***What It Takes To Be A Survivor Is What It Takes To Be A Saint***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno April 23, 2023*

*based on Joshua 2:1-21*

I’m not a obsessed with genealogy. Many people are. But I have an interest and I did spend one day at the Family History Center next to Temple square when I lived in Salt Lake City.

I went there first to find out as much as I could about my most illustrious ancestor, an early pioneer of California; a man named John Ogden Sherwood. Like many who settled that land in the late 1840s he began as a gold miner. He ended up owning quite a lot of land in the Sacramento area, much of Folsom, and became a justice of the peace. But I had heard, growing up, that he had at one time been indicted for murder. The family story was that he had killed a Chinese man over a disagreement over water access and somehow, after legal wrangling, had gotten off without serving any hard time.

Well, the great thing about the Family Research Center is not just the computer resources they have access to, but also the microfilm they keep on site which details lots and lots of old records. There I found a collection of the earliest civil court documents in California history. In short order I found my great-great grandfather listed as charged with murder. I also found that the spaces on the document where it says, *Convicted* or *Dismissed*, were left blank. He’d somehow gotten all charges against him dropped.

So I found myself related to a man who was likely guilty of killing a man, and may have gotten off because the system was rigged to look the other way if the victim wasn’t white. More than sobering, but it’s part of my pedigree and I am hungry for more information about it.

Now, to find the genealogy of Jesus, the Family Research Center won’t be of any benefit to you. But you can find two versions of it in the New Testament. The two are quite different, but then the Bible is full of contradictions. I bring it up because the genealogy in Matthew’s gospel is particularly interesting.

If you look at it you will see that among the luminaries in Jesus’ pedigree, you will find that one of his grandmothers is a woman named Rahab.

Yes, and Rahab, as we heard in the morning’s scripture, was what we today refer to as a sex worker.

When you’re talking about people who make it into the Bible you might first imagine Jesus’ grandmother as, you know, a Sunday School teacher, or President of Presbyterian Women, not a licensed sex worker. But hey, there isn’t one of us in this room who, if you go back far enough, won’t find a sex worker or someone who frequented a sex worker in his or her pedigree. That’s just a fact.

So there, in Jesus’s geneology, is Rahab. She’s one of our own. In fact, the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews lists her in the line of the greatest saints. Here is how it reads:

*It was by faith that Rahab was not destroyed with the people in her city … for she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.* Hebrews 11:31

“A friendly welcome.” Kind of makes one reconsider the definition of sainthood, doesn’t it. Takes the honor right out of it, maybe. Or does it?

Let’s look at the narrative once more – Joshua, Moses’s replacement, has led the army of Israel to the threshold of the Promised Land. Two spies are sent to reconnoiter the land. Somehow they end up in the red light district of town, Jericho.

Somehow the king gets word that spies are creeping about in their midst and he sends messengers to seize them. Yes, and knowing where lonely soldiers sometimes go, they inquire with Rahab and what does she do? She lies to them about these fellows. Okay, it’s really a half-lie. Here is what she says,

“True, a couple of Jewish boys were here earlier, but when the city gate was closing at dusk, they paid their bill in cash and left. Go quickly, if you hurry I’m sure you will catch them.”

The messengers rush out, not knowing that Rahab has hidden them on her roof. While piling flax sheaves on them to cover them, Rahab had told Joshua’s spies that she and all Jericho had heard of the mighty works of the Hebrew’s God, how God had parted the Red Sea for them, for heaven’s sake, and how the sea had closed over Pharaoh’s chariots, killing them all. All she wants is that they look with mercy on her family when they eventually breach the walls of Jericho.

Then, after they’ve had half a night’s sleep, which is lots better than none, she wakes the boys and shows them a sturdy rope they can use to repel down the outer wall of the town. Then she ties a bright red woven marker to her window to identify the place so that the invading Hebrews will pass over her apartment when they invade the walled city; a city that happens to be among the oldest in the world.

Rahab’s will be the only apartment that will be spared when the city is under siege.

Now, if the walls come a tumbling down and Rahab is living in the city wall, I’m not sure how that’s supposed to be accomplished, but it’s not central to the story so let’s overlook that.

As I said earlier, the Bible is full of those kinds of things, but what is truly interesting, really, is the fact that someone like Rahab will be remembered so fondly by the people of faith who will tell her story for three thousand years and counting.

I mean, she’s a sex-worker and she’s also a very skilled liar. Kind of a seedy sort of saint, don’t you think?

But don’t forget, Jesus once said to his followers, “be cunning as foxes and innocent as lambs.” I wonder if he said that with a humorous glint in his eyes.

I mean, look, Rahab comes from a long line of reprobate saints and if she is guilty of anything at all, and I doubt she is, it’s mild comparatively.

Think of drunken Noah, and lying Abraham. Moses was a murderer before he was allowed to see the burning bush. King David, the most beloved king in Israel’s history, stole a man’s wife and then had him killed in a battle. Lovely!

The apostle Paul says of himself, that he is no better, with his own personal history as a persecutor of Christians.

His story is so interesting. For sure. As it comes to us in the book of the Acts of the Apostles it goes this way: St. Paul didn’t actually throw stones at Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He simply watched over the coats of those who did the stoning until they were finished. Interesting, eh?

Paul knew he was no better than the stone throwers. In fact, he was maybe even worse, since he was both a coward and complicit in the murder of a just man.

Well, you know, these are our peeps. If people like these can be saints, then I guess any of us can apply.

