

**Nevertheless She Persisted**  
**Rahab**  
**Rev. Anna Hubbard**

*Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho*  
*Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,*  
*And the walls came tumblin' down.*

We are in week 2 of our Nevertheless She Persisted series where Kelley and I are bringing you along for a ride through Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, in which 4 women are named. Together we are imagining that these stories were being told to Jesus by his mother Mary. I am sure over the years he heard these stories a lot. Last week, we explored how Tamar's story influenced his ministry – and this week we are looking at the ways the story of Rahab did. I like to imagine little boy Jesus with heavy eyelids saying, "Mama – tell me about Rahab again?" And I imagine Mary, tired from a long day, looking to her son and saying, "sure baby – Let me tell you the story of where you came from..."

"Rahab, lived in the city of Jericho. Jericho was surrounded by walls and Rahab lived in the walls. She owned a business there, in the walls. A business that other people didn't like her owning. A business that gave her a bit of a reputation and meant that she wasn't really part of the community. I won't mince words J, your grandmother was a harlot. There were two kinds of prostitutes in her day – the religious ones who worked at the Canaanite temple and the run-of-the-mill prostitutes who worked for cash. Rahab was the second kind. She was the kind of person everyone talked *about* but not *to*, especially in public. Prostitutes, just like now, were social outcasts – ostracized moral lepers, tolerated but in no way honored. Even the men who beat a path to her door at night turned their backs on her by the light of day, as did the rest of Jericho (Higgs, Bad Girls of the Bible). She lived in the red-light district of Jericho.

One night, Joshua – you remember Joshua? – he took over helping our people find the promised land after Moses died. Well Joshua had decided to start acquiring the promised land and had made Jericho the first city he had hoped to take over. So, he sent two spies into Jericho. Although it's a little weird J, because there isn't much record of spying, just the record of them knocking on granny Rahab's door, and that they laid down – but I don't know anyone who would have come to Rahab's house for sleep when there was a perfectly good Inn in the middle of town. You will understand that more when you are older. Anyway, while the spies were at her house – they got word that the king of Jericho was looking for the spies, so Rahab hid them in her roof. And no, darling boy – I do not want to get into architectural debates tonight so can you please just listen to the story and close your eyes? OK, so when the king's men came, Grandma Rahab told them that yes, those men HAD been by but that they went on. The king's men believed her and left. Because it was a city of walls, she led them to

believe that they had left out the gate before it had been shut. Once the king's men were gone, she went to the spies, and she told them how she had heard about the ways of God and all the things that God had done and that she trusted their God. Before she left, she made the spies promise that no harm would come to anyone who was under her roof.

Seeing her faithfulness, the spies agreed. Well, her faithfulness is what scribes say, but if I'm honest Jesus they didn't really have any other choices. They had to trust Rahab because she held the power to turn them in. They instructed her to leave a crimson rope hanging from the window that they had just escaped from and that by doing so she – and her household would be spared. Sure enough, three days later, when those spies returned with Joshua's army, they took everyone out of Rahab's house before they destroyed the city. Without Grandma Rahab – and her faith in our God, who she had only heard about, we wouldn't be who or where we are today. Now get some sleep because your father is hoping you'll help him in the workshop tomorrow.”

It might be a little odd, but Rahab has always been one of my favorite stories. I think it is because I am always all in on the stories in which unexpected people turn out to be the heroes in the story. And Rahab really is the hero of this story. Even if for all time the authors of the books of the bible can't quit calling her a whore. Even if, Joshua gets all the credit. I mean that's the thing, right? We need to quit singing Joshua's praises and start singing –

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I mean, I'm not wrong. Without Rahab the spies might have been captured or worse. Without Rahab she and her family would have all died. And according to Matthew at least, without Rahab we don't have Jesus.

I gathered with clergy friends this week to talk about Rahab. And our good friend Bill, from Forest Park in Tulsa, all he could focus on was the whole city of Jericho being torn down. “God kills all these people, and Rahab saves her own skin sure – and her family – okay – but all of the Jericho people are out of luck? How is any of this good!? What am I supposed to do to redeem this story!?” he had said. He was so thrown off by this story – and this God – that he set up a phone call with our Hebrew Bible professor Lisa Davison. I'm thankful he did because she said some things that were so important. First, she reminded us that this story, like many of the stories in the Hebrew bible is a metaphor. She reminded us again, with patience, as if we hadn't let everything, she had told us leave our brains in the last decade, that stories in the Hebrew Bible are layered with metaphor and depth and often a story represents a lesson that is wrapped in a riddle. She asked Bill at one point.” When you preach the story of Noah – do you get stuck on the people not on the boat that God wipes out or do you lean into what the story is trying to reveal to us about who God is or who the writers believed God to be? Of course, any preacher – including Bill, knows, we focus

on what the story of Noah has to teach us about God. After our phone call I went back and took another look through that lens. And when we do that – the story of Rahab, and her impact on the ministry of Jesus really opens up. This story is important because it is yet another underdog story. Rahab is living in a place of marginalization. Not just one form either.

She is marginalized for being a woman first. As Kelley pointed out last week, as a woman you had no worth without a man. If a brother or a husband or a father didn't claim you – you had nothing. Because you could not own anything of your own. It is why at the get go we know that Rahab is a resourceful woman. She owns a business and can feed her family without a husband. In Wil Gafney's midrash she speculates that perhaps Rahab was allowed to own such an establishment because she worked out a deal with the king of Jericho in which she provides information from what she sees along the wall and he in turn cuts her tax rates and you know receives free services. It is all holy imagining – but it helps to highlight for us how resourceful Rahab must have been to be a female business owner.

