

The Best Little Harlot House In Jericho

It's interesting, isn't it, to look at our family roots. My mother was the avid genealogist in our family - and when she died, I inherited her research and some of the family pictures. Her father was Thomas Odber Miles the 4th - whose ancestors can be traced to the late 1700's when Captain Elijah Miles, who was a United Empire Loyalist, emigrated to New Brunswick - and settled in a place called Maugerville, just outside of Fredericton. When I lived in Fredericton, I found some of those old gravestones - and even the site where the original Miles homestead had been built. Captain Elijah Miles began the tradition of naming the eldest son of the eldest son, Thomas Odber Miles - after his friend and partner in law, Thomas Odber - and that tradition has continued without break from ~ 1780 to the present day. Around 1850, at the time of the California Gold Rush - several of the Miles' clan headed west to make their fortune. Which, of course, they never did. And on the way back, my great-grandfather instead bought land and settled in Montana, establishing a ranch just outside of Butte, Montana that I can remember visiting as a young child. My grandfather was born on that ranch in 1882. His nickname as he grew up was 'Coyote' - and his brother received the handle 'Two Gun'. Sometime in his early 20's, he moved to Alberta - which is where my mother was born. My grandfather died when she was just 4 - leaving my grandmother with 8 children to feed at the beginning of the Depression years. So there's a quick introduction to some of my family history - and I'm sure you all have ancestors and tales to tell as well.

It's interesting to look at genealogies - and the Bible, too, often records the lineage of its people - particularly the more famous ones. If we were to turn to the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew - we would find the genealogy of Jesus - stretching back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Kings David and Solomon, and other names we might recognize. But there are some surprising names as well - some skeletons in the closet, so to speak. For a start, there are some women mentioned - which is surprising given the time in which it was written. Who are these women? Well - working backwards - there's Mary, the mother of Jesus, of course. And there's Bathsheba - mother of Solomon. So already there's a frank admission that Jesus' ancestry includes an adulterous relationship. Before that was Ruth - a woman of Moab, and a foreigner. And just before that we come to Rahab. Rahab, who was again a foreigner - and a prostitute. Imagine! A prostitute as one of the ancestors of Jesus! And its all there in black and white!

Some of you were present on Tuesday evening when we looked at the story of Rahab - but for those who weren't and may not be familiar with her story, let me give you the highlights.

- * The story begins as the epic adventure of Israel's exodus from Egypt and their 40 year sojourn in the wilderness draws to a close. After the death of Moses, Joshua is appointed as his successor. Now at the edge of the Promised Land - Joshua sends out 2 spies to assess the situation.
- * They begin at the great walled city of Jericho - just across the River Jordan. The two spies enter the city and head to the house of the local prostitute, named Rahab - whose place is situated on the outer walls. That's significant for a number of reasons. The fact that her home was within the walls of Jericho meant that she was literally on the margins of her society. And as an inn or brothel - it would also have been a good place for the 2 spies to blend in and to pick up the local gossip.
- * Someone, however, becomes suspicious and reports their presence to the King of Jericho, who sends his henchmen to Rahab's place to apprehend the spies. In the meantime - catching drift of what is happening - Rahab takes the two men up to the flat roof of her house - and hides them under stalks of drying flax.
- * The text goes on to tell us that the soldiers of the King go to her door - and demand that she

turn over to them the 2 spies. Thinking quickly, Rahab tells them that there **were** such men at her place the night before - but they have left. And she sends the soldiers off on a wild goose chase.

