

Sermon on Joshua 2 & 6 Rahab

In the women's Bible study almost three weeks ago, we came across the story of Rahab. I must admit, I had heard the name, but had never really read the story or worked with it. I wondered a bit why. ...was kind of glad that the other women hadn't much idea about it either. The only person, who knew more, was Chris.

As an introduction we were given the following passage:

“After the death of Moses, God told Joshua to take the land of Canaan from the enemies of God. The major cities of Canaan were in reality small kingdoms, each ruled by a local king. The invasion point was in the plains of Moab on the far side of the Jordan. Joshua sent out two men to check out their first target – the city of Jericho. God had already prepared the heart of one woman in that city who became famous for her good deeds, her faith and her willingness to ally herself with God's people.”

(Women of the Old Testament p 18).

So far so good.

The texts we were invited to read and study were long pieces – one taken from Joshua Ch 2, the other from Ch 6.

We read the long pieces in turns, each of us reading a passage, and while we read we started holding our breath. We'd landed in the middle of warfare, invasion and murder.

People against people.

What we read was what you just heard as those two long readings.

Suddenly I knew why I had never before worked on the Rahab story.

Her story is right in the centre of a biblical book that is full of bloodshed and fighting, battles and betrayal...

And I'd avoided it all those years since I'd started studying theology.

Yes, I had heard about Joshua and Jericho, sure.

I knew that Canaan was no empty land, lying open and waiting for the people of Israel to walk in and settle there, but that there were towns and settlements with kings and peoples. What had never sunk in, really, was the fact that according to the stories in the book of Joshua those little kingdoms were taken and destroyed by the Israelites, and that God was obviously only on one side – that of the people of Israel – and allowed them to literally slaughter all the others and wipe them out.

How awful.

While we read ch 6 I looked at Katie and Neema and the others and said: Now I know why I have never been attracted by this...

But there we were with a Bible study guide that opened our eyes to Rahab and a dark time in the history of God's people.

In order to relieve us from a state of shock and dismay I read to us from a theological commentary in which the author writes:

“From Israel's perspective Rahab is the epitome of the outsider. She is a woman, a prostitute, and a foreigner. As a prostitute she is marginal, even in her own culture, and her marginality is symbolised by her dwelling in the city wall, in the

very boundary between the inside and the outside. Yet it is Rahab who understands best the nature of Yahweh. “Yahweh your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below”. And it is Rahab who saves the lives of the feeble Israelite spies, who willingly play about with foreigners, indeed with a woman whom they would have eventually slaughtered in combat. Rahab’s faith and kindness raise serious questions about the obsession with holy war in the book of Joshua. How many Rahabs are killed in the attempt to conquer the land? How many people with vision and loyalty are killed in the attempt to establish a nation?” (WBC p66).

The book expressed what we only just started thinking....
And our focus was drawn back to Rahab, the woman, and did not entirely remain stuck with “the destruction by the edge of the sword of all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys...”

What words would we use to describe Rahab? was the first question that we were asked in our study book. And we collected a lot:

Rahab was trusting and trustworthy,
protective, brave, risk-taking, daring,
curious maybe,
living alone, no family, prostitute or innkeeper? (...couldn’t always be separated in those days. The Hebrew word could mean one or the other).
Rahab, we observed, was resourceful,
creative, clever and smart.
She was far-sighted, wise and didn’t have much to lose.
She was quick-witted and a liar. She saved life by twisting the truth.
She could keep a secret.
She was hospitable, helpful and fearless. The king’s secret service and his overall control were no threat to her.
What an amazing woman!

We shared all these impressions, and Rahab got more and more shape in our imagination.
Who was she, what did she look like?
What was the house like – in the city wall...
...and how would we picture the window through which she’d let the strangers escape?

By now Elizabeth had arrived with little Jennifer.
She had missed the reading of the texts and had never in her life come across the story either.
So we decided to read it again.
And again we were appalled by the cruelty and the violence esp in ch 6, and we were kind of puzzled if not irritated by this image of a God allowing one people to simply take away and take over what is the other people’s: their houses, cities, possessions, children, animals –
even their lives.
...and all that because they understand that God is giving them this land to possess...

With strong and fearless warriors at his side Joshua prepared to conquer and defeat that land in which – acc to the promises of their God – they expected milk and honey to flow... but first of all there'd flow a lot of blood... What a contradiction!

There we were again: stuck with the book of Joshua – a book full of war and violence. Men and women invade the land of others and eliminate them, to make it their own. And – terrifying enough – God helps them to reach their goal. Careful reading, research and interpretation can help us to find out that the main focus of this biblical book is to show how the people who once set off with Abraham and Sara, following God's call into the promised land, now find a place to settle and make a home.

And somehow it seems as if all means are allowed – however violent they are – to achieve this aim.

Looking at the whole book of Joshua we soon see clearly that it is all about Joshua. He is the absolute protagonist. His story is inevitably interwoven with that of the people he leads.

Among OT scholars there is the assumption that Joshua is not one person.

Nowhere can be found evidence that Joshua ever lived.

Many scholars argue that there may have been many different traditions of various tribes of the people of Israel telling many different Joshua stories, stories of their leaders, their journeys, their trials and temptations.

There is also consent among OT scholars and historians that probably a battle such as the Jericho battle never took place.

There is no historical proof for such major warfare in the time in which the episodes of the book of Joshua are placed.

It is much more likely that the people of Israel came into the land of Canaan as many different parties, some meeting on the way, some meeting there. And they all settled among those who already lived there.

Probably they all had their own Joshua stories which then later, after the settlement, were put together into the book of Joshua which we find in our Old Testament.