Another way that Rahab is marginalized is because she is either a prostitute or a madame running a brothel. Either way – her profession is the lowest of the low. Women who sell sex have always been – and still are – outsiders because they are considered to lead distasteful lives. Never mind, the men paying for the sex never end up suffering the same societal consequences, but that friends is a little talk for a different day. The point is her lifestyle isn't part of the mainline culture and she is marginalized for the way she lives. Lastly, she is marginalized by her location. She is living on the wall. And only the outcasts of society live on the wall. She is positioned on the wall, with others who are unclean, so that no one has to see them or interact with them. People like her are on the wall – so the rest of town can forget they exist. And yet, and yet, God is going to use her anyway. No, not anyway. God will choose Rahab to fit the battle of Jericho.

Here is the thing about Rahab – and actually it ties into what Bill was struggling with – Rahab, is a story within a story. Because she is a prostitute – because she is on the wall – what we can gather is that Jericho does not claim her. Jericho has neither been kind to her nor has the city of Jericho taken care of her. She has always had to look out for her own wellbeing. So, even if we consider that she “sold” her people out we have to recognize that those were not her people. And we have to recognize that even if she had turned the spies over, she would likely have suffered punishment for allowing them in her house in the first place. But the other, more important thing is this – she has no authority and very little power. Power as we know is the ability to effect change and authority is the recognized status to wield one's change making power. The only power Rahab has in the situation at hand – is the power to protect herself and her own family. And so, she uses her power to do just that. This is why in Israel's story she is a hero. Because she did the unthinkable. Her quick thinking saved all that were in her house. She persisted.

Rahab's story is unlikely. I think we hear it and miss how important it is because in our time and place bad ass women saving their family happens every day. But when little Jesus hears this story- he hears how someone used their low position – to keep her family alive. It is worth noting that she saves her sisters too. An interesting thing happens in the text. Rahab's sisters are vulnerable in the passage. They keep disappearing in the mouths of the Israelites. When Rahab asks for the safety of her family – she says – “Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death” But, when the spies agree to her terms in Joshua 2:18, they agree to save her “mother and father, brothers and her father’s household.” They have erased her sisters and imposed their sense of hierarchy on her household by giving her father a household that is not his in the passage. The text doesn't say her father heads a household, but it does say she does. Rahab works with them in spite of their patriarchy because sometimes you have to work with what you have. Even the bible doesn't seem fully committed to the liberation of Rahab's sisters. When the Israelites take Jericho in chapter 6, they preserve the lives of Rahab, “her mother, father, brothers, all who belong to her – her whole family.” If it weren't for Rahab, we wouldn't know that she even had sisters. Rahab's sisters exist only on her lips. She has saved them in and into the scriptures. I point this out so that we can see just how deep the patriarchy goes and so we get a sense of how little power she has.

What we learn from the story of Rahab is that God is always with those in the margins. As a metaphor Rahab is Isreal. Seen in this light this story is one of hope. It is a story of deliverance. It is a reminder to the generations that come that God is and always will be located at the edge and on the margins. And we see this play out into Jesus's ministry over and over again. In Matthew 15 Jesus has an encounter with a Canaanite woman. And in my own holy imaginings I have to wonder did Jesus think of Rahab- when she came responded to him, after he implied, she was a dog, that even the dogs eat of the scraps of the table? When he says, “Great is your faith woman” is he thinking about how Grandma Rahab used her faith and the little power she had to change her and her people's outcome? Is he seeing the similarities between the two women who are using what they have to bring about a better future? A thousand years before Jesus ministered to another Canaanite woman Rahab believed that it didn't matter what you had done or what had been done to you, she believed that there is a place for you in the people of God. Rahab knew she was more than a prostitute. Never mind that the Epistle to the Hebrews and James still call her a whore.

Because of Rahab's story, of the God who lives on the edge of society and in the unthinkable places. It is Rahab's story and the others we will hear or have heard that set the framework for Jesus to always see God with the people that others would claim to be unfit or unclean. In this light we are able to see why Jesus has a heart for the people he encounters. We see why Jesus isn't concerned with people's skeletons or shame. Because his family tree is made up of people with lots of skeletons in the closet. Normally that would be my hook for today's sermon. That God can and will do the unthinkable. That as Kelley would say no matter what you have said or what you

have done – God as God has always done – has but one label for you and that is child of God. And that is still true – so very very true – but this week I think we need a different word.

This post-election week has been difficult. Kelley and I both took mental health days on Wednesday. I don't want to speak for her, but I think we both needed the time to reflect on how we lead this community, full of people we love, many of whom may or may not have their rights as children of God stripped. How do we lead this beautiful, inclusive, community into this new unknown future? And in talking to many of you – I know that this week has been difficult for you as well. What I realized this week is that Rahab's story is Jesus's story but it is our story as well. If this week has you feeling more fearful, more disillusioned, and less hopeful. If you are wondering where we go from here and wondering what power you have for change, then you are in good company. Rahab's story is a story of hope. It is a story of what you can do with even the tiniest bit of power. Sure, you and I don't have any authority – but we do have some power. Even though it seems dark – we have resources to enact change. We learn from Rahab, that no matter what situation we find ourselves in we have the capacity to help somebody else. Friends, we might not have any authority. But what we do have is the power to help. We have the power to continue to give dignity to our queer siblings, we have the power to continue the work of reconciliation and calling out racism when we hear it. We have the power to question bias and to teach women and girls that they have worth beyond their bodies. What we have is the power to meet people right where they are and treat them with love and respect. And while it might sound flowery – I have to believe now more than ever, that the God of Rahab is still on the side of those in the margins and that SHE is still working alongside us for the ways of love. Rahab's story is a metaphor of hope – and in remembering Rahab we are offered the opportunity to let our stories be stories of hope too.

Amen.