- * Returning to the roof - Rahab tells the spies that everyone has heard of the Israelites and how they left Egypt in defiance of the Pharaoh - and also how they recently won the battle with 2 Amorite kings with the help of their God. "People have lost their courage and their will to fight" she tells them - and asks for the safety of herself and her extended family when they take over Jericho.
- * This, the 2 spies promise to do - and Rahab helps them escape by letting them down by rope through the window of her house which is in the outer wall. Before they leave, the spies tell her to tie a red rope or cord to the window so that the Israelites will be able to tell which is her house. And they leave - hiding in the hills until it is safe to make their way back to Joshua's camp on the other side of the Jordan River. There - they tell Joshua that the countryside is ripe for the taking - and relate to him their encounter with Rahab, and the promises made
- * We next hear of Rahab several chapters later in the account of the siege of Jericho. You may remember this part of the story from your Sunday School days. In anticipation of invasion, the city has been heavily fortified. The city gate has been closed and all the residents remain in their homes - bracing themselves for the onslaught. For 6 days, the Israelite warriors circle the city, with the priests bearing the Ark of the LORD and blowing their trumpets. On the 7th day, they again march around the city - and on the 7th time around, Joshua commanded all the people to shout as loud as they could. At that, the great wall of Jericho collapsed and the Israelites entered the city.
- * Joshua orders the spies to honour their oath and rescue Rahab and her family. And the story of Rahab ends with her and her family living in Israel. The next we hear of Rahab is many centuries later in Matthew's genealogy.

So what has this story of Rahab to tell us today? What insights can be gleaned from this courageous, shrewd and marginalized woman? To be sure - as we discovered at the session on Tuesday evening - the story leaves us with many questions. Do the ends justify the means - after all, Rahab basically lied her way to survival and safety. And one can see in the story a disturbing image of God as a vengeful tribal deity. However, we must try and view the story from the lens of the day and not our own. Society in that time was one of survival of the fittest - and there was a proliferation of tribal gods - and the story is seen from that perspective. But the God of the Israelites also revealed a pattern of using the unexpected and surprising in accomplishing God's plan - a pattern that continues throughout the rest of the biblical story - and even into our own day.

Next week, we begin Advent and the journey to Bethlehem once again. And if ever there was a surprising twist - it is the incarnation - that God would so richly dwell in one born in a stable to peasant parents.

In our story today - God was able to use the unlikely person of Rahab, the prostitute - this marginalized, resourceful, brave, shrewd woman - who later became the ancestress of King David - and eventually, Jesus. And God continues to work through the unlikely, the unexpected, the surprising. Which is why we must live our lives wide open to encounter the holy - wherever sacred presence chooses to show up.

One of the other insights through this story of Rahab is that God looks beyond any human labels we might place on people. We are a society that loves to label others - homeless, hooker, white trash, handicapped, mentally disturbed, addict - thinking perhaps, by doing so, we can control and contain that which may be different than ourselves. In one article I read in preparation for Tuesday evening's session - I came across this statement: *"One of the many things this story reminds us of today is the humanity of those we might assume we already understand. Rahab is a prostitute. Her home is within the walls of Jericho - she is literally on the margins of her society Yet here, she*

is thoroughly described - she is a character who acts - a woman with foresight and courage. What stands out is the emphasis that the author of the story places upon Rahab's family. She is a prostitute, yes - but she is also a daughter. She is also a sister

Her sexual behaviour was not the identity that God recognized within her first. Nothing she can do forfeits the image she bears of God. God acted through Rahab. The writers of the Bible complicated her for us. An image-bearer of God still, she was taken from the outside into the most important lineage of Christian history." God sees beyond our mistakes, our masks, our labels - to who we are - and names us as God's own. And then God uses us to accomplish far more than we could ever ask or imagine.

A harlot, a liar, a conniver - what a seedy sort of saint Rahab was! And yet, to be fair, she was not alone in her less than perfect example. Poor, drunken, naked Noah; desert sheik Abraham with his squabbling family; old conniving Sarah; hotheaded Moses the murderer; lustful David; cowardly Peter; bigoted Paul - the stories of God's chosen ones compose a rogue's gallery if ever there was one. If people like them can be saints - anyone can. Maybe that's the point. Out of a ragtag bunch of nobodies come somebodies - made saints by God's gracious choosing of them to be a part of God's plan. Like Rahab - and like you and me.