Ascension 11/5/2017 and Water of Life 11/12/2017

**RAHAB – A PROSTITUE IN THE SAVIOR’S FAMILY-LINE**

Joshua 2:1-15; 6:22-25

There seems to be a lot of interest these days in tracing back one’s family history. Ancestry.com seems to be making a good chunk of money helping with such searches. I guess it would be fun to discover that you are a direct descendant of Martin Luther or George Washington – or perhaps a distant cousin of Donald Trump. My wife’s father discovered that her family has a direct connection to General Robert Hood, a Confederate general in the Civil War who appears in nearly all the history books. General Hood had the unpleasant – and unsuccessful – task of trying to stop Sherman’s march to the sea.

But there’s a certain degree of danger is tracing your family-tree. You might find out that you are a descendant of Benedict Arnold or a distant cousin of Adolph Hitler or Charles Manson. There may be some skeletons buried in your family’s closet, skeletons you wouldn’t be so proud of.

There are quite a number of skeletons in our Savior Jesus’ family closet. There are cases of deception, lying and idolatry. There was incest, adultery and murder. Today we consider one of those skeletons. We will be considering: **RAHAB – A PROSTITUTE IN THE SAVIOR’S FAMILY-LINE.**

Rahab was a Canaanite – today we’d call her a Palestinian. She lived in the mighty walled city of Jericho in the days before the Children of Israel conquered the Holy Land. It was about 1,400 B.C. Rahab was well-known in the city because of her means of livelihood. She was a prostitute and her home served as a brothel.

As the Children of Israel prepared to march across the Jordan River and conquer the Holy Land – 40 years after setting out from slavery in Egypt and after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness – Joshua sent two spies to check out the first major city they’d encounter – Jericho with its walls 30-feet-high and 12 feet thick. When the spies arrived at Jericho, they chose as a hiding place Rahab’s house. Perhaps they figured that no one would be suspicious to see two strange men enter there since there was a steady stream of men in and out anyway. We don’t know why they chose that house, but without a doubt God led them there. He led them to a sinner, that’s true – a sinner whose heart had been moved by the reports of the miracles worked by God on behalf of Israel.

God had promised it would happen like that. Through Moses, God had said: *I will send a terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their back and run…. No man will be able to stand against you* (Ex 23:27; Deut 11:25). God had kept his promise. The people of Jericho, even though they sat behind those mighty walls, were terrified. At least one, Rahab, had also come to believe that the God of Israel was indeed true God. Listen to her beautiful confession to the spies: *I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you.****10****We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites ~~east of the Jordan~~, whom you completely destroyed.****11****When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below* (Josh 2:9-11).

We don’t know how much Rahab understood at this point. We don’t know how much she knew about this God of Israel and his teachings in the Bible. We can’t be sure at this point if she had renounced her pagan, Canaanite idols – or simply was ready to add Jehovah as another god on her list. For sure, though, she recognized Jehovah, the God of Israel, as a real and powerful God who truly existed and was truly involved and active in the lives of his people. And for sure she recognized that on any list of gods, he deserved top billing. She believed he would give her nation into Israel’s hands as he said he would do.

Later Rahab would come to know Jehovah much, much better. For she was spared when Jericho fell. She married into the tribe of Judah, becoming a link in the line of the Savior, the great-great-grandmother of King David. She came to be a true believer in Jehovah, the True God. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews confirms this when it says: *By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient* (Heb 11:31).

But a prostitute in the line of the Savior. Why in the world would God have permitted such a thing? The answer is simple. What better way could there be to demonstrate the wonderful Bible truth: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*?

*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,* the Bible says. *There is none righteous, no, not one.* Every one of us is a sinner – and in real trouble because *the wages of sin is death* – both physical death at the end of our life in this earth and spiritual death in Hell for eternity. We all stand under the condemnation of God. And it doesn’t matter how we compare to other people – certainly we all can point to others we consider to be worse than us – but the question on Judgment Day is not “How do we matchup against other sinners?”, the question is “How do we compare to God and his standard of absolute perfection and sinlessness?” By that standard we’re all doomed.

True, in the eyes of the world Rahab as a prostitute was an especially wicked person. But in the eyes of God, she was a sinner – no more and no less doomed than any other sinner. Christ came to pay for her sins and the sins of all other sinners. The Bible’s Good News is *all we like sheep have gone astray… and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* Rahab was a sinner – she believed, and she was pardoned. But there’s more -- Christ’s righteousness – his sinless life – was credited to her account.

There are two great spiritual problems for sinners. #1. Our sins must be punished. #2. God’s law must be kept. Jesus solved both problems. On the cross he endured the punishment we deserved. The 33 years before that he kept the law perfectly as our substitute. Both parts of Jesus’ rescue are offered to each of us because *Christ Jesus came to save* [us] *sinners.*

I was a bit shocked at the Arizona-California Pastor-Teacher Conference this past week when our District President said that the fact that *Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins* was not the great rediscovery of the Reformation. He said that in its Communion liturgy the church throughout the Middle Ages had been singing: *O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world*. Rather, President Bucholz said: “The problem was that the Roman Catholic Church was teaching that you get the benefit of what Jesus did by your life of good works.” You have to do something to finish what Jesus started for you. “But,” Bucholz continued, “the great rediscovery in the Reformation was that *Christ is our righteousness.”* Righteousness before God is not something that we must achieve by our efforts, rather Christ’s perfect life is credited to us. The Bible says: *Righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*  Rahab, a prostitute, was righteous! Her sins were forgiven and she was regarded by God as righteous through faith. Including her in Jesus’ family tree certainly is a clear proof of it! You and I are also righteous! Yesterday’s sins –and today’s – and tomorrow’s are washed away AND God regards us as holy people because of Jesus Christ. We join Luther in saying: “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness.”

