

No Damsel in Distress  
Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 11:30-34  
Reading from the Old Testament: Joshua 2:1-16

It was an all-star 1980's homage to the genre of the classic Western, though more Gary Cooper and Alan Ladd than Clint Eastwood. The movie? *Silverado*. The cast was a litany of major male stars of the Eighties, including Kevin Kline, Kevin Costner, Danny Glover, Scott Glenn, Brian Dennehy, Jeff Goldblum, and even a brief appearance by Monty Python's John Cleese. With an abundance of testosterone present, it had all the makings of what my father would call "a real shoot 'em up." The movie critic for the San Francisco Chronicle wrote that the film "delivers elaborate gun-fighting scenes, legions of galloping horses, stampeding cattle, a box canyon, covered wagons, tons of creaking leather and even a High Noonish duel ... it manages to run the gamut of cowboy movie elements." (Peter Stack, *San Francisco Chronicle*)

The storyline didn't attempt anything all that original. Set in New Mexico, a community endures the intimidating control of a corrupt sheriff in the employ of an even more corrupt rancher, both of whom were previously partners in an outlaw gang. Alas, a collection of drifting

gunslingers finds one another and wind up saving the town and its citizens from the threat of intimidation, violence, and corruption of the powerful.

Yet, for all the gunslinging wizardry and equestrian theatrics of this gang of heroes riding four abreast into town for a showdown, the character who displays the greatest strength, integrity, courage, and concern for others is Stella, the petite, middle-aged proprietor of the local saloon and brothel. Though surrounded by endless bravado and machismo, Stella is the one who possesses the greater fortitude and tougher spirit.

Imagine the contrast, Stella is played by Linda Hunt, who you may know as Hetty Lange in NCIS LA, and who stands at about 4' nothing. Her boss/nemesis, the corrupt Sheriff Cobb, is played by Brian Dennehy, who up to the time of his death looked like he could start at left tackle for the Carolina Panthers. He may have the gun, badge, and muscle, but Stella has the strength, the savvy, and most certainly, the movie audience.

Before the big showdown, she encourages her friend, Paden:

"Cobb's using me to stop you. So good people are being hurt because of me. That makes me mad. Some people think because they're stronger, or meaner, that they can push you around. I've seen a lot of that. But it's only true if you let it be." She says, "The world is what you make of it. If it doesn't fit, you make alterations."

Stella. Shrewd. Wise. Perceptive. Nobody's fool. Undaunted as she swims against the tide of a patriarchal culture that judges her, exploits her, and would hold her back. She could just as easily be named Rahab. They are one and the same in character, in strength, in integrity, in concern for others, in cunning. I can hear Rahab using Stella's best line in the movie, when Rahab is introduced to Israel's spies, "Are you the Midnight Star herself?" "I am. I'm always there, but I only shine at night."

Rahab plays a significant theological role in the narrative of Israel and a model for us of faith-inspired courage. Rahab is not who we expect to find in the role of witness to the sovereignty, love and purpose of God; and she exposes our proclivity to judge and dismiss before we know and understand. The text tells us Rahab was a prostitute, and

there are many who would prefer to pass over that or just whisper it at a level no one would catch; having already drawn conclusions about her life choices and morality.

We don't know the backstory, but we do know the culture and the consequences of patriarchy. Outside of marriage, family, or slavery, the options for women hovered between slim and none, and none had the stronger magnet. And if the woman had responsibility for the security and sustenance for others, the challenges were immense. It wasn't a glass ceiling. It was more of a lead box. Yet, whatever the circumstances, life had shaped Rahab into a strong, shrewd, perceptive, and independent businessperson. She had a home. She had people depending on her. She had bundles of flax stored on her roof, meaning that she may have also had a side business making linen or oil.

Rahab knew people, and more than that, she knew what was hidden in their closets. Rahab had learned how to handle powerful people, navigating around countless indignities and sexual aggressions. The Talmud, the treasured history of rabbinic commentary on the Torah, goes so far as to suggest that just the mention of Rahab's name would arouse the passions of men. Survival, sustenance, and

independence necessitated strength, endurance, determination, ingenuity, street smarts, and intelligence. Stella. Rahab. The names are almost interchangeable.

If the saga of Israel was a symphony, the book of Joshua would mark the transition to the second movement, following the fireworks, energy, and drama of the mercurial first movement that took us from spectacle of Creation and the Fall to the operatic intrigue of the Patriarchs, and on to the odyssey of Moses and those wandering Hebrew fugitives, the heirs of Divine promise. Of course, each of these elements could inspire a symphony alone. Yet, as we came to the end of the Moses story, the mood is bittersweet and unresolved. The Israelites have come a long way. Like travelers drawing near their destination, they can see the skyline of the city, and yet, their leader Moses has died and the Jordan has not been crossed, leaving the promise of land for a nation unfulfilled, and the symphony far from complete - the trumpet players are getting bored.

