“Three Remarkable Women” (in Transition)

Joshua 2: 1-7

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Text: Joshua 2:1-7 (NIV)  
1 Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.  
2 The king of Jericho was told, "Look! Some of the Israelites have come here tonight to spy out the land."  
3 So the king of Jericho sent this message to Rahab: "Bring out the men who came to you and entered your house, because they have come to spy out the whole land."  
4 But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from.  
5 At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them."  
6 (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)  
7 So the men set out in pursuit of the spies on the road that leads to the fords of the Jordan, and as soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Last week, we returned to our series on transition. Change in the life of each individual and in the life of our church. I mentioned that Pastor Winans gave us an excellent illustration by working with a platform of building blocks. He suggested that as we go along, the blocks sometimes shift or jiggle loose. Transition in life can be challenging and even frightening. I mentioned the great comment from Isaiah that we must keep in mind when on the journey of transition. Isaiah said: “I will trust and not be afraid.” (Isaiah 12:2)

We asked a question about what things go together and what things do not. I cannot ride a bicycle and play the piano. I cannot be in a state of trust and a state of fear at the same time. The question seemed effective at getting us started. Now... here is another question as we return to this theme of transition: Can people have certain things in common even if they do not know each other well or even at all? Of course! Abraham Isaac and Jacob were all patriarchs in Israel. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all Gospel writers who served the Lord. Today, let’s ask this: What might three women have in common as found in the Word of God? One was a prostitute, the second was a beauty queen and the third was a fifteen-year-old virgin from a modest family. Of course, the answer is that they all served God as He led them thru amazing transitions in their lives. Let’s take a close look. First, let us pray.

Let’s get into the time machine. It is 1400 B.C. and Moses has died. God has called the young man Joshua to lead his people to cross the Jordan River and go to the land that He, God, is giving them. That land was called Canaan and the Canaanites were an unspeakably
wicked nation but a strong and fierce people. The Canaanites are not about to give up their land agreeably and Joshua knows that this transition... this journey for the Israelites will be a challenge. In fact, Joshua eventually must capture the city of Jericho which is absolutely the strongest city in the ancient world and Joshua is probably wondering exactly how this will come about. He’s cautious.

Joshua sends out two men. Today they would be called a “recon” unit... they are going out in reconnaissance to examine the land and the troops they will face and report back to him. We read:

"Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there.

We do not know the names of the two men but we know the Word of God does give us the name of the prostitute: Rahab. Her name means “proud” or one might say “self-assured.” It is a Canaanite name. She is a citizen of Canaan. But she has apparently heard of the amazing things the God of Israel has done for his people. Yet, we are a little uneasy about this. Why would two Godly men of Israel seek lodging at such a place? It is a “bordello”... a polite old French word meaning a house where women lived who sold themselves. They surely did not go there for entertainment but rather probably because they had been detected.

In the ancient world, prostitutes often served their governments by making known their “clients” to the officials. In fact, the ancient code of Hammurabi said “If felons are banded together in a prostitute’s house and she has invited them to the place, she shall be put to death.” In other words, if its obvious they have come there to hide and not for business she must report that. But... would God bless such a choice by these men? Would God Bless such a woman and protect her and lead her in transition for His own purposes? Of course, He would and He did.

Rahab is about to transition from a loyal Canaanite citizen to a secret agent for God! She knows about the law that will require her death if she is found out but somehow God has made it clear to her that she needs to fear Him... God... far, far more than she does the Canaanite King! So, the authorities come and ask her where the men are. She has hidden them on her roof! Rahab is now afraid. It might have been safer to turn the men over to them but she has heard about the God of Israel. But she is working thru the same truth that we studied last week. She may have never read any of the Hebrew Scriptures but she obviously has some fear of God. A prostitute or not. Something is going on inside of her and she senses she must protect these men. She is having an Isaiah 12:2 moment:

“I will trust and not be afraid.”

OK.... the plot thickens as she gets deeper in this strange moment: we read:
Joshua 2:4-6 (NIV) 4 But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. She said, "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. 5 At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly. You may catch up with them." 6 (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax she had laid out on the roof.)

We see that she is not only a prostitute and probably what moderns would call a “Madam” but she is a very capable liar! We may despise her without knowing her but God does not. God has ordained a moment of transition for her and she is listening! It was Luther who supposedly said, “One has to know when to tell a good lie!” Obviously, God is about to bless her deception. Lying prostitute or not, she is serving Him and has transitioned into a servant of Israel. Before they leave, she elicits a reasonable promise from them. We read:

Joshua 2:12-13 (NIV) 12 Now then, please swear to me by the LORD that you will show kindness to my family, because I have shown kindness to you. Give me a sure sign that you will spare the lives of my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and that you will save us from death."

It’s a different sermon but prostitutes can love their families and develop a proper fear of God! And God cares about them! Back to the spies...their response? They say:

Joshua 2:14 (NIV) 14 "Our lives for your lives!" the men assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the LORD gives us the land."

