



CONTEMPORARY HEROES AND HEROINES DAY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection – Joshua 2:1-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho.’ So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. (v. 2) The king of Jericho was told, ‘Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.’ (v. 3) Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, ‘Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.’ (v. 4) But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, ‘True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. (v. 5) And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.’ (v. 6) She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. (v. 7) So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

(v. 8) Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof (v. 9) and said to the men: ‘I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. (v. 10) For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the

two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. (v. 11) As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. (v. 12) Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith (v. 13) that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.’ (v. 14) The men said to her, ‘Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land.’

(v. 15) Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. (v. 16) She said to them, ‘Go towards the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterwards you may go on your way.’ (v. 17) The men said to her, ‘We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you (v. 18) if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. (v. 19) If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. (v. 20) But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you.’ (v. 21) She said, ‘According to your words, so be it.’ She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.

(v. 22) They departed and went into the hill country and stayed there for three days, until the pursuers returned. The pursuers had searched all along the way and found nothing. (v. 23) Then the two men came down again from the hill country. They crossed over, came to Joshua son of Nun, and told him all that had happened to them. (v. 24) They said to Joshua, ‘Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands; moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us.’

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Situated in the midst of Black History Month on the 2011 African American Lectionary calendar, **Contemporary Heroes and Heroines Day** challenges us to be conscious of how history is being made and not just observed. This will keep us in an organic and healthy relationship with history by pushing us to search for present manifestations of heroism with past manifestations as our foundation. We honor the past by highlighting the “contemporary,” and not being proverbially “stuck in the past.”

Heroines and heroes are celebrated for the purpose of allowing us to connect with them and their deeds. The beauty of heroism is that it needs both the ordinary and the extraordinary to exist. It is not heroic if the spectacular is not accompanied by scars and the awe-inspiring by average folk. Heroism is greatness wrapped in the common woman and man. Most heroes are exceptional and everyday people at the same time, this truism allows us to see their achievements as lofty enough to make us stand in wonder and their personhood approachable enough for us to relate to them. This moment calls us to look at the best so that we can find the best in ourselves.

Heroism most importantly allows us to see God at work. For the truly miraculous is found by God's tendency to bring greatness out of weakness and put treasures in clay jars (2 Cor. 4:7 NRSV).

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Joshua 2:1-24

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Almost all of my aunts, who had children, were either teenage mothers or extremely young and not ready for motherhood. They became pregnant by rape, older predators, and everyday teenage/young adult romance, but in almost every case the end result was an unforeseen and premature pregnancy (or two). The rigors of child rearing and the responsibilities of parenthood derailed their childhood dreams and forced them into the laborious grasps of single parenthood's demands. I watched them rear each other's children, support each other's dreams, have each other's backs and use their sisterhood to keep their sanity while pressing through the tumultuous vicissitudes of life. They went to night school, refereed sports games to make extra money, took weekend graduate courses, and obtained bachelors, masters, and law degrees in their thirties and forties all while finding and losing love, rearing their children, and holding down steady jobs. Collectively they have become a lawyer, a management supervisor, and a pioneer as the first black female in her particular graduate program, and the highest black female in her agency. Each of my aunts have modeled for me unconditional love, given invaluable advice, shown unshakable determination, and built impregnable bonds that hold our family together to this day.

When I see my aunts, I see heroines – my heroes! It would be easy to say they are my heroines, despite their teenage pregnancies, failed relationships, and bad decisions. The truth is, all of this is partly why they are my heroines. Heroism is not only found in success, it is found in complexity and new decisions made after errant initial decisions. Challenge and complexity give substance to success. Loving my aunts, and more importantly my aunts loving me, are the backdrop for my entrance into this text.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This text is rife with the unexpected. In fact, if I had to select a title for a sermon from this text (given my socio-cultural backdrop and that of the text) it would surely have to be "An Unexpected Shero." Look at the story. Spies have been sent by their prophet leader on a life-threatening mission to a strange and dangerous land and the only place that was safe for these spies was the house of a harlot or what we would today call a prostitute. Note, that the spies went directly to this house. The text does not indicate that they considered going anywhere else. In houses of prostitution people did not take offense at their otherness, and difference was not deadly. The only place where people did not all act alike and talk alike was not the house of prayer, but the house of prostitution. The combined desires for sex and money were forces strong enough to cut across social, economic, religious, and national barriers. Any other places, including religious institutions, were too homogeneous for strangers to find haven in them.

