

FAITHFUL PEOPLE IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

A Sermon on Joshua 2

by Russell Smith

As a candidate for ministry, I'm learning all the tricks and "ins and outs" of being a preacher. And you know, this is your lucky day because I'm going to fill you in on a little preacher's secret. Do you ever wonder why preachers all use the same old jokes? I found out why. The other week, I was having a meeting with several area preachers. Before the meeting, we were having coffee, and one of the preachers piped up and said, "Number 85," and everyone started laughing. Another said, "Number 214," and everyone laughed again. I turned to the preacher who had invited me and asked him what was going on. He told me that these preachers had heard all the jokes so many times that they had just assigned numbers to each one so they wouldn't have to go through all the telling. I thought I'd try my hand at it, so I said, "Number 52." Dead silence. The preacher who invited me leaned over and whispered in my ear "Son, some people can tell a joke, and some people can't."

That joke was number 352.

Don't we tend to do that with the Old Testament stories too? It is so easy just to pass right over the stories as though someone were calling out a number. But these are stories of action, adventure, power, and romance. In the case of the Scripture for today, it is a story of intrigue. You see, the story of Rahab and the spies is just about as good as a Tom Clancy book or a James Bond movie. You have action, adventure, tension, spies, and in the end the good guys win. So today, we're going to slow down and take a closer look at the Rahab story.

Rahab's story is found in the second chapter of the book of Joshua. One of the major themes of Joshua is the providence of God. In this particular story we see this theme developed in the concepts of God's grace towards us and of God's placing his people out there where we least expect it. Let's set up the story. We have the Israelites. They're getting ready to cross the Jordan river and to invade the Promised Land. Now, this land is full of strong fortified cities and powerful armies. In verse 1, we read,

"Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there."

Now you've got to remember Israel's history here. Back in Numbers chapter 13, we read about an earlier spy mission that happened a generation earlier. In that mission, Moses sent out twelve spies to check out the Promised Land. Interestingly, one of those spies was Joshua. But that spy mission didn't go over so well. When the spies came back, ten of them said that Israel would never be able to take the land. Only Joshua and Caleb had confidence that the Lord would deliver the lands

to them. All the rest of Israel feared the inhabitants of the land. They lacked faith in the Lord's ability to provide victory. They feared that their children would be taken by the inhabitants as slaves. They refused to proceed with the invasion. Their lack of faith angered God so much that he condemned them to wander in the wilderness for a generation as punishment.

But there's a flip side to this judgment. God remembers that only Caleb and Joshua had faith, and therefore says they will enter the Promised Land. Then he makes a promise that is recorded in Numbers 14:31: "Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey — I will bring them in, and they shall know the land which you have rejected." God swears that even though he is punishing Israel, he will still be faithful to the original covenant with Abraham. God is providing grace to his promised people, even though they disobey him entirely.

Now let's go back to the second chapter of Joshua. This is a whole new spy mission. Joshua only sent two men, and those men were sent secretly so as not to inspire gossip within the camp. These two men are the start of the whole new invasion. This time Israel will go in and take the land. What we see here is the fulfillment of God's promise. He promised that the second generation would inhabit the land, and now we see the beginnings of fulfillment. As we read the chapter, we see in verse 8 that all the inhabitants fear the Israelites. They have heard of the power of God. The chapter ends with Joshua expressing confidence that the Lord will deliver the land into the hands of the Israelites. This story shouts out to us that God has shown grace. He has chosen his people. He will remember his promises. The story begs us, the new Israel, to remember that God has chosen us. He has lavished us with his grace, and he has kept his promise of salvation through Christ.

When I was growing up, we used to go to my mother's family reunion. This was a large extended family from the upstate of South Carolina. There would be hundreds of cousins that met there at the big hall overlooking the Veterans Memorial Park in Union, South Carolina. We'd have a big potluck lunch, and then afterwards all the older members of the family would sit in the rocking chairs on the front porch. We'd listen to them tell the family stories. I swear I must've heard some of those stories a hundred times (my grandfather liked to repeat himself). They told these stories because they wanted us to remember — to remember who we were and where we came from, to remember our heritage and our history, to remember the pride of our family. God is doing something similar here. He is subtly reminding us to remember our heritage and the grace that he bestows upon us.

The story continues to elaborate on God's providence. The two spies somehow make it into Jericho. This is really daring. It would be something like sending CIA agents into Baghdad to scout out the state of Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons program. We are talking *Mission Impossible* stuff here. But you see, God has a purpose. He guides them to Rahab. Now we don't know an awful lot about Rahab. At some point in her life she was a prostitute. There are some scholars who think that by the time of this story she had left that profession, but the shame of it stuck to her. Ultimately we just can't be sure.

