

Back in October, we explored the idea that when we choose to follow Jesus, we become Exiles in this culture. We surrender the values and beliefs that made us comfortable, that gave us a sense of safety and security. We gave all that up for the sake of Jesus' Gospel. Now we're strangers in a strange land. And then in November, we spent some time really grieving the loss of that culture, of all those places and things we had taken refuge in. But now, we're looking forward.

Advent is the time in which we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christmas together. We enter into Israel's story, their longing as they waited for the promised Savior to come. And so we too, who are Exiles, longing for home, waiting for the Day when Jesus comes again, are waiting.

This year for Advent, we're working our way through the Genealogy of Jesus found in Matthew 1. As any good Jewish person would, Matthew begins his story of Jesus with Jesus' pedigree. He wants you to know what kind of family Jesus comes from.

That's a pretty normal thing to do, right? When you meet a new person, you want to know some of their story, some of where they come from. Especially for leaders, we want to know about their families. These days, everyone's always digging for skeletons in the closets. The embarrassing family secrets everyone keeps. The weird relatives who get sat in the living room instead of at the big dining room table. We don't usually lead with those relatives. We keep them hidden as long as possible. And that was certainly as true in Jesus' day as it is for us now.

Which is what makes Jesus' family tree here in Matthew all that much more odd. Because Matthew includes five women in the genealogy - something no one did back then. But even more interesting is the women he chose to include. They're not the heroes of the Old Testament. Their stories are embarrassing. They're awkward to read (as everyone who was here last week already knows). It seems like Matthew intentionally *led* with the skeletons in Jesus' closet.

Which is, of course, exactly what he did. Because by leading with these stories, Matthew is sending a clear message about exactly what kind of Savior Jesus is. He's not a squeaky clean savior. Not a spit-and-polish Lord. Jesus is the kind of Messiah that gets down in our Mess. Let's read the genealogy through this week's star:

"This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was Tamar). Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Ram. Ram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon. Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). " Matthew 1:1-5 (NLT)

Rahab. The second woman Matthew mentions in the genealogy. Who is Rahab? Well, her story is told back in the book of Joshua (chapter 2 if you want to go ahead and turn there). We have Abraham with whom God made a covenant to save the world, then his son Isaac. Isaac had Jacob and Jacob had the 12 sons Sheila mentioned last week, one of whom was Judah, who had two children by Tamar. Now Jacob and his sons and their families - including Judah - moved to Egypt. And once they were in Egypt, they were enslaved, so you have to fast-forward a few hundred years until you get to Moses, who did the whole 10 plagues and parting the Red Sea and Sinai and 10 Commandments and wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. That gets us to Joshua, who succeeded Moses. Joshua led the Israelites into Canaan, which was the Promised Land. Before

they cross into Canaan, Joshua sends two spies in to scope out the situation, and that's when we meet Rahab. Let's read her story:

" Then Joshua secretly sent out two spies from the Israelite camp at Acacia Grove. He instructed them, "Scout out the land on the other side of the Jordan River, especially around Jericho." So the two men set out and came to the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there that night. " Joshua 2:1 (NLT)

Wait, what?! Rahab is a *prostitute*?! Surprising, to say the least. It sort of makes you want to flip pages in your Bible, to say, "Are you sure we got the *right* Rahab? Surely there's got to be *another* Rahab in here somewhere!" Well, the only other Rahab in the bible is a giant mythical sea creature - imagine the Loch Ness Monster on steroids and HGH (LNMGH?). So given the choice between the two, it seems that this Rahab here is our woman.

Jesus has a prostitute in his family line?! That's shocking. Can you imagine if some reporter figured out that one of the Republican Presidential candidates had a mother who was a prostitute? It'd be shameful. It'd be embarrassing. And so too here. It's shocking, even offensive that Matthew would include Rahab in Jesus' family tree.

