

**January 21 2023 –  
Women Who Prepared the Way  
Rahab**

**A sermon preached by Zac Klassen on January 21, 2024**

Good morning. This morning, as we turn to consider Rahab's story, I thought I would begin by highlighting both the importance and challenge of this worship series we find ourselves in right now. The importance, I hope, is clear enough: to elevate and center the stories of important women of scripture, to learn from them, to name the complexities of their lives and the challenges they faced in a world that was often stacked against them; to be inspired by them; and finally to see how the gifts their stories bring connects us with the ultimate gift of God with us in Jesus. The challenge of learning and telling their stories, however, becomes more and more apparent as we consider just how much we don't know about them. We have very few sources of information about their lives apart from the Hebrew scriptures and the scriptures of the New Testament. Sometimes details or speculations about the lives of these women reappear in other, later writings, be they later Rabbinic or Christian writings of later ages, but by and large we are left with very few ancient texts that tell us of them.<sup>1</sup> The fact that their stories are so briefly told leaves an awful lot *untold* and leaves a lot to the imagination. Imagine if someone years from now would write a story about your family history, and from a few oral sources and retellings, would write a chapter's worth about who you were and how you fit in the family history. What information would they choose to center? What bias would they bring to your story? What labels might they give you? Would you be a hero or a villain? What would they miss or leave out because they didn't deem it important?

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<sup>1</sup> In Midrashic tellings of Rahab's story, she marries Joshua, a suggestion that conflicts with the Gospel of Matthew's suggestion that Rahab married an Israelite named Salmon.. See <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rahab-midrash-and-aggadah>.

In our story for today, the story of Rahab, we face head on the challenge of trying to tell the story of a woman who we know very little about. The first “telling” of her story, you might say, came through two spies (men) who stayed with Rahab on a reconnaissance mission and who upon returning, told Joshua about their encounter with her (Joshua 2:23). The information they relayed and that we later came to receive about her in the texts in scripture are few, however. And so, when we tell Rahab’s story, we have to recognize that there is an awful lot we do not know. The scriptural account gives us some details to start with: she was a resident of the city of Jericho (shown here on the map), her profession was that of a prostitute, she lived on the outer side of the city wall, and one day when Israelite spies came to spy out the land in preparation for an attack on the city, they came to her house and “spent the night there.” From the telling of her story in Joshua 2, we are told that Rahab was then approached by the King of Jericho (through a message) who had gotten wind of the presence of these spies. The king instructed her to “bring them out,” but Rahab lies and conceals them on her roof so that they are not caught, and then creates a diversion so that the King believes the spies had already left. On the one hand, this is most certainly a brave action – lying to the King would be an offence of the highest order—to prevent what surely would have been the execution of these two Israelites. The next part of Rahab’s story makes things more complicated, however, since the story tells us that part of Rahab’s reason for sheltering these spies is that she has come to believe that God has given them the land. Rahab declares Israel’s God, “God in heaven above and on earth below” (2:11) and so in this telling she becomes the first foreign herald of Israel’s conquest of the land, with full knowledge of what this conquest will mean for almost all the people living in the city. She takes steps to ensure that she and her family will survive the impending slaughter, but she does not take any steps to prevent it.

Joanna Harader notes that taking all of this into account makes telling Rahab's story more complicated: if her story is told without nuance or complexity, she too simplistically becomes either a heroine who "risks her own life to protect the lives of the Israelite men" or a villain whose "calculating selfishness....leads to the genocide of her people."<sup>2</sup> Rightly, Harader notes that "the truth is probably somewhere in between these two extreme versions," and that Rahab was likely "scared," feeling "little connection or loyalty to the people in her community who had marginalized her throughout her life," and that in this difficult position, she "did the best that she could with what she had."<sup>3</sup>

