

Over the past few weeks in worship we have been spending some time reading about Moses and the Israelite people as they ventured toward the Promised Land. Last week we heard about how Moses was allowed to see the Promised Land but that he was not allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land.

The book of Deuteronomy, the 5th book of the Bible, ends with the death of Moses but not before he lays his hands on the next person to lead God's people. Leading God's people to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land fell upon the shoulders of Joshua.

So in this scene which we are about to read, the Israelites are camping near the Jordan River and Joshua decides that he needs to send out two spies to check out Canaan to see what the Israelites are up against. Canaan is the land that had been promised to God's people but the Canaanites are already living there. The land of Canaan is the Promised Land.

The story we are about to read has lots of sexual innuendo and intrigue in it. This story which we are about to read makes for a great book or movie. As we read this story pay attention to the profession of Rehab, the only person with a name in this story. After reading this story we will then look at the footnote about her profession.

Read Joshua 2

This story raises several questions and observations. The first question which may have come to your mind is, "why did these two spies go to the house of a prostitute?" It's interesting how the NIV version of the Bible interprets her profession. If you read along in your Bible you noticed that there is a small "b" beside "prostitute." You will notice at the bottom of the page that her profession can also be interpreted as "innkeeper."

Prostitute and innkeeper are two very different professions, of course. Well it seems that later translators of the Bible were uncomfortable with Rehab being a prostitute so they changed her profession to “innkeeper” to make it less seedy. It’s kind of embarrassing that the spies to the Promised Land end up at a brothel. So a little historical revisioning seems to be going on here.

The Bible never tells us why these two spies went to visit Rehab. Like a good book or movie that question is left open ended for us to ponder with no answer. Even the name Rehab is a word which when translated has sexual innuendo attached to it.

It is easy, though, to judge Rehab for being a prostitute. Being a prostitute then, like it is for many women now, is not a profession that one chooses to enter into. Becoming a prostitute was done by poor women whose families were in debt. The same holds true today for many women who make a living in prostitution or exotic dancing. Prostitution was one of the few options for a poor woman to generate some income to get the family out of debt.

But word gets back to the king that there are spies from another country visiting Rehab’s house. The king dispatches soldiers to find these foreign spies. They come to Rehab’s house and knock on her door. But Rehab is quick to protect these foreign spies. She sends them up to the roof where the spies hide among the recently harvested flax.

Rehab then quickly makes up a story that the spies had already left the town and were probably on the road somewhere. The soldiers believe this Canaanite woman and head off in search of these Israelite spies. After the soldiers leave, Rehab then retrieves the soldiers from the roof.

Rehab arranges for the spies to climb out her window and down the outside walls of the city in order to escape. But before they leave, Rehab pleads with these spies to protect her and her household. For some reason she believes that their invasion into Canaan will be successful and she wants to protect herself and her family. The spies agree to her offer and they seal their promises to one another.

But the spies need something visible to broadcast to the invading army of Israelites that Rehab's house and family needs protection. Rehab then agrees to hang a crimson or red rope out her window as a sign that her house and her family are not to be touched when the Israelites invade.

The use of this crimson cord is significant. The crimson cord is significant because it is very similar to something else in Israel's history. There are several pieces of the Joshua story which connect him to Moses' story. And this crimson cord or rope is one of the events which ties Joshua and Moses together.

Back when the Israelites were slaves under Pharaoh, God sent 10 plagues to try to convince Pharaoh to let the people go. The last plague was one in which all infant boys would be killed. But the Israelites were instructed to place the blood of a lamb over their doorposts to prevent their children from being killed. This act of red blood over the door became known as the Passover which the Jewish people still celebrate today. Rehab hanging a crimson cord out her window connects her story to the Passover story.

We would never think of Rehab as being a hero in God's unfolding story. She is described as a prostitute. She is probably poor. She is a Canaanite, the people who will be described as the enemies of God's people. But as she is described in the Hebrews reading that Karl read earlier, Rehab the prostitute is a hero in the story of God's unfolding drama with God's people.

When I think of Rehab, I am reminded of another story.

“In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a story on CNN featured a beleaguered group of refugees. There were six or eight of them, all young people working in the French Quarter. They were a scraggly looking bunch—bartenders, exotic dancers, tattoo artists, and the like.

For several days, this group had been trying to escape the devastation and chaos in New Orleans, moving from one squalid shelter to another. The reporter from CNN discovered them trudging along the side of the interstate, trying to make their way by foot out of the city. They had no means of communication. They had no transportation. They were desperate.

The news story focused on one of the young women in the group. Her father was a pastor somewhere in the Midwest. Apparently they had had a falling out somewhere along the way. She had run off as a teenager, moved down to “the Big Easy,” and she wound up as a bartender in some seedy club in the French Quarter.

This young woman looked how you might expect a bartender in a seedy club in the French Quarter to look. Lots of body piercings and tattoos. And there she was, on the side of the highway with all of these desperate people who had just lost everything.

The young woman asked the reporter if she might use the reporter’s cell phone to try to get in touch with someone to let someone know that she and her friends were okay. The reporter obliged. So the young woman called her father, the pastor in the Midwest.

They had not spoken in some time, but he answered the phone. “Daddy, I’m OK,” she said. Then she burst into tears, “I don’t know how we’re going to get out of here! I’m so scared!” They exchanged just a few words before she hung up the phone.

The reporter asked, “What did he say?” With tears running down her cheeks, she replied, “Daddy said he’s coming down right away in the church van to pick us up.”

After reading this story, my first question is, "what did the folks in that Midwestern church think when they received word from their neighbors about their church van pulling into town with this group of disheveled social outcasts riding inside?" Did they welcome them? Or did they shun them.

We are invited to not judge Rehab for being a prostitute in this story. We do not know her background. We do not know her circumstances. We do not know her story. But Rehab has a story if someone is willing to listen to her.

We do know, however, that God uses Rehab to help carry out God's plans. Obviously God is not ashamed by her. God is not embarrassed by her. God is not embarrassed to use Rehab the prostitute to carry out God's plans. The writers of both Hebrews and James cite Rehab as an example of what true faith in God is all about. Rahab is also mentioned as an ancestor of Jesus in Matthew's gospel.

We who sit in nice pews and warm church buildings can tend to become very judgmental of people who do not look like what respectable church people should look like. But whenever we come across someone who looks miskept, or is heavily tattooed and body pierced, or has a lifestyle that we judge as wrong or sinful, I think we are invited to remember the story of Rehab the prostitute.

God uses a prostitute to help lead God's people into the Promised Land. One of Jesus' ancestors is a prostitute. Think about that whenever we want to decide who is pleasing to God or who God can use. AMEN.

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