It says a lot about the state of the contemporary Church that we are so bothered by this sort of story. Most often these days, Church is a place you clean yourself up to go to. And even though we've mostly gotten away from having to wear "Sunday Best" to go to Church, we haven't let that shift penetrate to our souls. Church is a place you don't show weakness. You certainly don't talk open about the sin in your life. Morally speaking, we clean ourselves up. And that's not only a perception we have inside these walls. I can't tell you how many times I've been talking with someone who finds out I'm a pastor and they say, "Oh, I haven't been to church in years. I'm sure if I came now the building would burn down around me" or some similar sentiment.

We have created a Church culture that says, Get your act together, *then* come check us out.

That's why the story of Rahab is so awesome. Because she was a prostitute. Wow. Her story reminds what the Gospel *really* looks like. What Grace really looks like. Rahab's story reminds us of who we are, and what the Church can and should be. So let's dig in:

<I'm just going to read Joshua 2; I'll have some key verses on the screens>

We know two things about Rahab that make this story even more interesting: she's a prostitute and a Canaanite. In last week's story, Tamar pretended to be a Temple Prostitute. That's not what Rahab was. She was the sort of prostitute we're more familiar with today. Prostitution has been called the world's oldest profession. And it hasn't changed much; it's never been a glamorous profession. Little girls don't say, "When I grow up, I either want to be a princess or a ballerina or a hooker."

Women become prostitutes today for the same reason they did in Rahab's day: they don't have any other options. We don't know exactly why Rahab became a prostitute, but we know that she was never married. Most often this would be because her father had more daughters than he could afford to marry off (since in the ancient world, the father had to pay the husband to take the woman). And we don't know anything about Rahab's family other than that they lived in

Jericho and named this particular daughter after a sea monster - imagine naming your kid Medusa.

So Rahab is lower class. She's bottom of Jericho's social barrel. And she's a Canaanite. When God led the Israelites into Canaan, God ordered them to kill everyone - every man, woman and child in the land. (And that's a whole big, hairy theological issue. I don't want to ignore it, but it's very much a question for another day. So without ignoring it, let's put it to the side, accept it for the moment). What this means is that God told Joshua and the Israelites that Rahab doesn't get to live. She's one of *them*. And she's not just a Canaanite, she's a *prostitute*.

So that makes Rahab's story all the more exciting. Because she recognizes these spies. And she *hides them* from Jericho's authorities. That's a big deal. That's a betrayal of her people. Why would Rahab do that? Listen again to what she said to the spies:

"I know the LORD has given you this land," she told them.

In the Scriptures, whenever you see the word LORD written in all capital letters, it's a replacement for God's name, Yahweh. So Rahab says, "I know Yahweh has given you this land." That's a big deal. That's a HUGE confessional statement coming from a pagan. Because Rahab would've worshiped Canaanite gods like Ba'al or Asheroth. And the Canaanites thought that their gods lived in their lands, that they would protect them from the Israelites and their foreign god Yahweh. Except for this Canaanite, Rahab. She apparently believes in Israel's god. Why?

"We are all afraid of you. Everyone in the land is living in terror. For we have heard how the LORD made a dry path for you through the Red Sea when you left Egypt. And we know what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan River, whose people you completely destroyed. No wonder our hearts have melted in fear! No one has the courage to fight after hearing such things. For the LORD your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below.

Apparently, word about Yahweh has gotten around. Egypt was the most powerful empire in the world at the time, only a couple hundred miles from Jericho. So Rahab and all the Canaanites had heard how Yahweh had broken the Egyptian Empire and freed Israel. They'd heard how Yahweh had protected Israel in the wilderness. And now they'd heard that Israel was headed their way. So they're justifiably scared. But notice that last part of Rahab's response:

For the LORD your God is the supreme God of the heavens above and the earth below.

She realizes it's not just that Yahweh is a stronger god than Ra or Isis or Ba'al or Asheroth. Yahweh isn't just the biggest kid on the god block. Yahweh is the one true God. The Ruler of the sky and the earth - an ancient idiom for "everything". And we know this is more than just lip-service because she's acted on her belief. She hid the spies from the authorities! So in light of this living, active faith Rahab demonstrates, what does she ask?

