

13th Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2017

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Mount Olive Lutheran Church

Theme: God's surprising grace
Text: **Joshua 2:8-21**

⁸ Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof ⁹ and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you 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 and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. ¹² Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign ¹³ that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death."

¹⁴ "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

¹⁵ So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. ¹⁶ Now she had said to them, "Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way."

¹⁷ The men said to her, "This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us ¹⁸ unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. ¹⁹ If anyone goes outside your house into the street, his blood will be on his own head; we will not be responsible. As for anyone who is in the house with you, his blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on him. ²⁰ But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear." ²¹ "Agreed," she replied. "Let it be as you say." So she sent them away and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

The Word of God we'll consider today is our 1st Lesson from Joshua chapter 2. Let's begin with prayer: *Send forth, O Lord, to ev'ry place Swift messengers before your face... To bring good news to souls in sin, The bruised and broken hearts to win, In ev'ry place to bring them in Where you yourself will come. Amen. (Christian Worship hymn 572 vs. 1, 3 alt.)*

If you'd never heard the story of Rahab of Jericho before... the events that unfold in Joshua chapter 2 may seem pretty intense... you got spies, a prostitute, a king in panic... a frantic search, a cover-up in the dead of night, a thrilling escape... It sounds more like a Hollywood thriller or an HBO drama than a Bible history lesson.

But of the many remarkable things that take place in this account, the most remarkable is what is taking place in the heart and on the lips of a woman named Rahab. Today we're gonna consider the story of this woman... and as we do so, we'll see one surprise after another... but perhaps the greatest surprise we'll witness is God's surprising grace.

It was about 1406 B.C. when the events of our sermon text took place. 40 years earlier the nation of Israel had been miraculously freed from slavery in Egypt. After leaving Egypt the LORD parted the waters of the Red Sea and sent Israel marching through the desert of the Sinai Peninsula toward the new home he had promised. And God provided for the over 2 million Israelites during their two-year journey to the land of Canaan. During those two years he revealed his Word to them through their leader, Moses, including the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai. He miraculously supplied them with water in the desert, gave them bread that fell from heaven, and sent massive flocks of quail into their camps for meat. His miracles... his care... his forgiveness... all these were evident during that journey to the Promised Land.

But then Israel arrived and decided they didn't want to go in... they were afraid of the people living in Canaan... they told Moses they'd rather go back to slavery in Egypt than fight the people of this land. You see, Moses had sent 12 spies into Canaan to scout the land and prepare for battle. But when they came back ten of the spies told the people they didn't stand a chance. After all the LORD had done... the people still didn't trust him to do what he promised. And so the LORD gave them 38 extra years of wandering in the desert to learn. And during those years every single adult in Israel from the previous generation died. Only their children would be allowed to see the Promised Land of Canaan. There were two exceptions however. The two spies who had trusted the LORD and not joined in giving the bad report to the people.

And no, these are not the same two spies from our text, but one of them – Joshua – sent the two men we read about today. Joshua was the new leader of God's people and would lead the conquest of the promised land. And before attacking, just like they had done 38 years prior, he sent in men to spy out the land. This time though it would not be 12 spies... just two would suffice. And the city he sent them to was called Jericho. It was located just west of the northern tip of the Dead Sea. This city was the key to the entire land of Canaan. And Jericho knew it too.

The city was built with a large wall surrounding it and gates that would close it up each night or when enemies came near. The wall was so large that entire homes were built into its side all around the city. And it was in one of these homes that the two Israelite spies found themselves as they tried to avoid notice during their mission. This was no ordinary house though... it was more like an inn... or really, like a brothel... It was home to a woman named Rahab who was known in the city for her profession. She was a prostitute. An occupation that was not uncommon in Canaanite cities.

And this was just one of the many commonplace immoral practices you might find in these cities. In fact, it was because these people had rejected the true God for centuries and indulged openly in such wickedness that God's judgment was finally coming down on them. Some might wonder why God allowed such evil to go unpunished for so long. Well... God had a reason. The Scriptures tell us: **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9).** And this patience of God... this desire that people turn away from sin and toward him in faith... well it was not for nothing when it came to these Canaanite people. Exhibit A: Rahab of Jericho.