Joshua and later Christian writings (cf. Hebrews 11:31, James 2:24-25) tell Rahab's story much more in line with the first narrative – as a foreigner whose trust in God, courage in the face of worldly power, and kindness to God's people stand to this day as an example for us all. To be sure, as readers of scripture today, this is one aspect to Rahab's story that we can continue to learn from. Indeed, even in our song of praise today, we sang of Rahab as an example of someone who "took on powerful men" and who "defied laws and scruples to let life live again." But, as readers of scripture today, in an era where the fires of colonial wars and conquests continue to burn fiercely throughout the world and indeed in the very same regions that the Joshua conquest story takes place, I think we need to seek the greater truth of Rahab's story somewhere "in between" the details of what the text gives us.<sup>4</sup> We need to use our imaginations to discern, with the Spirit's help, the ordinary, complicated woman Rahab from the heroine Rahab whose lie enabled Israel to inherit the land.

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<sup>2</sup> Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel*, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel*, 38.

<sup>4</sup> The most recent war between Israel and Hamas is now in its third month and the death toll continues to rise. Just the other day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the very idea of Palestinian statehood becoming a reality after the war. Cf. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/israel-palestinians-netanyahu-two-state-solution-1.7087705>. Similarly, Hamas has often repeated the claim that Israel should be wiped off the map.

As I thought about the difficulties with telling Rahab's story, I found myself recalling a book that I read in my undergraduate degree called *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits*.<sup>5</sup> The book is written by McGill Professor and Canada Research Chair in Colonial North America, Alan Greer. In the book, Greer tells the story of Catherine Tekakwitha, a young Mohawk woman of the early colonial period who was likely of the Turtle clan. She resided with her people in what is present day upstate New York only later to migrate with the Jesuits to a new home near Montreal before dying at the young age of 24. Tekakwitha was the name given to her by her Mohawk people and apparently translates: "she who bumps into things," a name given to her due to vision impairment she was left with after a smallpox infection that killed her parents and her brother and left her quite ill. Greer notes that Tekakwitha's "short life happens to be more fully and richly documented than that of any other indigenous person of North or South America in the colonial period."<sup>6</sup> Despite the large amount of textual documentation of her life, however, much of it is told through the writings of two French Jesuits named Claude and Pierre. Like the two spies in Rahab's story, these two French Jesuits are primary sources that relayed information about Tekakwitha's story to their superiors, and like the two spies in Rahab's story, the information they relayed involved a depiction of Tekakwitha, a member of an Iroquois nation, that is colored by their perception of her confession of their God, her eventual baptism, and her practice of other Catholic rituals. Upon Tekakwitha's death, Claude in particular began work to have her recognized as a saint given his perception of her virtues and her great devotion to the faith.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Greer, *Mohawk Saint: Catherine Tekakwitha and the Jesuits* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, vii.

<sup>7</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, lx.

One of the first challenges that Greer, a historian, mentions in relation to the telling of Tekakwitha's story, is the challenge of separating "hagiography," or a biography of a saint's life, from "history." Greer notes that while "[h]agiographers tend to highlight the key virtues of their subject and lift them "up out of history in order to place...[them]...in a celestial realm along with other saints," his job as a historian was to "bring Tekakwitha down from heaven, resituating her in the historical context of colonial North America."<sup>8</sup> Throughout his book, Greer looks at Tekakwitha's biographies from the perspective of a historian, trying to find the truth about her in the space in-between the colonial Christian texts about her. There is one notable example of Greer's method of reading as a historian that I want to highlight, especially as it connects with Rahab's story.

Greer examines biographical accounts of Tekakwitha's childhood to discuss her kinship ties and the importance of family and community in her life. Due to the devastation left from smallpox, Tekakwitha was left an orphan, and some of the stories told about her describe her as somewhat of an outcast, a lonely child whose light sensitivity led to her wearing a blanket over her head often.<sup>9</sup> Hagiographers later took descriptions of Tekakwitha as a "lonely outcast," however, and used that description as an example of Tekakwitha's *humility, modesty, and separateness* from the rest of her people. There was a vested interest, in other words, in telling her story as a story of separateness from her *Mohawk* people, especially if she was to be named a *Christian* saint. This depiction of her separateness only became heightened later as she would begin practicing some of the rituals of Christianity. Her position as an outcast among her people made it easier to tell the story of what they perceived as her "conversion."

