6-10/11-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Joshua 2:1-21 The Faith of Rahab Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

Type into your Google browser “unlikely American heroes” and close to 2 million results will come up. The stories range from war heroes to those who seek to rescue child slavery victims to images of ordinary men and women taking a stand for what they believe.

Type into that same Google browser “unlikely heroes of the Bible” and only about 504,000 results will emerge, with many advertising books that have been written on a variety of biblical characters.

One of those books is by author John MacArthur, in which he wrote:

“The pages of Scripture are filled with stories of great heroes—men and women whom God used in unique and powerful ways to accomplish His purposes. Their exploits vary greatly, yet the common thread that runs through all of their testimonies is *faith*.”

-John MacArthur, *Twelve Unlikely Heroes*, amazon.com

From biblical heroes to war heroes to superheroes, these characters real and fictional capture our imagination through their actions that assist others. Their bravery in spite of their fear encourage us to boldly care for someone else in need.

Although I don’t often watch movies from Marvel or DC Comics, I do want to see the current superhero in action, “Wonder Woman”.

In researching this week’s sermon I came across an article about Wainstill and Martha Sharp, a Unitarian minister and his wife from Massachusetts who traveled to Czechoslovakia in 1939 to assist Jews and political dissidents in their quest to flee the Nazi regime. They became unlikely war heroes who saved scores of refugees.

 - http://nypost.com/2016/09/17/the-most-unlikely-heroes-of-world-war-ii-are-a-pastor-and-his-wife

This summer in worship, I am taking a step back into the Old Testament to ponder the stories of some of the more unlikely heroes of the Bible, ordinary and even scandalous men and women who made a difference in the history of God’s people through their willingness to take a step of faith.

What better place today to start pondering that step of faith than with the story of a woman named Rahab.

Rahab was a Canaanite who lived in the city of Jericho, west of the Jordan River. Along with others who were poor, marginalized or shunned, she lived along the outer wall of the city.

Some translations call her an innkeeper, and although hers was a place where a man could get a meal and a night’s lodging, most translations bluntly name her reality. Rahab was a prostitute, a woman of ill repute and thus an outcast.

Yet with her location and line of work, Rahab was well aware of what went on not only within the walls of Jericho but also outside the walls, in the world beyond her city.

One evening 2 Israeli spies arrived on Rahab’s doorstep. What better place to try and blend into the city and retrieve information then a house where men did not want to be seen, in the poor section of town, on the outskirts of the city. Back in camp, however, this outing could have been cause for scandal, or at the very least any contact with Rahab and her establishment would have made the spies religiously unclean.

Yet these men were on a mission, sent by Joshua, the Israeli successor to Moses, as he sought to finally lead God’s people into the Promised Land after having spent 40 years wandering in the desert wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt. The Promised Land was so close the Israelites could now see it physically and not simply in their imaginations. Yet settling over 2 million Jews into a land already occupied by the Canaanites would be no small accomplishment.

Already the Canaanites of Jericho had heard stories of the Israelites, for one cannot simply hide a horde of that magnitude. Stories of the strength and power of their God preceded the Israelites into Canaan, and so the people of Jericho were afraid before Joshua ever set foot on the western side of the Jordan River.

When the Israeli spies showed up at Rahab’s door, she knew who they were and what their presence meant. So did the king of Jericho. Somehow the king knew of their arrival, and sent a search party to retrieve these men from Rahab’s house. Rahab then had a choice to make. Turn over the spies to her own people, thus prolonging the inevitable, or risk her own life to protect the spies. She chose the latter, hiding them on her roof, lying to the king’s men and sending them on a wild goose chase outside the city walls.

On a side note, this is only one of two instances in the Hebrew Scriptures that lying was honored by God, when women lied to save the lives of others. The first instance was the Hebrew midwives in Egypt when they declared that the Israelite women were giving birth before they could attend. This was a lie told to save the lives of countless baby boys who otherwise would have been killed by Pharaoh’s men. Rahab told her lie to protect the Israelite spies.

Once the king’s search party had left her house, Rahab then engaged in conversation that showed her faith as well as her fear. She told the men what she knew of their people and their God.

*“I know that the Lord has given you the land. Terror over you has overwhelmed us. The entire population of the land has melted down in fear because of you.We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Reed Sea in front of you when you left Egypt. We have also heard what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites on the other side of the Jordan. You utterly wiped them out. We heard this and our hearts turned to water. Because of you, people can no longer work up their courage. This is because the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below.”*

Then, like any good businesswoman, Rahab struck a bargain and asked for their protection.

*“Now, I have been loyal to you. So pledge to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal loyally with my family. Give me a sign of good faith. Spare the lives of my father, mother, brothers, and sisters, along with everything they own. Rescue us from death.”*

What an unlikely place and an unlikely way for God to show up—in the house of a Canaanite woman with a scandalous reputation! Yet if we pay attention to the Scriptures, this happens time and time again. God spoke to Moses through a burning bush. God used a large fish to get Jonah’s attention. Jesus surprised the disciples on a beach in the early morning. Time and again God will show up in a surprising way through an unexpected character or in an unexpected place to call God’s people into a new next step of faith.

Rahab was an outsider of outsiders. She was a woman; she was a Canaanite, a foreigner, a non-Jew and thus not of the tribe of God; and she chose to engage in a scandalous profession. She was the last one anyone would expect to have faith in God, or for God to have faith in her.

