

“Beyond Coffee and Cake Hospitality: Joshua 2:1-22;6:22-25.”

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Joshua 2:1-22; Joshua 6:22-25

Context Description:

This sermon was written to be preached to a largely Caucasian, middle to upper class church in suburban Nashville, Tennessee. Most in the congregation are fairly well-steeped in organized religion and, on the whole, have a higher rate of biblical literacy than the national average. They are becoming more socially aware and want to branch out into more justice-oriented work, but are encountering issues related to traditional cultural values of the American South and challenges to their assumptions regarding morality, ethical purity, risk, and ideologies in the currently polarized political context. The purpose of this sermon is to encourage their widening vision and awareness and to challenge them to consider unlikely heroes, the ethical grey areas they may encounter, and the ultimate value of life in their justice work.

(I’m assuming the Joshua text will have been read earlier in the worship service)

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Some of the best advice I ever received was this:

Don't get all caught up in trying to be the best person on the planet. You'll drive yourself crazy. But then, don't be too bad either – that's just stupid and no good to anyone. Doing the best you can in the midst of both evil and good honors God more than going to extremes in either direction.

“Don’t be too good.” But also “Don’t be too bad.” Not exactly what you might be expecting to hear from the pulpit today, eh? Those words were adapted from the book of Ecclesiastes¹, whose advice admonishes us to be careful with the burden we place upon ourselves to always do the right thing. Such advice speaks strongly to me as someone who has felt the need to always do the right thing, and who has standards which are difficult to keep. To always be good. To always tell the truth. To live as righteously as possible. To not make mistakes. To try to keep the world in as black and white terms as possible. But – fortunately or unfortunately, as the case may be – it’s not that simple. Life is composed of various shades of grey.

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:16-18.

In our text today, we have an unusual hero. Her name is Rahab and she often gets overlooked or diminished in the larger story of the fall of Jericho, although I'm not quite sure how. She's one of my favorite characters in the Hebrew Bible. Enigmatic, wily, a survivor, a risk-taker, a strategist, and maybe even an ancestor of Jesus.² When attention is paid to her, oftentimes it is centered on her conversion, which is important in the story but not really what I find the most interesting. What I find most interesting is her hospitality, and, let's be frank here, it's not of the 'coffee and cake' kind.

Imagine with me: two spies have been sent out by Joshua to investigate Jericho, to find out where the dangers lie and how they may proceed. They've been wandering around the desert, without a lot of contact with other people outside of their own tribe until now. Their first stop once they arrive? Rahab's house. But it's not just any house; Rahab is a prostitute. Many have asked why – was it strategic to their reconnaissance mission or were they simply her customers, taking advantage of being away from home and prying eyes? No one knows, but they decide to spend the night there. Soon the king of Jericho is aware and seeks to take them into custody, ordering Rahab to give them up. But Rahab hides the men and then lies telling the king, "They left and I don't know where they went." She then goes back and talks to the two men, asks them for protection for herself and her family should they invade, and then helps them to escape.

There's a lot going on in this story – too much to go into here. There are questions about the spies and whether or not they're to be taken seriously or laughed at in this story. There are questions about why the Israelites were interested in battling Jericho to begin with. There are questions about the ethics of how that siege will be carried out, namely in the instructions given to destroy everyone except Rahab and her family. And there are questions about when and why this story was written, and what it's trying to teach us. There's a lot of grey area in this story and we need to wrestle with those questions. But today, that's not what interests me.

² Matthew 1:5. However, the Jewish Talmudic tradition says that Rahab married Joshua (not Salmon as suggested in Mt 1:5) and contributed to Jewish culture by becoming a forebear of eight priest-prophets, including Jeremiah, and the prophetess Huldah. Found in Meg. 14b and Midr. Tadshe, in Epstein, "Mi-kadmoniyot ha-Yehudim," Supplement, p. xliii.) and cited in entry "Rahab" in the Jewish Encyclopedia, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?letter=R&artid=71>, accessed on 12 April 2010.