Jesus told a parable regarding the actions of sinners once they receive the Savior’s righteousness and forgiveness by grace through faith. It was the parable of a certain creditor who had two debtors – one owed 500 denarii – about 2 years’ wages; the other 50 – 2 months’ pay. Neither could repay, so the creditor forgave both of the debts in full. Now, Jesus asked, *Which of them will love that creditor more? I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled,* came the answer. *You have judged correctly,* Jesus replied. And he went on to show that in general the one who is forgiven much and knows it, that one will love the Savior much and show it. But he who has been forgiven little – or thinks it’s little, the one who thinks that he really doesn’t need forgiveness all that badly, such a one loves little.

In the case of Rahab much sin was met with much forgiveness. Now we will see that HER FAITH SHOWED ITSELF IN MUCH LOVE. Although she certainly was in the “baby Christian” stage, her faith produced loving fruits.

First of all, when the king of Jericho heard of the spies and sent soldiers to seize them, Rahab hid the spies on the roof of her house and said they had already left town. “They went thata’ way,” she said and pointed toward the gate. And once the soldiers were gone, Rahab helped the spies escape out through the wall and advised them where to hide out until the king gave up the search. That certainly was her faith showing itself in action.

But was what she did morally right? Was it right for her to disobey her king, the governing authority God had placed over her and her city? Was it right for her to lie? Does the end justify the means?

The black and white answer would be “No, it was not right for Rahab to lie and deceive. Dishonesty is sinful. And if she had given an honest answer to the soldiers, God could have found a different way to rescue those spies.”

We could sit here with self-righteous judging and condemn what she did. Notice, however, that God doesn’t condemn her. As we saw earlier, the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews lists her among the heroes of faith and says, because she welcomed the spies, she and her family were spared when Jericho’s walls came tumbling down and most of its inhabitants killed.

We certainly can empathize with Rahab because we too are sometimes caught in situations where the right course is not certain and specific teachings of God’s Word seem to point us in opposite directions. There will be times, for example, when telling the truth, seems wrong or harmful. A silly example might be when the wife comes home with a new hairdo – one which, when you first see it, you don’t think was a good choice. And she asks: “What do you think of my new hairstyle?” That might not be the best time to tell her the honest truth, namely that you think it looks terrible.

Actually the Bible does give us guidance for times like that. The Paul says: *speak the truth in love* (Eph 4:15)*.* The desire to be truthful in all we say does not justify cruel or hurtful words. Being brutally honest isn’t loving. We are going to find ourselves in situations when we need to find careful, tactful, loving ways to address sensitive issues.

On a much more serious level, there are going to be times when the Bible’s principles of *love your neighbor* (Matt 22:39) and *hate what is evil* (Rom 12:9) seem to conflict – or the Bible’s principle *obey God rather than human beings* (Acts 5:29) seems to conflict with the Biblical principle *obey your earthly masters in everything* (Col 3:22). There may be times when we don’t see how we can follow both seemingly conflicting directives in a particular situation.

In such cases, like Rahab, we pray for guidance, then, following our consciences, we strive for the right, the God-pleasing course. But we do that trusting that God will see the faith and the desire to serve him behind our action – and wash away in the blood of Christ the imperfections or errors in what we do.

Rahab’s faith showed in her protecting the spies from certain arrest and possible death. Her faith showed also in another way there in Jericho. Besides her concern for the safety of the spies, she had other loving concerns. She was concerned about her family members. *Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you…. [S]pare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them—and … save us from death.* (12-13). It would seem that she had not always felt such loving concern for her family. It’s hard to imagine that she was concerned about her family’s feelings as she disgraced them with a life of prostitution. But her faith in the true God changed her; that faith now showed in a true love and concern for her family-members.

The Lord asks the same feelings of love and concern from us. The Bible says: *Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever* (1 Tim 5:8).

Paul expands the circle of our concern beyond bloodlines. He expands it to include our family of fellow-believers in our church and synod and our Christian family of fellow-believers wherever they may be found. Paul writes: *as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers* (Gal 6:10). It was fulfilment of this duty toward fellow-believers which was perhaps the greatest fruit of Rahab’s faith. And most likely she didn’t even realize she was doing something very helpful for them. Unwittingly, her words and actions gave encouragement to the entire nation of Israel at this crucial time in their history. Israel had been scared off earlier. The spies that time had brought back a report of walled Jericho as an impregnable fortress and the men as mighty giants who could never be defeated. As a result, the people of Israel had become terrified and had turned back into the Sinai Wilderness. Now under Joshua they were ready to try again. And Rahab’s words about how all the people *were melting in fear because of* Israel and its mighty God – that report encouraged the Israelites to move forward and conquer the Promised Land at last.

Rahab’s words and actions, which came from the faith in her heart, gave encouragement to thousands of Israelites. We can be confident that our words and actions are also felt – often in ways we’ll never know – because God blesses them and uses us as his agents for good in this world.

God called Rahab the prostitute to faith and declared her righteous for Jesus, the coming Savior’s sake. Rahab in turn demonstrated her faith with words and actions which God used for good. In this same way by grace through faith God credits Jesus’ righteousness to us. Then, because they are fruits of our faith, God accepts and uses our imperfect works for his glory and our neighbor’s well-being.