Joshua is the story of Israel's entrance into and securing of the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. However, here we encounter a significant problem that has vexed the faithful ever since. Yes,

Abraham was promised land on which his heirs would build a nation. Unfortunately, though, the land in question was already occupied. Now, if Mel Gibson was directing the story, there's no problem. He'd relish in the blood and guts of conquest, hewing to the Deuteronomic command to destroy all the inhabitants, whether innocent or guilty, civilian or military, preschooler or retiree.

But was this actually the command of God, or the misapprehension of God's intent by God's people? What do we do when the apparent command of God contradicts what the word of God reveals about the character of God? Or, to confuse matters further, what do we do when the apparent command of God contradicts a more fundamental command of this same God? Deuteronomy 20:16-17 states, "as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded..." But wait! In this same book we read in Deuteronomy 5:17 - "You shall not kill (murder)." It is perhaps the most irreconcilable contradiction in Scripture.

Though we have repeatedly ignored it, or at the least, failed to grasp it, as Christians the contradiction is (supposed to be) reconciled in Jesus Christ who gave his life for the reconciliation of the world. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." The apostle Paul said, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

However, even before the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the prince of peace, the Hebrew Bible bears repeated witness to the ways of God that run counter to the xenophobic stringency and holy war posturing of Deuteronomy 20; one of the chief witnesses being none other than the Midnight Star of Jericho, Rahab.

Moses' successor, Joshua, sends spies into the land of Canaan to gain intelligence about the land they will inhabit and the opposition they will face. Obviously, we're not looking at James Bond and Jason Bourne here. Sleuths, they are not. No sooner are they in the land that their cover is blown. Word has already reached the king about their presence and intent and location.

Were it not for the savvy people skills of Rahab, the mission would have failed, and military intelligence would have remained an oxymoron, or at least unavailable. With Rahab, disaster is averted and plans for entrance into Canaan are made. And take note, who in the story is the chief witness to the sovereign God of Israel? Who is the instrument of God's gracious purposes? The outsider, a Canaanite woman, the proprietor of Jericho's saloon and brothel. It is Rahab who declares, "I know that the Lord has given you the land ... The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below."

As is so often the case, the grace of God is realized in unexpected places through the most unlikely of ambassadors. God just will not abide our presumptions, assumptions, verdicts, biases, and opinions. Rahab joins the Good Samaritan, the Syrophenician woman, the Ethiopian eunuch, the Samaritan woman at the well, the Centurion at the cross, and certainly Jesus. They all demonstrate that our God is a God who breaks through the boundaries of human in-ness and out-ness, even when those boundaries have been set up in the name of religion and purity. What would the Lord say to Samuel before anointing David?

"The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

In essence, through Rahab we see scripture critiquing scripture. Through Rahab, we look back at the dispassionate, cold, and calculated edicts of violence in Deuteronomy 20 and say, "Not so fast." Our limited and narrow perceptions of God's purpose and character are challenged, and we are invited to seek the ways God may be calling us to expand our understanding of community, family, nation. As Paul would one day declare, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

A Jewish rabbi once observed a common mistake we Christians make when reading the Bible. He said it is our habit to read the Scriptures to end a conversation. In contrast, he said that the Jewish people read scriptures to open the conversation. Gordon Matties suggests that "most often we view Scripture as a static rule book rather than as a source for beginning conversation with God from which to begin the process of adaptable prophetic discernment that is empowered by God's Spirit in the community of faith."

Rahab lays waste to all prideful notions of who is in and who is out. She reveals that God will not be boxed in by our borders. Don't you just know the Spirit of God is grieved by the partisan animus that is laying waste to our common good, and even more by the ways God's name is exploited to justify our prejudices? In 1 John, it is written, "There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life - fear of death, fear of judgment - is one not yet fully formed in love ... If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both."

It is no surprise then, that Rahab, the outsider, is lifted up in the New Testament as representative of the courage that love requires. Listed with that great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews and included as an integral branch of Jesus' family tree in Matthew 1, Rahab exquisitely represents the boldness of God's grace. Walter Brueggemann suggested, "we are discovering in Scripture that we are caught with a God on the move, who shows himself most often not in the complacency of things as

they are but in the threat of the new. And we will have to learn to feel freshly ourselves." (Walter Brueggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*) And just where will we learn that? In Rahab and in our neighbors, who may well have powerful things to teach us about the hospitality and love of God. It seems to me that it is about time for us to start listening and learning. Amen.