There is not much that we know about this woman from the Bible, but what we do know is pretty amazing. This unbelieving prostitute living in land doomed to destruction... living in a home inside the walls of Jericho no less (and if you're not sure why that's such a big deal go home and read Joshua chapter 6 today!)... this woman somehow had come to hear about Israel and the LORD – the God of Israel. I suppose it's not that surprising that she heard about what Israel had been up to. Even back then without facebook and 24-hour online news it would be pretty hard to hide the fact that 2 million Jews had marched out of Egypt, decimated their army, and had now been not only marching toward Canaan for the past 40 years, but had already begun to defeat some of the great military powers in the region. Rahab says as much to the spies in our text: **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. (Joshua 2:10).**

But while her knowing this might not be very surprising... her conclusions based on this and her actions certainly are. She begins by hiding the spies on her roof when the king's men come to her house looking for them. She then convinces the king's men that the spies have already left the city and sends them off on a wild goose chase to find them. Then you get to our part of the story in our sermon text and we hear her say these things to the men: **I know that the LORD has given this land to you (vs. 8); and: the LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below (vs. 11); and: swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family (vs. 12).**

And with all this going on it makes you wonder, "Why is she saying and doing these things? Is it simply that she sees the writing on the wall and is looking to save her skin?" No... it's because her heart had been transformed. She had faith. But don't take my word for it. God says so himself in the New Testament. In Hebrews chapter 11, a chapter sometimes called the "Hall of Faith", we find this verse describing Rahab alongside other great heroes of faith throughout the history of God's people: **By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Hebrews 11:31).** James also mentions Rahab as he holds her up as an example of a faith that produces good fruit: **was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? (James 2:25).**

Now that's surprising, isn't it? A pagan prostitute becomes a believer in the true God and puts her faith into action as she helps God's people in need. But is it really surprising that she did all that? Or is the most surprising thing of all that God's grace would seek out a woman like that in the first place and then use her to accomplish such amazing things?

I am absolutely convinced that our God preserved the record of people like Rahab so that we could know beyond a shadow of a doubt how his love works for the people of this world. It truly is grace – love, undeserved – that reaches out to people that most of us would write off as a lost cause... and finds them where they are... and gathers them into a family where God says they belong.

And this is just as true today as it was 3400 years ago. If you have ever sold your body for money – God's grace is for you. If you've ever paid for sexual pleasure – God's grace is for you.

If you've ever looked at another person with impure thoughts – God's grace is for you. If you've ever judged those who've fallen into sexual sin – God's grace is even for you.

The surprising, amazing truth is that sexual sinners, greedy sinners, lying sinners, gossiping sinners, prodigals and Pharisees... all are within the reach of the grace of God. All of us are undeserving... but that's what's so amazing about grace – it's love just for those who don't deserve it... or in a word: everyone.

But why would God show such love to people like Rahab, like you and like me – people who do not deserve it? Is he not a just and holy God? He sure is. But he is also a merciful and faithful God. And in his mercy and justice he would send his Son Jesus Christ into this world to take the punishment for our sin and give us the holiness God demands. God's Son would die so we could be his sons and daughters. And he would rise so we could live with him forever. It is because of Jesus that God's surprising grace is a reality for us today who look back on that sacrifice in faith just like it was a reality for those long ago who looked ahead to the sacrifice God's promised Savior would make.

You see, ultimately that was Rahab's hope. And not only did she find God faithful in fulfilling that hope and forgiving her and welcoming her into his family of believers... but she also found a place in God's nation of Israel. The LORD did show her mercy and Rahab was spared when the walls of Jericho fell. And she would leave her life of sin behind her. In fact, she wound up marrying an Israelite man and becoming a key member of Israel's bloodline. You know, sometimes people find the genealogies in the Bible boring... but just listen to a small part of this one from the Gospel of Matthew which begins by listing the family tree of Jesus Christ... right in the middle of it we find these words: **Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. (Matthew 1:5-6)**. From prostitute to princess... an ancestor not only of the great King David but of David's greater son: The King of Kings himself, our Lord Jesus Christ.

God's surprising grace called Rahab to faith, into a life of faith-filled service to her LORD, and even into the bloodline of the Savior himself. But something just as surprising has happened to each of you as well. God's good news has reached your ears and your heart. God's Spirit washed you clean in baptism. The Father has claimed you as a part of his family. He's empowered you by his grace to live a life worthy of your calling. And though perhaps you can't trace your family tree directly to Jesus Christ... you can be sure that you are a part of his blood family. Because the blood of Jesus covers you in a righteousness that allows you to live now and forever... a righteousness that allows you to stand before God without fear of judgment... a righteousness that allows you to cry out to God for mercy in this life – just like Rahab or the Canaanite woman in the Gospel – and to know without a doubt that God hears you and will answer you in the way that is the very best for you – now and for eternity.

If you ever feel like God's grace isn't for you... or can't reach someone else who is too far gone... just remember Rahab. No one is so lost that the LORD cannot find them... no one's so corrupt that God cannot change them... and no one is so wicked that Christ cannot save them. God's grace extends to all people. Remember that for yourself today, brothers and sisters. And

remember that as you reach out to those around you with that same grace of God. You might just be surprised at what happens next. Amen.

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. (Philippians 4:7)