Yet she is remembered in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments because her faith in a God she had never met compelled her forth into action that saved not only the lives of the spies but also the lives of her own family as well as the lives of many Israelites who would fight their way forward into the Promised Land.

Not only did Rahab express her sincere faith in the God of the conquering nation, she also displayed her trust in the word of the spies to save her. First, she blatantly displayed a scarlet cord hanging from her outside window. She had no idea how long or even if the spies would return, but she trusted in their word to save her, and the cord was a physical expression of her faith. Imagine how many times her neighbors or family or even the leaders of Jericho asked about that cord, and she refused to explain it.

Next, she convinced her family to move into her house to protect them without fully explaining to them how or why. In a day and age when women were considered the property of the men in her life, to acknowledge her father was still living meant that she chose her scandalous lifestyle apart from his protection. I can only imagine how she pleaded with her family, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and their families, in order to convince them they would be safer in her house.

Finally, Rahab displayed her faith through her patience. Each morning she awoke not knowing if that day she would live, die or flee for her life. Joshua and his warriors did not cross over the Jordan one day and tear down the walls the next. Instead Joshua crossed over then celebrated Passover, then allowed the men to heal from mass circumcision, then had the warriors follow the priests and the ark of the covenant in a walk around the city once each day for six days.

Only on the seventh day did the walls come down.

Each day Rahab had to be patient, not knowing what that day would bring, yet trusting in the Israelite God to protect her and her family.

Finally, her faith was rewarded. On the seventh day, when the priests and the warriors marched around the city seven times, and with a loud shout tumbled the walls of Jericho, only Rahab and all in her household were spared. She and her family were set outside the camp of Israel and watched the destruction of the town they once called home.

Rahab and her family settled in Israel, where she met and married Salmon and gave birth to Boaz,who became the great-grandfather of King David. While the stigma of her past is always associated with her name, I believe Rahab is mentioned time and again in the Scriptures less for her past and more for her faith.

Rahab is only one of four women listed in the Gospel of Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. We may skip over the lists of begats when we read Matthew Chapter 1, yet surprisingly four women are listed: Tamar-Rahab-Ruth-Bathsheba.

While this was unusual for first century Israel ancestry lists, what is even more strange is that the four women listed are all unlikely heroes of our faith. Four women who at the time were considered foreigners and outcasts, all associated with sexual scandal, yet all remembered as beloved daughters of God who made a difference in the ancestry of Jesus.

All are a reminder to us here today that God still works through the least likely among us to share his hope, his word, his love, is faith. If God can work through Rahab, God can work through you and I. If God reached out to Rahab, God still reaches out today to our neighbors the world abandoned long ago.

Rahab is also listed in the honor roll of faith in Hebrews 11:31, honored as one who stepped out in faith by receiving the spies in peace and belief.

Rahab is also lifted up as an example of one justified by works in James 2:25. Through her care and protection of the spies she lived out her faith in action.

How do we follow in the footsteps of Rahab? Not her checkered past, not her sexual sins, but her willingness to be a powerful witness to faith and faithfulness to Almighty God. In what ways have you been bold in your faith this week? When have you had to step out in faith, conquering your fear, risking ridicule, yet willing to follow where God leads?

A.W. Tozer once said:

The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the same coin.

-A.W. Tozer. Sermonillustrations.com: faith

Rahab was someone the world overlooked—yet God saw her situation. Rahab was someone many people dismissed as a lost cause—yet God saw the yearning and fear and hope in her heart. We remember Rahab today not because of who she was, but because of what she did—she took a step of faith and trust in God that set in motion a new future.

Every time we come to Christ’s table, every time we partake of the bread and juice of Holy Communion, you and I take steps of faith and trust in God that can also leave behind the hurts of our pasts and set in motion our new hope-filled futures.

Every time we recall Jesus’ blood shed for us and every time we celebrate his victory over death through the resurrection, you and I take another step forward in faith, another step deeper in our journey with Jesus, another step headfirst into ministry to the hurting world around us.

Our Annual Conference theme this past week was “Be Not Afraid: God is With Us.” While there may be much to fear as we look into a shaky present and an unknown future, God reminds us once again to trust that indeed God is with us, to trust that God does go before us, to trust even that God is doing a new thing, and has been each and every day of our lives.

This year at Annual Conference 22 men and women were commissioned for provisional membership, on track to then be ordained in June 2019, even in the face of a special session of General Conference being called for February 2019. Bishop Palmer called this a bold counter narrative to the fear that speaks of the demise of our denomination. These 22 men and women did not allow fear to hold them back from stepping out in faith,trusting in God to guide them into an unknown future.

I left annual conference this week hopeful that no matter what happens with our denomination, the church of Jesus Christ will continue. We will continue to be called by God.

We will continue to be nurtured by the Holy Spirit. We will continue to the hands and feet of Jesus in this world, if we live by faith, trusting God and one another, looking forward rather than looking back.

Today you and I are called to follow in the footsteps of Rahab, the footsteps of the apostle Peter, even in the footsteps of those commissioned this past week, taking one faithful step of faith followed by another faithful step of faith followed by another faithful step of faith, trusting all along the way in God’s presence and God’s guidance.

We will not know what tomorrow holds, but we do know who holds the future. We will not know where our faith in Christ Jesus will take us, yet we can trust in Christ to already be there ahead of us.

As you share in the bread and cup of Holy Communion today, may that be a sign of your faith in Christ this day. As you go forth this week, may you live as one forgiven and loved by God, living in faith step by step by step. May it be so. Let us pray.