For today, I think an important part of this story is about how Rahab risked life as she knew it to provide protective hospitality to people who needed her help. Rahab is the hero in this story, not the spies. And unlike other stories and motifs we are familiar with, Rahab's story is unique. First she is a woman who is the primary provider of hospitality, namely in the form of protection (usually protection is provided by a man). Second, she comes to no harm despite being labeled a "prostitute." And third, she survives the slaughter of Jericho and remains with her family (instead of being taken as a bride³ or spoil of war), and we're told she lives for many years under the reciprocal protection of the Israelites.

I think it's interesting how the insider and the outsider get mixed up in this text. Rahab is an insider – she lives within the walls of Jericho, she is known to the king (or at least to his messengers). Yet, she is also an outsider – she's a sex worker and she lives on the outskirts of the city on the wall itself, and has been marginalized by not only her fellow citydwellers but also by the many generations who have read this story over the centuries. The spies? They're outsiders in forbidden territory and at risk of being killed, but insiders in their own community who are able to repay Rahab's protection with protection of their own when the day comes.

In the time of the ancient Israelites, it was customary that if one is providing hospitality, one is also required to ensure safety and protection to one's guests, at all costs.⁴ Rahab had made the decision that her home would be a safe place. Maybe her only motive for protecting these strangers was to get on their good side and save her own skin,⁵ but the text doesn't say that. In fact, the text shows that Rahab had

³ If she did get married later, the text makes no mention of it being due to an exchange as a result of her act of hospitality.

⁴ We see how this plays out (or doesn't play out, as the case may be) in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 as well. Cf. Emilie Grace Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906 [repr. 1976]), I, 210.

⁵ Andrew Arterbury writes that not only was the provision of protection as an act of hospitality for the benefit of the stranger and his/her own safety, but also the townspeople into whose community strangers arrived had to assume, for their own protection, that these strangers had "either military resources or 'magical' powers" and that the "custom of hospitality in antiquity grew out of a desire to neutralize [these] potential threats" by either protecting one's "household or community from the wrath of the stranger" or to curry the stranger's favor. See his "Entertaining Angels: Hospitality in Luke and Acts 20," *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2007), 21. Arterbury also refers the reader to see, for example, the story of Joshua's 'spies' being hosted by Rahab in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:22-25 as examples of these. A more substantial work on Arterbury's research on hospitality can be found in his book *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian*

already decided to protect the strangers before she knew who they were. This is a story of a woman who sells her body for an evening of pleasure to two strange men who, it turns out the next day, are wanted by the king for being a threat to the security of the homeland. And Rahab knew that to turn them over would be to most likely consign them to death.

The genocide and violence committed by the Israelites in Joshua 6 cannot be ignored in this story. There are some serious theological questions to be asked about these passages and it would be dishonest to pretend they're not there. But as we look at the character of Rahab and how she is portrayed, we see that she has been lauded elsewhere in the New Testament as providing exemplary hospitality.⁶ The later actions of the Israelites are not similarly lauded. In this story, hospitality trumps conquest.

Rahab risked life as she knew it to provide protective hospitality to people who needed her help, people who would lose their lives otherwise. She hid them, she resisted her king by lying to protect them, she smuggled them out of the city and created a diversion for them to get away. Such actions sound familiar to me.

In the 1800s, a woman who had been beaten and abused by various men in her lifetime managed to escape and decided to risk her life (it was her decision this time, not her abusers) to save others. Under secrecy and subterfuge she was able to provide protection and sanctuary for approximately 70 men and women who were being similarly abused or under threat. She was Harriet Tubman, a well-known figure with the Underground Railroad. Her acts were acts of resistance against an oppressive system known as slavery.