The major themes in the book are a place and a future for the people of Israel, political unity and a common faith in one God.

Discovering this gives us of course some relief.

No major warfare, no mass murder...

...but surely fights and violence, that's for sure.

Even though we lack historical evidence of the episodes told in the book of Joshua, we need to ask why the book had to be put together as such a story of fights and battles, winners and losers? And all in the name of a God who could only be on the side of one people?

That all seems not right.

In no name of no God should such killing ever happen or have happened! Or should such stories be told... and surely not in the name of the God of Jesus who not only asked his followers to love their friends and neighbours, but also love their enemies!

The people of Israel may have needed such a history of winners and losers, of battles and conquest to strengthen and form their identity as a nation... ok – or actually not.

Now, seen in the light of the New Testament, on the background of the life of Jesus, things like living together in peace and strangers becoming friends, giving and sharing should be the values that give a people their identity, a purpose for life and a future.

20 centuries after Jesus it must fill us with embarrassment and shame to see and admit that there were more wars than there were stories of peace-making and reconciliation.

With that in mind, as Christians in the 21st century who try to interpret and understand this text from the book of Joshua, our task must be to focus on the **life-giving and saving side of the story.**

And here we are back at Rahab's.

We see her home in the city wall.

We see the flax on the roof of her house that helped to hide the strangers.

We see the window through which she let the men escape.

We see the rope at which they were let down.

We see the kings' soldiers call at Rahab's, hear her talking and see the city gates closing.

We see the crimson cord in Rahab's window, and assume what her role in the city is.

We see her living at the boundaries of society, her curiosity to experience something new, and her openness to a strange God.

We see her care and concern for her family. (She lived alone & made her own living. No children are mentioned. But she asked for the rescue of her father, mother, brothers and sisters).

Rahab was well informed about a faith story and a God that were not her own. She had heard of Yahweh. She was impressed by the works God had done for the Israelites. In our text she talks about her heart melting and Yahweh, being the God in heaven and on earth.

She wanted God's purposes to come into being.

And she simply had a longing to live!

Rahab came ever closer, became almost alive for us, the more we read in our Bibles and searched in the texts. So when the Bible study guide led us to the question:

Why do you think Rahab risked her life for these two men?

...we had plenty of ideas in store.

Rahab was not only clever and intelligent, but also well informed.

She knew much about the on-goings in her city, but she also was well informed about what was going on outside the city walls.

She was fascinated by the strangers and their faith in God.

She was of a curious nature, open-minded and happy to experience changes.

Maybe the appearance of the spies was a welcome interruption of an everyday life that had long since turned a bit dull and boring?

Since she seemed to live halfway in- and outside the city, she may have had less fear and obedience towards the authorities. She saved the lives of these spies in spite of her king wanting them to be handed over.

Maybe she was similarly free-spirited when it came to religion?

Maybe the strict city priests couldn't prevent her from stretching herself a bit and getting a taste of this new people's faith...

The thought of their God had captured her, and thus she was happy to meet two people who believed in him.

Maybe Rahab was only having sympathy with the strangers?

Or did she already in the beginning see advantages that she might have as a reward for her hospitable and protective actions? "Since I have dealt kindly with you, will you in turn...?"

Maybe Rahab risked her life because she had nothing or not much to lose?

Could she have been an outcast in her own society? A prostitute? A woman alone?

Was she still in touch with friends and family?

Did it matter much to her, what people thought about her?

Or whether she'd be forced to flee?

To what extent do you have to be alienated from your own people, in order to risk everything for two strangers and betray your own folk?

These are all ideas and questions that came to our minds when we thought of this extraordinary woman.

In Ch 6 of the book of Joshua we learn that Rahab and her family survived. Nothing else remained. Jericho, the story tells us, had been razed to the ground, and from then on belonged to the enemies, and Rahab lived among them as a stranger.

She hadn't been all at home with her own people, and now she wasn't with the Israelites. Rahab's life is full of the tension between "being one of us" and not really belonging to the others.

Isn't that something so many of us know?

Don't many of us have their "houses" in the city wall – half in and half out of the place where we've chosen to live?

Only that unlike Rahab, we have had the chance to learn that our God is not asking a decision from us for one or the other but is giving us the power and the ability to embrace it all. See it all. Enjoy it all. Make the most of it. Live it all.

And here we get a last glimpse of who Rahab maybe was.

What she wanted more in life than anything else, was to live!

...live life in all its fullness.

By all means.

The trust in life itself, the trust in her own power to live, and the trust in a God who is life and gives life, was what set all her actions in motion.

Rahab had a sensitivity for the changes of times, she could see the dangers at the political horizon, and foresee the catastrophe to come.

And because she wanted nothing more than to live, she took the necessary steps.

She acted radically – not only being kind and friendly (ok, she did that), but she was also cunning and full of the will to survive.

This is fascinating and frightening at the same time: Rahab, the woman who knows no boundaries...
...a person really free?!
Did she ever experience peace and quiet?
A home?
A real sense of belonging?
Reconciliation?
Friendship?
Community?
All the things the living God is offering to his people?
Did Rahab keep the crimson cord which had saved her? Did she treasure it as a way to life and to the God of love?

We don't know.

Many questions remain open. Much can only be speculation.
But I have fallen in love with Rahab. With her determined will for life!
And that is, what you can do, too.
Love her. Love her will for life.
And discover your own longing for life in all its fullness – and think about the risks you'd take to get there... ☺

As members of an international congregation we all live somehow at the boundaries, on the fringes, between the worlds, not belonging entirely here... nor all there...
But what we all have in common is our faith in a God who loves us and guides us.
That can be the crimson cord to save us, when we put it into the window of the houses of our lives.
Amen.