Now swear to me by the LORD that you will be kind to me and my family since I have helped you. Give me some guarantee that when Jericho is conquered, you will let me live, along with my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all their families." -- Joshua 2:9-13 (NLT)

A pretty amazing request: Rahab asks for salvation. But not just for herself. For her whole family. Her family! The very family that named her Medusa. The very family that for whatever reason doesn't support her, that has left her to take up prostitution. Rahab asks for *their* salvation, too. And all this in the name of Yahweh.

In making this confession of faith, Rahab has in effect become an Israelite. She's abandoned her Canaanite roots. Abandoned the Jericho way of life. And why shouldn't she? What has that way of Jericho, that way of Ba'al done for her? Her family, her people, her culture have abandoned her to prostitution. Why shouldn't she abandon them?

And the really cool part is that the spies are true to their word. When the Israelites reach Jericho in Joshua 6, under Joshua's explicit orders, Rahab and her family are spared. They're *specifically* exempted from the command to destroy everything. As Jericho is falling, Joshua sends the two spies to Rahab, who's readied her family, and they bring them out of the city into the safety of the people of Israel. Rahab is one of God's people now.

Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute and her relatives who were with her in the house, because she had hidden the spies Joshua sent to Jericho. And she lives among the Israelites to this day." Joshua 6:25 (NLT)

Can you try to imagine that? How churches would act today if former prostitutes actually showed up to worship with us? We like stories like Rahab's from a distance. We love the "Hooker With a Heart of Gold" stories. But we don't really want to get up close. We don't want to watch her kids (who have no idea who their parents are) while she goes to the doctor to be treated for STDs. That makes us uncomfortable. That's too messy for us. We'd rather just bring her on stage, let her tell her amazing story of finding Jesus and feel inspired (but at the same time, a little defeated because we don't have that same sort of dramatic story).

Which is a shame, because hearing Rahab's story should have the opposite effect on us. Because Rahab was a Canaanite. By all rights, she should've been dead. God said so. But Rahab chose to follow God. She recognized that all these gods her culture followed were false, were idols. She made a choice that instantly made her an exile in her culture.

But in doing so, she found life. Because Rahab wasn't just spared from death. She was welcomed into God's people. She married into Abraham's family. Joshua doesn't tell us that, but Matthew does. Matthew points out to us that she marries into Abraham's family tree. The same family King David comes from. The same family Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the God who created heaven and earth and who could've chosen any pedigree, any family tree he wanted to, THAT Jesus chose RAHAB the PROSTITUTE to be his great great great great... grandmother.

God brought Rahab in off the street and seated her at the head table for the family meal.

And that's your story. It's my story.

You were dead. I was dead. And Jesus made us alive.

You think, well... my story isn't nearly as dramatic as Rahab's. I wasn't an especially bad person.

I get that. I used to think the same thing. I've mentioned before that I was raised in the Church. And I was always an obnoxiously good kid - sometimes I get embarrassed at how not bad I was. Anyway... I used to go on these weekend trips to churches where we'd basically do a revival for some church somewhere. And there was a guy who used to go on these trips... I think his name was Tim. All I really remember about him was that he was about the nicest person I'd ever met. And Tim's mom had tried to abort Tim when she was pregnant by drinking Drano. So Tim was sort of messed up, but his mind was sharp and he had this incredible faith and when he'd share his story about how God had worked in his life, people would start crying and all that.

And sometimes they'd then say, Okay, JR. Your turn.

Really?! You want me to follow that?!?! I was like 12. My parent's hadn't even gotten divorced yet. Sometimes I thought maybe I should develop a drug habit or start robbing banks or something so I could compete with Tim. Or Rahab.

But over time, I realized something about myself. And it's true for you as well, whether you're closer to Rahab or Mother Theresa on the morality scale:

Dead is dead.

It doesn't really matter *how* dead you are. Whether you're just a little bit dead, like from a heart attack or dying in your sleep dead or if you're SUPER dead, like body destroyed in a car crash or bad guy after a tussle with John McClaine, Jason Bourne AND Jack Bauer dead.

