

Hebrews 11:29-31 (NRSV)

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

Joshua 2:1-14 (NRSV)

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, "Go, view the land, especially Jericho." So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. ²The king of Jericho was told, "Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land." ³Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land." ⁴But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, "True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. ⁵And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them." ⁶She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof ⁹and said to the men: "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. ¹⁰For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. ¹²Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith ¹³that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death." ¹⁴The men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

*Do we really trust God? Are we willing to risk everything for the God who loves us?
Rahab was a woman who put it all on the line for a God she had never met.*

The seven holy habits – inviting, worshiping, learning, praying, caring, giving, and serving – are not merely what disciples of Jesus Christ do, they express who we are. They are the concrete evidence of the faith we claim to have. Today and for the next two weeks, we'll look at three heroes of the faith, each of whom are among the many persons lifted up to us by the writer of Hebrews as examples of those whose actions show us what faith is.

Since this has been a series on the holy habits of Jesus' disciples, you may be a bit surprised that these three heroes all come from the Old Testament, as do all the examples in Hebrews 11 – and the list is long. As we strive to be faithful disciples of Jesus, we stand in the long line of God's people that stretches back nearly four millennia. Rahab served; we serve. David prayed, we pray. Abraham worshiped; we worship. All those who have strived to walk in God's way have been disciples. All who have placed their faith in the one true God, have placed their faith in Christ. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "This is what the ancients were commended for" (11:2, TNIV). We begin with Rahab, whose act of faithful courage became the stuff of legend.

The stuff of legend

It is amazing to see what one act of courage can do for a woman's reputation. When we meet Rahab, she is a common prostitute living in the city walls of Jericho. Yet, in Jewish legend, she came to be remembered as one of the four most beautiful women in all of human history. The story was told that she went on to become a righteous convert to the worship of YHWH, that she eventually married Joshua, and even became the ancestor of

eight great prophets, including Jeremiah. Matthew lists her in his genealogy of Jesus. In his NT letter, James lifts her up as an example of faith in action. And as we've seen already, the writer of Hebrews includes her in the long lists of God's faithful. What was it about Rahab and her story that gave birth to such prominence and reverence among God's people? The basics of her story are pretty simple.

One day, two men arrive at her door. Whether they come as clients or not, we're not told. Rahab realizes that they are spies for the Israelites who are preparing to attack Jericho in their conquest of Canaan. She, like the rest of the city, has heard of these people and their god. She quickly decides to help the two men, in defiance of her own king. She hides the two men and then helps them escape from the city, but only after extracting a promise that she and her family will be spared by the Israelites when they take the city. The men tell her to hang a red cord in her window as a signal of the household to be spared. When Joshua enters the city, he keeps the promise made to Rahab (6:22-25).

There are two important questions surrounding this story. First, why does Rahab take the risk of helping Joshua's spies? Second, why was this story preserved and then told in such detail in the book of Joshua?

A confession of faith

Why does she help? Rahab tells the spies that she has heard what the LORD has done for the Israelites. She knows that God has given them the land. She knows about the flight from Egypt across the dried-up Red Sea. In short, she has heard about the mighty saving acts of

Rahab's Faith & Works

Last week, we looked at James' call for believers to realize that their works (or deeds) are completely bound up with their faith. In his commentary on the book of Joshua in *The New Interpreters' Bible*, Robert Coote reflects on the juxtaposition of Rahab's faith and her works (or deeds) by New Testament writers:

"Rahab is mentioned twice in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11:31, Rahab becomes one in the train of forebears who survived or prospered by faith, and in James she is a model of those who are "justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). The partial contrast between these two texts (Hebrews expounds on faith, while James advocates works) points up inevitable partiality of interpretation, even for New Testament writers dealing with the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, these texts also complement each other. Brief though they are, both attribute to Rahab the same faith marked by the same work: safeguarding the Israelite spies. Thus in concert they articulate the familiar biblical theme that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, 26). From this biblical perspective, the figure of Rahab reminds the interpreter that faith may be expounded in terms not only of doctrine, but also of lives lived. Moreover, the lives of the faithful include not only deeds performed, but also perseverance and patience maintained in the face of adversity. To be faithful is both to do and to endure, and the vector of a person's faith manifests itself through both."

YHWH¹ and believes. She confesses her faith to the two men, "The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below." Rahab, this common prostitute, utters the words that God hopes all humanity would utter. She places her faith in a God she has hardly met.

Acting on it

It is one thing to profess faith in God, the "God in heaven above and on earth below," as Rahab puts it. It is another to act on it and yet another to risk one's life, and that is surely what Rahab does in defying her king.

Perhaps this is why the story was preserved in such detail, why Rahab became the stuff of legend. We see in her a willingness to act on her faith, to risk it all, to get out of the boat. What she knows of the LORD God is only what she has heard. She knows nothing of the law given to Moses, nothing of the tabernacle and God's presence. Yet, she has been given faith sufficient to take extraordinary risks, even to betray her own people.

It's no wonder that James commends her to us as someone whose actions have shown her faith. Christians have always embraced the seven holy habits as a means of cultivating a deeper faith and the loving actions that are its fruit. Rahab shows us what is possible from the seemingly simple act of believing.

¹YHWH is the English translation of God's name as revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The Israelites came to embrace the name as so holy that they would not say it. Thus, when they came upon the name, YHWH, in their Scriptures, they would say, *Adonai*, the Hebrew word for "Lord." English translations respect that tradition by rendering YHWH as LORD (always in the small caps to differentiate it from the word "Lord.").

