

Confessions of a Woman of the Oldest Profession

JOSHUA 2:1-24; 6:22-25; MATTHEW 1:5; HEBREWS 11:30-31

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • June 18, 2017 • Big Springs Community Church

Congregation of Christ: “It’s been said that politics is the second oldest profession. I have learned that it bears a striking resemblance to the first.” Who said this? This quote is usually attributed to President Reagan when he was still governor of California.

But claims for the oldest profession have been made for gardeners, ranchers, engineers, soldiers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and of course, lawyers. Some have pointed out that tailoring was the oldest profession because Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves for their garments. But I would argue that they were gardeners before they were tailors!

Who first coined this maligning term? Most have pointed to Rudyard Kipling, in his 1889 short story “On the City Wall.” He begins his story of a woman in India saying, “Lalun is a member of the most ancient profession in the world.” But Kipling opens his story with a quote from the Bible, *“Then she let them down by a cord through the window; for her house was upon the town-wall, and she dwelt upon the wall.”*

Why is the pastor talking about “the world’s oldest profession,” a subject not fitting for a sermon? The Bible verse that Kipling quotes is part of our text today, Joshua 2:15. Joshua Chapter 2 is centered on the story of Rahab, a woman of Jericho, who was also a prostitute. Some have speculated that Rahab was a temple prostitute, because in those days, sexual rituals in pagan temples were part of their worship. But it’s more likely that Rahab was an innkeeper, because in the second millennium B.C., innkeepers were commonly associated with prostitution.¹ It is striking that in “The Instructions to the Commander of the Border Fortress” of the Hittite empire in those days, there is a prohibition of building an inn on any part of the city wall. This law is for security reasons, as we will see in our text.

Our text begins with Joshua sending two spies inside the city of Jericho. They would stay at Rahab’s inn, but they were soon known to be in the city, so the king of Jericho searched them out. And what’s the first place they would search but the inn by the city wall where the known prostitute was? Rahab hid the spies and denied they were in her inn. She lied to the king’s men. After the searchers left, she confessed to the spies her faith in the God of Israel. The conclusion of this story is not in Joshua’s Chapter 2, not even in Chapter 6, but in three passages in the New Testament.

Rahab’s Lying Confession

Verse 1 needs some geographical background. Shittim was located east of the Jordan River opposite Jericho, and where Israel camped in Numbers 25:1. Jericho was located 10 miles north of the Dead Sea in the Jordan Valley. It was along the important trade route along the river valley, and also a gateway to other Canaanite cities. Combined this location with its climate and fertile soil, Jericho was an important city.

¹ Hess, Richard; Block, Daniel I.; Manor, Dale W.. *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary)* (Kindle Location 1284). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

With this background, it was not surprising that Jericho was Joshua's first target. He remembered that Moses sent him, Caleb, and 10 other spies to gather intelligence about the Promised Land. When they came back, the ten other spies reported, *"The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height... and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers"* He and Caleb were the only two spies who unsuccessfully encouraged the people to trust God's promise that he will give the land into their hand (Num 13:25-33).

It had been 40 years since then, and Joshua now sent two spies to Jericho. This has always been good military strategy since the ancient days. Compare the report of these 10 spies of Moses 40 years before with the two spies of Joshua in verse 24, *"Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us."*

The two spies came to Rahab's house and "lodged" or "stayed" there. Some people speculate that the two spies had sexual relations with Rahab, but the word used for "lodged" or "stayed" is also used in Ruth 3:4, 7 when Boaz laid down to sleep. The same word is used when Samson laid down till midnight before he escaped from the Philistines (Jgs 16:3). But the two spies were quickly discovered, so the king of Jericho sent his men to arrest them at Rahab's house.

What did Rahab tell the king's men? Twice she denied any knowledge: *"I did not know where they were from,"* and *"I do not know where the men went."* She hid them on her roof, so it was clear she lied to them. Rahab's lie has been the subject of many debates. One side defends her action because deception is part of warfare (see also Exo 1:15-21; 1 Sam 16:2; 1 Kings 22:19-23); the other side says lying is not permitted in any case. But the debate is out of place. The story does not comment on Rahab's ethics. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is her action mentioned as a sin.

Rahab's True Confession

Every story has a climax and a resolution. The climax is the turning point in the story, when the hero is in danger from the villain, and may even not resolve the conflict. In this chapter, the suspense reaches its height in verse 7, *"So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out."* The king's men set out in pursuit of the two spies. They set an ambush at the fords of the Jordan River, normal crossing points where the waters are shallow.

The resolution is usually when the hero resolves the conflict by escaping or killing the villain. Where in our text is the resolution? It begins in verse 15, *"Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall."* The two spies finally escaped the pursuers.