The demands of her profession develop the virtue of acceptance in Rahab, the hero in this text. The precursor to her heroism is that she must first accept the spies before she can save them. This teaches us that openness and acceptance lay the foundation for the existence of heroism in

our lives. The potential to increase heroism in the world exist when we create environments that train us to first accept people as they are.

As a prostitute, we can suspect that Rahab's choice of profession is at least partially caused by harmful and hurtful relationships with men from her past. After all, she was not part of a culture where women were highly valued or given opportunities to earn a living on their own. Thus, we should not miss the not so small irony that Rahab is there for a community of people who have never been there for her. It is easy for hurt people to hurt people, but something divine happens when scarred people decide to heal people, when hurt people decide to love people, and oppressed people decide to liberate people.

This text give us the springboard to celebrate women who routinely save, uphold, stand up for, and deliver men, even when men have traditionally not loved women as they should. In fact, it calls upon us to extol all oppressed persons who choose to rise above the hate fueling forces of marginalization and live in love and heroism.

Rahab is also heroic because she teaches us how to avoid loving from a place of weakness, because she acts on her own terms. Not only does she break the rules given to her by her world, she makes the spies in the text break the rules given to them in their world. Rahab leverages a deal that forces the two spies to forsake going by the book (the war guidelines) in Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and 20:10-20. Ultimately, she avoids helping these men at the cost of her own life and that of her family.

Rahab's heroism can also be found in her transcending the social limits put on her by the gender and class expectations of her culture. Rahab does not allow social expectation to determine who she is or how she will act in the world. Gender, would have demanded that she acquiesce to a male king. Class would have commanded that she comply with a rich king. Her occupation would have demanded that she acquiesce out of shame. Rahab steps up, hands on her hips, determination in her heart and a plan to save her and her family, firmly in her mind. She is undaunted by social expectations, past failures, and her profession. This is her moment and she is ready for it. An ordinary woman takes extraordinary action. So, today, her exploits are still preached about long after those of the kings of her day have been forgotten.

Rahab's heroism is not a result of her life's work or commitment to a cause. Her heroism comes in her ability to spontaneously seize a moment and do something brave. This moment seizing valor democratizes heroism. If it is too intimidating to ask that our entire lives be marked by heroism, it is more realistic to be invited to grasp one moment of heroism. Opportunities for greatness and occasions for heroic acts sometimes come in the blink of an eye. Our chance for the heroic sometimes presents itself in a spontaneous instance where split second decisions must be made. All of us may not be heroes for a lifetime, but any of us can be heroes for a moment.

Celebration

In verse eleven Rahab confesses, "The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven and on earth below." Your God, she says, "Lords over the celestial AND rules over the terrestrial. Your God lives transcendently AND works imminently." All that Rahab is and all that she does is a result of this God— a God who is metaphysical enough to have a habitat in heaven AND is relevant and present enough to work in the home of a prostitute. Only this kind of God can make heroism

possible. Ultimately, the complexity of heroism reflects the complexity of God. The beauty of heroism finds itself in the beauty of God.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The cold sweat of Rahab as the king's officers arrive at her house and ask her to bring out the spies who came to her house; Rahab quickly shuffling the spies through her house to find a suitable hiding place for them; men on a roof with stalks of flax covering them; Rahab letting men down by a rope through a window in her house; a crimson cord tied in a window; and

Sounds: The fast beating hearts of the spies as they hide in Rahab's house; the hooves of the horse of the King's messengers trotting to Rahab's door; the men climbing to the roof and flax being spread upon them to cover them, the clanging of the gates shutting as the pursuers leave, the panting of Rahab and the men as she aids them in climbing from the roof via a rope; and the discussion between Rahab and the spies in which she barter their safety for that of her family.