The Book of Joshua's Place in the Bible and the Church's Theology
(adapted slightly from Jerome F. D. Creach's commentary in the *Interpretation* series)

The book of Joshua is one of the Bible's greatest testimonies to the mighty acts of God on behalf of Israel. It reports how the Lord gave Israel the land of Canaan (Josh. 1–12) and allotted it as an inheritance (Josh. 13–19), to fulfill the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 12:7; 15:12–16). This story, along with the book's concluding call to faithfulness (Josh. 23–24), is pivotal to the theology and literature of the Old Testament. Joshua promotes obedience to the Law, Genesis–Deuteronomy, which it follows. Indeed, Joshua's opening emphasis on torah obedience (Josh. 1:7–8) establishes the Pentateuch as the primary authority for Israel's life in Canaan and as the basis for the writing prophets' (Isaiah through Malachi) evaluation of Israelite society.

In light of Joshua's central place in the Old Testament story and in the biblical canon, it is not surprising that the book has been a rich theological resource for the church. Traditionally, the Christian community has seen Joshua as foundational for basic doctrines such as election, predestination, and divine grace.

The church has also found in Joshua a deep well from which to draw its typological expression of the faith. Early Christians saw as significant that Joshua's Hebrew name, *Yeshua* (meaning "The Lord Saves") is written as *Iêsous* (Jesus) in Greek. Joshua's attempt to give the Israelites rest from their enemies (Josh. 1:13, 15; cf. 21:44) came to be seen as a model of Jesus' provision of rest from the power of sin (Heb. 4:1–11). In this scheme, Canaan, the land promised to Israel's patriarchs and possessed through Joshua, symbolizes the heavenly reward of those who follow Jesus. The Jordan, which Israel crossed en route to conquering the land, became a code name for the passage into the next life.

But despite the obvious importance of Joshua in the Old Testament and the traditional place it has held in the Christian community, the book has fallen out of favor with some believers, particularly in the modern period. The problem with Joshua is that it advocates, and says that God dictates, the destruction of all the Canaanites as part of the conquest of the land. This feature of the book seems an approval of what modern people would call "war crimes." In his famous work *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine sums up the issue this way:

"There are matters in that book, said to be done by the *express command* of God, that are as shocking to humanity and to every idea we have of moral justice as anything done by Robespierre, by Carrier, by Joseph le Bon, in France, by the English Government in the East Indies, or by any other assassin in modern times." (p. 104)

To those who share this view, Joshua represents the worst impulses of humankind, dressed up as an expression of the divine will. As a result of such opinions, some Christians reject Joshua because they think it primitive and brutal, promoting a violent god who is surely different from the Father of Jesus Christ. But perhaps a majority of those who are uncomfortable with Joshua simply ignore it, thus letting the book languish in a kind of scriptural ghetto from which its voice is seldom heard. The revised lectionary gives evidence that this may be the most popular solution to the problem of the book's contents. It includes only a paucity of selections from Joshua, with no story of battle represented. But the avoidance of Joshua fails to recognize how indispensable the book is to the larger biblical account. Indeed, the story contained in the book is referred to or quoted directly in fourteen other biblical texts. The contemporary community of faith is impoverished theologically when it fails to attend to Joshua. This book, with all its objectionable contents, presents a portrait of God and God's demands on God's people that the modern church particularly needs to hear.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, FEB 24 – MAR 1

Monday, Joshua 6 The spies' covenant with Rahab and her family is fulfilled by Joshua when Jericho falls.

Tuesday, Matthew 1:1-17 Jesus' genealogy as presented by Matthew. Jewish genealogies weren't meant to be complete. Why do you think Rahab is included?

Wednesday, James 2:14-26 Back to last week's Scripture passage. What is it about Rahab's story that would cause James to lift her up as an example of someone in whom faith and works are married?

Thursday, Joshua 7 In what ways would you contrast Rahab and Achan?

Friday, Joshua 9 In what ways are the Gibeonites similar to Rahab?

Saturday, Joshua 24:1-28 The Israelites renew their covenant with God. Do you think Rahab and her family take part in this?

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

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This week: Islam, Part 2 Next week: Mormonism

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sa_studies-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How would you describe Rahab's faith? Why do you think she is willing to take such risks? How would you explain her faith? What does this story say to you about our discipleship and the cultivation of the seven holy habits?
2. Take a few minutes and look through all the examples lifted up in Hebrews 11. Fred Craddock urges us to see a pattern here. He writes:

Hebrews 11 offers two portraits of the life of faith. One image is filled with triumph and victory over all enemies, with dramatic deliverances from all threats and dangers, even death (vv. 32-35a); the other is marked by torture, public mocking, imprisonment, beatings, stonings, homelessness, destitution, hiding in caves, and violent death (vv. 35b-38). Popular names for the two conditions are "triumph" and "tragedy," "success" and "failure"; and yet both are descriptions of the life of trust in God. The one group would likely draw new adherents to faith in order to share in its remarkable benefits; the other would likely evoke mocking and jeers, "Where is your God? Why does your God not come to rescue you?" To those who always draw a direct correlation between faith and one's circumstances, the second portrait is not of faith but of unbelief; else why would they suffer? To those who always draw a direct correlation between faith and hardship, the first portrait is not of faith but of compromise; else why would they fare so well?

Hebrews simply entitles both portraits "faith." Faith does not calculate results and so believe, nor can an observer look at one's lot in life and thereby measure the depth of one's faith. The writer is simply reporting on what has always been true among God's believers, and the reasons for the differences are hidden in the purposes of God. To offer both examples to the readers is in the service not only of truth but also of encouragement.

Which of these two portraits do you have the most trouble understanding as a portrait of faith? Where can you find your own story in these contrasting portraits? How do the seven holy habits help us to see and embrace both triumph and tragedy, success and failure?