Old Testament typically warned about the dangers of foreign women. In the Torah, it is foreign women who are the ones who sexually tempt you and lure you to give up your own god. Rahab does neither to the spies and a few days later, when Joshua marched into Jericho, he and his troops spot that scarlet rope hanging from Rahab’s window and her household is saved. Despite Rahab’s notorious profession, she is one of only four women named in Jesus’ ancestry.

Rahab was an ambassador for God just as much as other faithful witnesses we read about in scripture. They do more than just pray, they act and their actions are life-giving. As James 2:14 states “What good is it, my friends, if someone says they have faith but does not have works? Can that faith save them?” Then James cites two examples of such faithful action – Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and the story of Rahab as he writes, “Was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and then sent them out by another way?” It was a very risky move on Rahab’s part which often gets overlooked in the myriad of biblical heroes we meet on a regular basis.

I invite you to consider an example of such risky behavior as witnessed within the ocean lobster. From time to time, lobsters have to leave their shells in order to grow. They need the

shell to protect them from being torn apart, yet when they grow, the old shell has to be abandoned. If they didn't abandon it, the old shell would become like a prison, and finally their casket. The tricky part is the brief time period between when the old shell is discarded and the new one is formed. During that terribly vulnerable period, the transition is scary. Ocean currents toss the lobster around from coral to kelp. Hungry schools of fish and flocks of seagulls are ready to make them part of their food chain. I thought about this process when I was sitting at Newport Beach watching swarms of seagulls dive into the bay waters seeking food. Seagulls can be beautiful but can also be aggressive feeders. Although I was too far north to be in lobster terrain, I couldn't help but wonder what species find themselves at the mercy of such gulls. For the lobster who is transitioning between shells, one can imagine that the old shell must look pretty good when you are being tossed to and fro on the currents of life. For we aren't so different from lobsters – to change and grow, we have to take risks and open ourselves up to God's work. We have to learn to shed our shells, that structure or framework in life that we have depended upon that isn't as stable as we once thought. Rahab had grown up in the pagan religion of the Canannites as did her family. Her gods were selfish and punitive, they would only answer your prayers if it fit their interests and your well-being was the last thing that mattered. Reminds me of that old joke about the atheist community who set up a "Dial-A-Prayer" phone system so people could get what they stood for. When you call up the atheist "Dial-A-Prayer" number, no one answers. But Rahab saw that Yahweh was not like that - simply hearing the stories of Yahweh's faithfulness, as the Israelites left the predictability of slavery and were guided through their most vulnerable times in the wilderness, prompted her to risk shedding her own shell as well.

Lest we think those days of risk are behind us, I remind you that risk has taken on a whole new form in the 21st century. Those who worship gods of self-interest, greed, and power are still very much among us and in many ways, we are very much in the minority when we stand up for equal rights, equal pay, and equal access. Our advocacy for those who are oppressed is only tolerated as far as it doesn't affect our neighbors. The minute we throw out our scarlet rope to assist the pregnant teenager, the Mexican refugee, the single mom of 5, the gay one, or the black one, or the poor one, we are told "Not in my backyard." The time has come for us to respond, "Yes, in God's backyard." In God's backyard, the scarlet rope is hung over the wall proclaiming that faith is practiced through deeds or it cannot be called faith. In God's backyard, that scarlet rope is hung in faith to say we believe in what we don't see and trust that the reward of this faith will be to see what we believe. In God's backyard, no matter who we are or what is in our past, we are redeemed. In God's backyard, let us make it so.