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<sup>8</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel*, 31-32.

Greer notes, however, that what is lost in this telling of Tekakwitha's childhood story and her later adoption of Christian ritual is the fact that despite being an orphan who later would be influenced by the spirituality of the Jesuits, she did indeed still belong to "a larger [Mohawk] family with dozens of women to feed her, teach her craft skills, tell her stories, and arrange marital matches for her."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, having grown up with the rituals of her Mohawk people, Tekakwitha didn't so much abandon the rituals of her people as try later in life to find a way to reinterpret her own rituals of cleansing and the use of smoke or incense in light of the rituals of the Catholic mass that she was introduced to. Reading beyond the Christian biographies of Tekakwitha, Greer attempts to show how her Mohawk community's influence likely continued to live on in her during her short life despite the upheaval that came with colonization.

When I think about this, I can't help but think too about Rahab. We don't know the story of her childhood, but we might imagine that at some point in her life and for reasons we don't know, she moved into a profession that set her more on the margins of a society where "respectable" women were supposed to be managing the home and the children. One of the points that Joanna Harder makes about Rahab is that she exists both "literally and figuratively" on the edge of her community – living literally on the outer part of the city wall but also living socially somewhat of an outcast role through her profession.<sup>11</sup> Listen as she describes some of the possible advantages of Rahab's social location:

...Rahab's socially marginalized position allows her to speak with people—both the foreigners and the king's men—whom she would not have contact with if she were a 'respectable' woman. Being on the edge means that we have little to lose and, therefore, will likely be willing to take more risks and confront those in power."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Greer, *Mohawk Saint*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Harder, *Expecting Emmanuel*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel*, 35-36.

There is one way, then, of reading Rahab's position "on the edge" as giving her a kind of greater perspective and power—she can maybe see the faults of her own community as well as possibly the gifts of those on the outside. When we think of a church context today, we might draw a fruitful parallel and say that those who don't find themselves totally comfortable or at home in the church have an important perspective to offer the church – to challenge and provoke us with God's wisdom coming to us from beyond us.

But while this reading could be helpful for a church that has all too often pushed people to the edges or excluded them, it is also a complicated reading, because in the telling of Rahab's story, her position on the edge and her willingness to challenge her own king leads to the slaughter of most of her own people. If done insensitively, this reading could, in a way similar to Christian biography of Tekakwitha, tell Rahab's story too simplistically as one of a foreigner turned Israelite saint, without attending to the more complex questions of Rahab's relationship to her larger community, her kinship ties, and her family. We are told that knowing what was coming, Rahab took steps to save her family – her father and mother and her brothers and their families—but beyond that we don't know if Rahab struggled with the implications this would have for her wider community or maybe even if she tried to save others. Her arrangement with the Israelite spies was a kind of treaty – did she try to negotiate a much more life-giving treaty, one that would spare more life? While we don't know this, I like to think that Rahab's position on the edge of her community positioned her uniquely to try to forge a bond of friendship with the Israelites. However, that is not the story we are told. The story we are told simply frames Rahab and her family as turning on their community because of how they were wise enough to realize that God had given Israel the land and so they became the few protected ones among

many set to perish.<sup>13</sup> Rahab's story then becomes wrapped up in Israel's history of liberation and the inheritance of land that required the total destruction of the inhabitants of the land.

