

"Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

<sup>2</sup>The king of Jericho was told, "Look, some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land." <sup>3</sup>So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land."

<sup>4</sup>But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. <sup>5</sup>At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, they left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." <sup>6</sup>(But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.) <sup>7</sup>So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut."

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Our church has a tradition of telling stories rather than traditional sermons over the summer, and because I am a Morris, I have a story for you. But first, let me set the scene. We've got the city of Jericho sitting on prime real estate and the incoming Hebrews are cutting a swath through the Promised Land. Joshua – Moses's successor – has sent in spies to scope out the land. They have no trouble getting into the city; it was a trade center, a sort of crossroads. Apparently, they weren't really good at the whole undercover thing, though – they didn't cover their tracks at all. MI6 they are not. In less than 24 hours, the king gets tipped off about their presence, an alarm is raised, and before the sun has set, their cover is blown. I dunno, maybe 40 years in a desert isn't ideal urban stealth training.

The spies had ended up at the home of a prostitute named Rahab – lots of unanswered questions there. A hot second later, the guards are banging on the doors demanding the fugitives be turned over to them. And then, up steps Rahab. And Rahab? She's an actress. You can just see her, veils tossed to the side at just the *perfect* angle, waving her smelling salts and collapsing artfully on the ratty fainting couch in the corner.

"Oh *no*, officer! *Spies!?* Why, I *never!*"

Very Scarlett O'Hara.

And it takes some convincing, but I suspect she had experience dealing with belligerence. Finally she has them sent off on a wild goose chase, "Hurry officers, they went... that way! If you go fast you can still catch them!"

You kind of get the sense that Rahab isn't a young woman anymore. She's older now, and wiser; one of thousands of women who's life didn't go as planned, but there she is regardless. There's bills to pay, bread to bake. It may not be the life she had dreamed for herself, but it's not a bad life. She has her own home, rooms built into the city walls, and she still speaks with her family. Not every woman in her position can say the same. And she's

smart. When she let those Hebrew spies into her home, hid them under mats and laundry on her roof, and then convinced the guards that they had already left, she knew exactly what she was getting herself into. Those two spies may have bumbled their way through their first undercover mission, but Rahab was already planning 12 steps ahead. Somebody had to do it.

Here's the thing. Jericho isn't the first place the Israelites had hit since leaving Egypt. Everyone had heard about the plagues that God sent, about the crossing of the Red Sea, but Rahab also mentions other victories and conquests much closer to home, such as "Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom the Israelites completely destroyed," which is both vague and terrifying. She says that the hearts of her people have "melted in fear and their courage failed, because the Hebrew God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

So, yes, Rahab knew exactly what she was doing when she invited two blundering Hebrew spies into her house and then risked everything to protect them.

She strikes a deal with them. She will help them get out of the city undetected and cover their trail. In return, when their armies and their god come to destroy Jericho, she and whoever of her family she has gathered in her rooms will be spared.

All this – it feels a bit calculating, doesn't it, this actress of questionable morals throwing in her lot with foreign spies to save herself and her family. Where is her patriotism? Her loyalty to the land of her birth? And even if we assume, as we must, that the Holy Spirit was acting here – bringing these people together and driving and inspiring them to act in ways they never would have on their own – even that leaves questions unanswered. What sort of fledgling faith could Rahab claim to a God she had only heard of in terms of destructive power?

We are not wrong to feel a touch... uncomfortable with Rahab. We would be wrong, however, to assume that our assessment of her is also

God's. It's been a familiar theme in sermons these past few weeks. What we see in someone may not be wrong, but it is never the whole story. Not where God is concerned. If anything, her character flaws make her fit right in with the rest of the Old Testament heroes, none of whom quite live up to heroic standards. She may be calculating, but so too was Jacob when he convinced Esau to trade his birthright for a bowl of sub-par stew. Or when Jacob's sons waited until all the adult males in the city of Shechem were recovering from circumcisions to attack – killing them all while they were laid up in recovery? Or like the third time that Abraham and Sarah pretended to be siblings while in a foreign city? I mean, that's not just scheming, that's weird. Who does that? The characters of the Old Testament are a parade of flaws and second chances, and Rahab is no different. God's chosen people were never chosen because they had the moral high ground.

It's tempting to gloss over the awkward pieces of the story. Especially when it's a female character. There's so few "strong independent women" in the bible as it is, you think, just once couldn't we have a straightforward heroin? But the bible doesn't do that. To smooth over her flaws and ticks, to ignore the life she lived with all of its mistakes and second chances and moral ambiguities, is to do Rahab a massive disservice, and God too. It turns her into a character, rather than a person, and God chooses people. And when God chose the person that she was, that means God chose her baggage too. She doesn't become a part of this story in spite of her mistakes, or in hopes that she'll clean up her act in the future. She becomes a part of this story because the person she was, flawed and weary and strategizing, was the right person. Period.

We owe it to ourselves and to the complexity of our faith to engage with that. I'm not saying you have to embrace that ambiguity right away, or even like it... but for heaven's sake don't pretend it isn't there.

The story ends in proper dramatic fashion. The city of Jericho is flattened, razed to the ground and only the section of wall where Rahab's

home was built still stood. She, and all her family gathered inside were unharmed, and when the Israelites moved on, Rahab and her people moved with them, and eventually they became them. Rahab married and had a son named Boaz – the same Boaz who would go on to marry Ruth. Their line becomes the line of Jesse and David, which in time becomes the line of Jesus. She's not just the person God chose for one job when the chosen people needed an inside woman. God chose her to be a foundational part of his people's legacy. Which means, that the life she lived before Jericho fell isn't just her personal history anymore. In a very literal sense it is ours.

Church history is full of people trying to explain away the prostitute in Jesus's family tree. Researching for this, I found several sermons trying to explain that the word 'harlot' really just translates to innkeeper.

It doesn't. In case you were curious... it doesn't.

Rahab is no more or no less a hero than any other man or woman in the bible. But God didn't choose her for that. God doesn't do heroes, just people. The closer we get to understanding that, the closer we get to understanding God.