So if you were dead, it doesn't really matter if you were a relative sinner or saint. Dead is dead.

And that makes your story of being brought to life in Jesus every bit as beautiful and miraculous and exciting as Rahab's.

We don't think that way in most of the Church; really in most of our culture. We have a Professional culture - as a rule, we tend to cede to authorities, to trained professionals. So in the Church, we tend to leave sharing the story of the Gospel to the paid, professional Christians (and I say that as one of those paid professionals).

But my job isn't to be the storyteller! My job is to help you understand your own story of being brought from death to life. To help you to be able to tell that story in all its power. Because if you are a follower of Jesus, then you have a story.

And that story is what the Rahabs of the world need to hear.

So what is your story of rescue? What is your story of being brought out of death into life? Have you ever sat down and thought through it, maybe written it out? Have you ever tried to share that story? It's important that we do just that.

Can you imagine what would've happened if Rahab had never heard the story of Israel's rescue? Can you imagine if the spies had forgotten that they had been slaves? If they had thought they were too good to hide out with a prostitute?

Can you imagine what the world would be like if they never heard our stories of rescue - however dramatic they are? I think it'd look a lot like it does right now. Most people would look at Church as something nice to do if you have time, something that might do some good things in our community, but not as a place where the dead can find life, where slaves can find freedom. Where hookers find a home.

And if we don't tell our stories, we forget where we come from. We forget that we too were once slaves. We too were once dead. We start to think that somehow we earned God's love, that somehow we're fundamentally different, basically better than the world. We turn into a holy huddle, we look down our noses at the Rahabs of the world, forgetting that we, too, were in the same boat as them. That dead is dead, no matter the degree.

That's why we need Rahab's story. We need to remember that our savior is a direct descendant of this woman who was a prostitute, who heard the story of God's rescue and believed, joined into what God was doing, and so was saved from Death, given a new life. Her story is our stories, and we need to tell them all. Over and over. Who could get tired of hearing that story?

How messy is your Gospel story? Do you keep your conversations about Jesus neat and sanitized? Do you whitewash your past, your struggles, your faults? Or do you celebrate your story in all its messy details because whatever your past, you have been and are being saved out of it?!

The Gospel is not a safe and sanitized kind of story. It's the story of the dead coming back to life. The blind receiving sight. Slaves being freed. Strangers and exiles finding a home. To participate in this Gospel is to confess that you, too are a Rahab. Can you imagine family Christmas in Rahab's old age? She's married now, living among the Israelites, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, and someone asks, "Grandma, how did you and Grandpa meet?"

Well, child... that's a long story... get comfortable.

We must tell our stories. Because they remind us who we are. And they show the Rahabs of the world the way home.

That's why during Advent, we're sharing in the Communion meal together every Sunday. Because this meal is the ultimate retelling of the story of our rescue. It's the place we gather to tell ourselves this story.

This table is where we take bread and remember that Jesus' body was broken for us. For our sin. Jesus broke the power of sin in our lives and freed us from death. We remember that when we eat.

This table is where we take juice and remember that Jesus' blood was poured out for us. To enact a new covenant between us and God. Because we weren't just saved from sin. We were saved FOR a new, abundant life with God. We remember that when we drink.

So you may come to the table today as Israel. You may already have been saved by Jesus. If so, let this meal be a reminder to you that your story is one of rescue. You were dead and now you're alive. Tell that story. Let what God has done and is doing in your life be a light shining in the darkness.

You may come to the table today as a Rahab. You may be trapped in a system, a culture, a way of life that feels like death. Today, Jesus offers you rescue. You have heard the story of God's rescue and it's available for you, too. Choose to believe that God can rescue you, too. And act on that belief. Come and share in Jesus' body and blood.

Let's pray together.

Jesus' table is open to everyone - both the Israelites and the Rahabs. Let's eat together, and let this meal be a commitment to share our stories.