One of the interesting tensions in the Joshua telling of Rahab's story, however, is that it makes clear that Israel did not, in fact, wipe out everyone in the land and that the systematic erasure of the people did not take place. Rahab and her family, along with their history and rituals remained, and later in Joshua we read that many other Canaanite communities around Jericho remained as well, likely becoming over time inter-mixed and integrated in various ways with the people of Israel. Which makes you wonder, when the walls of Jericho fell, were others spared too? Did Rahab draw in an extended group of "brothers" and their families? Joshua 6:25 says that when the battle of Jericho took place, "Rahab...with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared." And then it adds this fascinating line: "Her family has lived in Israel ever since" or "to the present day." Commenting on this line, Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Daniel Hawk says:

'To the present day' voices the startling admission that the invaders' program of erasure did not succeed. Rahab and her family do not only inhabit the nation's past but the nation's present as well. Rahab and her family remain in the land and retain their identity, set outside the camp by the conquerors, yet living within the nation that occupies the land of her ancestors. The note, and others like it in Joshua, blunts the impulse to situate the peoples of the land within Israel's past and pointedly renders them present and visible.<sup>14</sup>

Rahab's family, like the family and kinship network of Tekakwitha, did not disappear, but remained on the land and, like the many First Nations that continue to this present day, are visible when we have eyes to see. Did Rahab's family struggle in their new situation? Did they

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<sup>13</sup> Here, as Frymer-Kensky points out, Rahab's story is told as a kind of "mirror-image" of the exodus story, with many parallel details such as, for example, the story of the scarlet cord being parallel to families in the exodus who paint lamb's blood on their doorposts to protect from the ensuing death. See Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, pp. 36ff.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Hawk, "To the Present Day," in *Unsettling the Word: Biblical Experiments in Decolonization* (Altona, MB: Mennonite Church Canada, 2018), 58.



mourn the loss of Jericho and its inhabitants. From Matthew's genealogy, we learn that at some point Rahab, who up until then was unmarried, eventually married an Israelite named Salmon, but again, the rest of her story is left untold.

As I think about Rahab's story and about Tetakwitha's story, I wonder about the possibilities of friendship and mutual learning that were left unexplored in what was often the zero-sum game of colonization present in their stories. Today, as in the past, we continue to hear political leaders blatantly demonize other nations and peoples, stating that it is impossible to make peace or share land with those who practice different rituals or different faiths. Instead of sharing the manifold gifts the world's creator has given us—gifts of knowledge, of ritual, and of land—instead of working to forge bonds of cooperation with each other across language, religion, and tradition; we too often give into division and silence the voices on the margins or on the edge of our communities that push us to build bridges with others and widen our borders to welcome others.<sup>15</sup>

In our present age, if we are to be a people of justice, love, and peace, reflecting to the world the grace of God, we will need to be bridge builders and people of welcome. As I think about Tekakwitha's name, "she who bumps into things," I can't help but somewhat playfully imagine the church as a community of people open to "bumping into others," refusing to stay cordoned off in our cultural, political or religious enclaves, but open instead to the awkward and unexpected encounters that come with living in God's diverse world. In a similar vein, Rahab, notably, is a name that means "wide, broad, or spacious." Perhaps her name could counter the all too typical labels that she has been given throughout history, labels like: "prostitute," or "the trader turned Israelite heroine." Perhaps instead Rahab's name can evoke for us an image of a

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<sup>15</sup> We in the North American church even struggle to see how important our inter-cultural faith community is, a fact important for us to reflect on today on what is Anabaptist World Fellowship Sunday.

woman who sought to challenge her own people and I like to imagine the ancient Israelite spies too, to see that the land was *spacious* enough to share. Perhaps Rahab can be for us a reminder that the love of Christ is *broad* and *spacious* (Eph. 3:18), encompassing friend and stranger, forging new bonds of community. May it be so. May we, residents of our community, situated on the traditional territory of the Six Nations of the Grand River, be a place to bump into people, a place that is “*rahab*” – a spacious place where the work of justice and friendship can grow, for it is by such work that we are justified (Jas. 2:24). AMEN.