In World War II France, the Vichy puppet regime enacted the same laws against Jews as did Germany. In a tiny village in south-central France called Le Chambon, people rallied together to protect every Jew who came into the village, at great risk to themselves, their families and their livelihoods. Many of the villagers were arrested by the Gestapo and sent to prison. Yet, without fail, whenever someone

Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting, New Testament Monographs, 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

⁶ Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25. Cf. Andrew Artebury, *Entertaining*, 77.

knocked on their door seeking refuge, they took them in and hid them. In the end, they saved 3,000-5,000 people. Their acts were acts of resistance against the genocidal regime of Hitler's Germany.⁷

And in the 1980s, churches and synagogues around the U.S. set up a network, taking in and providing sanctuary to Central American refugees who had escaped torture, imprisonment and war in their home countries of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. It was called the Sanctuary movement and, in the end over 350 congregations united to protect those who would surely die if they were deported. Their acts were acts of resistance against the unjust regime of the U.S. immigration system and Reagan-era foreign policy.⁸

The faithful have done this for centuries. They have affirmed their commitment to life by protecting those who are under threat of violence. They have acted in the messiness and grey areas of life, choosing life over truth, and valuing the lives of those they are protecting above their own. One of the rescuers at Le Chambon acknowledged that "the righteous must often pay a price for their righteousness; [that price is] their own ethical purity" when it comes to affirming life by providing protective hospitality.⁹

I think the text wants us to understand the irony found in Rahab's story: in the end, the Israelites were saved by the actions of a single, non-Israelite woman who made a living as a prostitute, not by military might. And yet, despite that, the lives of the people of Jericho were not saved.

So what about now? We all still "bear an obligation to save the lives of others."¹⁰ We are all presented with opportunities in our lifetime to act on behalf of those who

⁷ For more information, see Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

⁸ For more information, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996) or Renny Golden & Michael McConnell, *Sanctuary: The New Underground Railroad* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986)

⁹ Attributed to Magda Trocme, wife of Protestant pastor, Andre Trocme, who led the effort, referred to in Letty M. Russell, "Hot-House Ecclesiology: A Feminist Interpretation of the Church," *Ecumenical Review* 53/1 (January 2001), 50.

¹⁰ James L. Heft, "Introduction" in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, James L. Heft, ed. New York: Fordham, 2004, 7.

are being threatened. Sometimes it may be as simple as the act of providing a safe place for a meal and rest. Or it may be providing a ring of protective hospitality around a funeral to shield a grieving family from the Westboro protestors.¹¹ Other times it may be working with Christian Peacemaker Teams, standing as a monitor at an Israeli checkpoint in Palestine, making sure those who are trying to get to work and school aren't abused or detained unnecessarily. And other times, it may even go so far as to requiring you to act as a human shield, as Egyptian Muslims just did for their Coptic Christian neighbors to ensure their Christmas mass wasn't bombed by extremists.¹²

As people of faith – just like anyone else - we aren't purely good or purely bad. And as we confront complicated situations filled with shades of grey, it will be challenging to determine what the best courses or action are. But it is my hope and prayer this morning that when people in need knock on our door in the middle of the night, or call out in need of help, we will be found faithful to welcome and protect them and act on their behalf. Amen.

Bio: Jayme Reaves received her M.Div from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in 2004 and has lived and worked in post-conflict contexts such as Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo, bridging the gap between theology, peacemaking, and reconciliation. She is now a Ph.D candidate in political theology with a thesis specializing in protective hospitality in the Abrahamic traditions at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin in Belfast, Northern Ireland and also works for Healing Through Remembering, an organization which seeks to address the issue of dealing with the past in the context of the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.

¹¹ Staff writers, "Arizona enacts funeral protest legislation," *CNN.com*, 12 Jan 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/US/01/11/arizona.funeral.westboro/>, accessed on 28 Jan 2011.

¹² Yasminw El-Rashidi, "Egypt's Muslims Attend Coptic Christmas mass, serving as 'human shields'," *Ahram Online*, 7 Jan 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/3365.aspx>, accessed on 11 Jan 2011.