So the central part of the story is between these two verses, 7 and 15. This is where we find Rahab's confession of faith, to be proven real and true in later passages in Scripture. What is the content of her confession?

First, she affirms God's might and power over all mankind. Because of this Almighty power, *"the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you"* (verse 9). God's power evokes terror in the hearts of unbelievers. This is not the same fear when the writer says, *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom"* (Prv 1:7). Godly fear involves both a sense of reverence and awe before God, as well as a sense of his displeasure with sin. Right after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, Moses sang a prophetic song about how the people of Canaan will flee in terror from God's great might, *"all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone"* (Exo 15:15:16).

And this is what has happened to the people of Jericho when they Israel encamped across the Jordan River. They heard that God controlled the waters of the Red Sea to let the Israelites cross on dry ground. If he did it to the Red Sea, why can't he do it again to the Jordan River? If God delivered the powerful Amorites to Israel, why can't he deliver all the Canaanite cities to Israel as well?

Second, she confesses that Lord God of Israel, *"is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath"* (verse 11). Back in Deuteronomy 4, we find the Israelites encamped in the plains of Moab before crossing the Jordan River. Moses in his last sermon to the people, encouraged them to trust the Lord, *"Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other"* (Deu 4:39). These are the same words that Rahab professed to the two spies.

This pagan prostitute's confession of faith in the God of Israel consists of two parts: knowledge of God and heartfelt trust in God. Rahab heard about God's power and majesty, and she acted in faith in God by hiding the two spies. Knowledge is not enough to save anyone from sin and God's wrath. All the people of Jericho heard about God's powerful works for Israel, but none acted upon this knowledge except Rahab. True faith that saves is evidenced by works. This is why James say this about Rahab, *"And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?"* (Jas 2:25) James does not contradict Paul. He explains that good works is the sure outcome of true faith. There is a saying that says, *"We are justified by faith, but faith that works."* So James continues, *"For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead"* (verse 26). Faith that does not result in good works is not real faith.

Make sure that your faith is not only knowledge of God, or of Bible stories, or of doctrines. Make sure that this faith is also laid to your heart, so that its outcome is a life of obedience to God's Word. Paul has this exhortation and warning, *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved"* (Rom 10:9-10). Make sure that your confession of faith in Christ is with both your mouth *and* heart.

The Fulfillment of Rahab's True Confession

Rahab's confession is further evidenced by her appeal to God's mercy. After having switched allegiance from her pagan gods to the one true God of Israel, she appeals to the two

spies to spare her and her whole family when Israel conquers Jericho, *“Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death”* (Jos 2:12-13). She was certain that God would fulfill his promise to Israel and giving the land to them. The spies swore to her that it would be done, instructing her to tie a red cord in the window easily visible to the Israelites. So she did, and her whole household was saved, *“But Rahab the prostitute and her father's household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho”* (Jos 6:25). She and her family became members of God's people Israel.

Now the epilogue. There are three other places in the Bible where Rahab the prostitute is mentioned. We already looked at James 2:25 where the apostle commends her for acting on her faith. A second passage is in Matthew Chapter 1, where five women in Jesus' ancestral line are listed. These are Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law who pretended to be a prostitute; Ruth the Moabitess, who must have been a target of malicious rumors after spending the night with Boaz in the threshing floor; the “wife of Uriah,” who was King David's mistress before she became his wife; and Mary, who was likely the subject of whispers after she became pregnant before she lived with Joseph as his wife.

In most Jewish genealogies, women are not mentioned. Matthew mentions five, and three of them are not even Jews: Rahab, Ruth and possibly Tamar. All of them have dubious reputations.

A third passage is in the “hall of faith” in Hebrews 11 where Rahab is commended, *“By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies”* (Heb 11:31).

Dear friends, why would the inspired Word of God include Rahab and four other women in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus Christ? Three things are worth noting. First, including women in Jewish genealogies is unprecedented. Second, two or three of them were outsiders, pagan Gentiles. Third, Rahab was a prostitute and Tamar pretended to be a prostitute.

Not only did our Lord Jesus Christ carried these women of disrepute in his ancestral line. He actually associated with them, ate and drank with them, and preached to them his gospel of repentance and salvation. So the self-righteous Pharisees accused him, *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”* (Matt 9:11)

Sometimes we think that the church is only for the clean, respectable, well-dressed folks. We're guilty of ignoring visitors who don't seem to be like us. This is like saying that a hospital is only for doctors, nurses and technicians, not for the sick. I like the sign in one of our churches that says, “Sinners, Doubters, Hypocrites Welcome.”

And do not even think that you're such a great sinner that you're beyond forgiveness, and even salvation. Because Christ our Savior *“came to seek and save the lost”* (Luke 19:10).