What is most important here however, is how she treats the spies. God leads these spies to her, and Rahab hides and shelters them. Notice that she puts herself in considerable personal danger

to do so. Verses 3-7 show how Rahab defies the king and directs the king's soldiers in the wrong direction:

“And the king of Jericho sent word to Rahab, saying, ‘Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.’ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, ‘Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And it came about when it was time to shut the gate, at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.’”

This was high treason, a crime that in those times was punishable by death. Rahab was taking a huge risk here.

A few years ago, Stephen Spielberg put out *Schindler's List*, portraying the story of Oscar Schindler. Schindler was a factory owner who tried to rescue his Jewish factory workers from execution in the Holocaust. As the movie progresses, the tension builds. Schindler and his Jewish accountant secretly work on their plan, all the while avoiding detection by the Nazis. As you watch the movie, you become aware that Schindler is playing a dangerous game with the Nazis. He is deceiving them to save the lives of others, and if he is caught he will die. Rahab is playing that same game, and putting herself in the greatest danger.

My point is this. The fact that Rahab put herself in such danger indicates that this was no snap decision. You don't just up and decide to turn your back on your religion and your country just for kicks. It doesn't work that way. God had moved in Rahab's heart long before the spies came to her house. God was doing something profound and mysterious and wonderful inside her, and when those spies providentially came to her house, she knew she had to act.

When I felt called to seminary, I had just accepted a job at a bank up in North Carolina. Being the way I am, I felt morally obligated to give that bank at least one year of service before I went to school. Well one year turned into three. During the course of my time at the bank, I learned a lot of things that will benefit my ministry. But I also met several wonderful Christian people who encouraged my faith. These people challenged me, they taught me, they nurtured me. I still keep in touch with a couple of them, letting them know how my education is going. I didn't know it when I started, but God had faithful believers there at the bank to help me along. God's people are out there, and we need to be aware of that. God's people are out there in unexpected places, and we need to be on the lookout for them.

This passage also tells us what to look for as we look out for God's people. In verses 8-13, we see that Rahab confesses faith in God. Listen to this:

“Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and said to the men, ‘I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For 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 who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And when we heard *it*, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father's household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.”

Pay really close attention to verse 11. That verse is essentially a confession that God is supreme, that God is the omnipotent ruler over all creation: “For the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.” In verse 12 she asks the spies to swear by the Lord that they will be merciful to her. In this verse she is acknowledging the authority of the Lord to mediate agreements. She is acknowledging that the Lord has the power to bind these men to her in a solemn oath. For the time period of the story, that's about as clear a profession of faith as it gets.

Think about the spies' surprise on this one. Here was a Canaanite. This was one of the people that the book of Deuteronomy says they were supposed to destroy. This is one of the people who is supposed to worship Baal and other false gods. But here she is confessing faith in the one true God. If that didn't leave the spies a little whopper-jawed at the whole thing, I don't know what would.

So we can recognize God's people by the confession. This is no real new news, I'm sure. My guess is that we all know that if someone confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior, then that's a pretty good sign that she is one of us. But the Bible tells us that Rahab's confession was a bit more than her words. When we look to James 2:25, we see that Rahab is noted for expressing her faith through doing stuff that demonstrates faith. Our confession is not just what we say. Our confession is what we do. If you want to look out for God's people, listen to what they say and watch what they do. You know that guy at your office that talks an awful lot about God? What is he doing to advance the kingdom? Is he just talking, or is he doing something? What about the lady with the Jesus fish on her car? Has Christ changed her life, or has he just given her a nice car ornament? What are these people confessing? Christ says that where our treasure is, our heart will be. I tell you, a part of our treasure is what we do with our time. You show me what a person does with his time, and I'll show you his confession, I'll show you his heart.

So we've seen that this passage testifies to God's providence by reminding us of his grace towards us and by reminding us to look for his people out there in unexpected places. We've also seen that we can recognize his people based on their confessions. It seems to me that these two concepts are best united in Romans 11:17-18:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.”

This passage captures the message of Joshua 2 because we affirm our membership in the covenant community in the same way that Rahab does. She was a branch that was grafted into the covenant community, and so are we. We all realize our membership in the covenant community in the same way that Rahab did: by confession of faith in the God of the Bible. Think about that for a moment. Remember we said earlier that this text calls us to remember God's grace toward us. For the Jews that meant remember their heritage. For us, it means to remember our own ingrafting into the faith. Remember we said earlier that this text calls us to be on the lookout for God's people out there in unexpected places. For the Jews that meant looking for people outside the nation of Israel. For us, it means looking everywhere around us for people who confess faith in Jesus Christ and live out that faith in their daily lives. And hear this — that is exactly what people are looking for in us. In this story that we read today, we should identify with Israel, but we should also identify with Rahab. People will be looking at our confession to see if we are of God's people, and they'll be looking at us in unexpected places.

You think about that!