The Bible has this to say about how God decided to choose the Israelites to be a special people –

*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that God set God’s love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you. (Deut. 7:6-8a).*

Why? God just does.

Nelson Mandela said of himself, “I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

One of the most amazing pieces of scripture in the Bible is the prophecy of a man named Hosea. He wonders how God can continue to love the people of Israel.

They are always setting up shrines in high places around the land – places where they can worship other gods so that they can hedge their bets just in case the indigenous god of the land, Baal, turns out to be more powerful than Yahweh, their own god.

Then, low and behold, Hosea finds himself marrying a woman who has the habit of looking for other men to carry on with. Not only that, when she “strays” as is her habit, and he hears that she is in the town center, standing on an auction block, about to be sold as a slave, he goes and pays top dollar for her, and then he brings her back home to their split-level house and their kids.

Today we would call him co-dependent or something worse, but Hosea says, “Hey, now I understand God’s heart. God is no more rational than I am,” he says. “God does dumb things in the name of love every day.”

So whatever the Bible means when it speaks of Israel as “a people holy to the Lord,” it’s talking about something besides a people “pure and spotless.” Yep. Not even close.

You look at the Biblical record you see something interesting in regard to sainthood. A saint is not a person who lives a particularly virtuous life. No, a saint, instead, is someone who is drafted by God to do something remarkable; something necessary, something that, in the end, will be seen as holy.

That describes Rahab. She was a typical person, doing a day’s work, and she found herself commandeered by God.

In fact, it was BECAUSE she was employed and doing her work, making her living, that she was in a place where God could use her, redeem her life – give her everyday life a meaning that would transcend itself.

The New Testament offers us a definition of sainthood. To the first Christians

it says, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Why? Because they have God’s work to do: “so that you may declare the wonderful deeds of [the one] who called you out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.”

God wants to make something out of us: “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people.” Out of a bunch of nobodies come a bunch of somebodies, is always how God works.

God seems to like to do the unexpected. God seems to like to choose the under- appreciated. Maybe God likes the element of surprise.

Or maybe, just maybe, there is more to it. Maybe God chooses the likes of Rahab because she happens to be the kind of woman who can get the job done.

Have you thought of that?

God needs someone who is willing to take a risk. Who doesn’t cower. God needs someone who can think outside the box, think on her feet, even tell a whopper convincingly when that is called for. Rahab is good at this. She has a track record here.

It wouldn’t get her into a country club, at least not through the front door, but it is good enough for God. In fact, it’s perfect.

Yes, indeed. God passes over all the purest people to get to Rahab because God has something to do that all the pure and spotless types could never get done.

See, the thing about Rahab that makes her so able and helpful in this case,

is that she is a survivor. She wasn’t born yesterday. No way. Often, people just do what they have to do to survive or help their family survive. Right?

Rahab had been in the business long enough to know very well how to take care of her own, and for that reason she was fully qualified to take care of *God’s own* --- Joshua’s spies.

You know, the people we want to work with the kids who come to this church are not white-glove wearing types. No, we want people who are willing to get down on the floor with the little ones; we want people who have lived full and various lives. People who will have a certain credibility with our youth that people who haven’t spent time in the trenches somewhere can’t buy.

Saints are made by listening to God’s call and saying, yes; trusting God to know who ought to be saints.

One of the classic books of World War II is something called, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed,* by Phillip Hallie. It’s an inspiring account of how an ordinary little village in the French Alps, Le Chambon, hid its Jews during Nazi occupation.

Hallie went there to interview the survivors there, wondering, what motivated these people to risk everything to do what they did? He discovered the source when he interviewed a woman who he learned had faked a stroke when the Nazis came looking for Jews that she had hidden beneath her chicken coop.

She was a 1942 version of Rahab.

What was the source of her courage? Here is what she said:

*[Our] Pastor always said in sermons, “There is a time in every life when Jesus asks you to do something for him.” The day the Nazis came to our village, they entered the church during the service and stood around the room.*

*And in his sermon that day, Pastor Trocme, said, “Children, I have often said, ‘Jesus comes into every life and asks you to do something good for him,’” and we knew right then what we had to do.*

Rahab was minding her own business, looking after things in her place of business there in Jericho, when God, through two frightened spies, asked her to mind God’s business.

She said, “yes” and she is remembered to this day for her courage and her pluck. We may look with some initial surprise at this, but we shouldn’t. Sometimes a sec worker is JUST EXACTLY who God needs to do the most difficult work of all.

The Epistle of James in the New Testament says that Rahab got to be a saint by her good works (James 2:15), but that’s just part of the story. I think the author of the letter to the Hebrews is just as correct in saying that she did what she did as much by her faith.

Rahab clearly had faith in herself as much as faith in God.

You have to grant this to Rahab; she got the job done. Maybe she had some misgivings herself. Maybe she wondered if God might have chosen a more eminent person, someone more holy to do the work. Nah. I bet she knew she was the perfect choice for the job.

If she had any misgivings at all she put them aside and went about doing what she needed to do to survive and make God’s people into survivors, too.

As one of her grandchildren was to say to his disciples a thousand-and-a-half years later, “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit.” John 15:16.

*So let me end by quoting Pastor Trocme of Le Chambon:*

*“There comes a time in every life when Jesus will ask you to do something for him.”*

*What might that be? Will you be ready? Will you realize that everything you’ve done before, whether it was done in the light or in the dark, has been part of the getting ready for that moment, that holy challenge?*

*You may consider yourself a real sinner. But, hey, that may be what makes you also a saint.*

Amen