And they did treat her kindly. Later, in Joshua Six, we read this:

Joshua 6:23 (NIV) 23 So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

The Israelites honored a covenant made with a lying prostitute who served God. We do not know what became of her but what can we learn from this? Certainly not that lying and prostitution are ok with God. They are not. But we can learn that God can take the most wicked sinner living in depravity and cause their hearts to fear Him and serve Him. This was a most extraordinary woman ...a remarkable woman...whose life transition changed her into God’s servant! So, our first remarkable woman was Rehab the prostitute.

Next, consider a beauty Queen named Esther. The year is 480 B.C. and we are in Persia where the King's name is Xerxes...also called Ahasuerus. He is not a follower of the God of Israel. Once again, he is an ancient man of great lust. One night, he throws a drinking party and, filled with wine, he calls for his wife Vashti to come and join him so he can show off her
beauty to his drunken guests. And Vashti refuses! This is one brave woman. She’s entering into transition because this crazy King Xerxes now banishes her! No one is sure if she was executed but now the King needs a new beauty queen. Vashti’s life transitioned from beauty queen to a woman of dignity. But are not focused on her but rather another beauty queen.

It’s a long story that we must condense. Xerxes sends Vashti away as he raged against her insolence. After searching all about for a suitable new queen, a woman named Esther is found. We read:

Esther 2:17-18 (NIV) 17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

So, Xerxes is delighted with an even more beautiful queen but...he probably does not know or even care that he is a Jewess. Esther is about to transition from quiet Jewish girl of little importance to a servant of God. Why? Because she has a Jewish uncle named Mordecai who has been like a father to her. Mordechai learns that a very wicked man named Haman has talked the king into destroying all the Jews who will not worship him. The king is livid! The Jews in his kingdom are toast unless someone intervenes. That someone would be Queen Esther.

She transitions into a very brave state. She knows that no one can enter the King’s presence unless invited to do so. So, her uncle comes to challenge her politely...to tell her that only she can intervene with the King. He tells her:

Esther 4:14 (NIV) 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

This is going to take an extraordinary amount of courage. Her uncle is asking her to go uninvited into the presence of a king so cruel that he banished his last queen for simply not showing up to a party. For Esther, this is her Isaiah 12:2 moment:

“I will trust and not be afraid.”

But she is being changed as we watch...changed into a brave woman. If ever you must meet a real challenge, by all means do what Esther did! She lines up people to pray. Then we read:
Esther 5:1-3 (NIV) 1 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance.

This is an amazing moment. The palace rule was that no one can come into the presence of the King uninvited. It was considered an amazing act of temerity. Reckless and foolish. But she has done it. She is standing in the doorway to the throne room. We read:

2 When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."

What just happened here? We see the truth found Proverbs Chapter Twenty One:

Proverbs 21:1 (NIV) The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

Esther took a chance on God! And God came thru for her! Eventually, the wicked man who wanted to harm the Jews was himself hanged. Haman was put to death and the remarkable woman Esther succeeded in intervening for her people. She had transitioned from a quiet beauty queen to a woman with remarkable influence over the King.

We’ve considered a prostitute who served God as He made more of her life than she would ever have imagined. We’ve considered a beauty queen as God called her to serve Him and He made more of her life than she would ever have thought of. But finally, a very young woman whom we speak of every Christmas who was younger than either of them and was called to transition far more than either of them. Consider the young Mary. We know the story:

Luke 1:26-33 (NIV) 26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

We all know that Mary asked some questions and then obeyed this calling. She really had to take this truth and apply it to her life:
“I will trust and not be afraid.”

God is about to change her and make her into a woman of courage. What kind of challenges does she have? She has to tell her fiancé that she is pregnant but is still a virgin and hopes he will believe her! She has to tell her parents the same thing! He has to move about in her little community showing her pregnancy and tell her friends it is from God... and that she has not fallen into sin! This is a tall order. But let me suggest something at this point. Those things would be very small compared to the real challenge to young Mary. She is about to transition from an innocent unmarried young girl to the earthly mother of the Christ! What woman among us would like to hear God say something like this:

“Mary, I am calling you to carry the child in whom my Holy Spirit will dwell totally and completely... he will never sin but he will be completely human even as he will be completely Divine... you will have the job of raising him up the way any mother does. He will be a real genuine human who will need to learn to walk and talk and he will get sick and fall down and have challenges like any other child but his human nature will always be obedient to his Divine nature within him. You will have to simply watch as eventually he will begin to live out his status as the unique Son of God. You will have to wait to see how his Divine nature emerges. So... God will take on flesh and you are to raise him up on the human level.”

Picture Mary and Joseph trying to figure this whole thing out. Most mothers watch their sons become teenagers and begin to experience hormonal changes and transition into young men... but Mary has to go way beyond this all the while wondering when the Christ side will really be more and more obvious. In ancient Judaism, the twelve year old birthday was typically when children, especially boys, were considered young men and even morally accountable. Mary has all of the usual sign posts to watch for and in her transition from young and innocent virgin. Now, she has a unique situation that no other woman has ever had. Imagine Mary at a PTA meeting talking with other mothers about her child? They are all talking about their sons and daughters and Mary never mentions “Well, my son is actually the Christ... but I don’t know how this will all work out. I’ve been wondering about it for twelve years.”

Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. Jesus was given some freedom but he did not use it to play or hang out with the other kids. After the feast, his parents started for home but having walked a full day, they realized he was not with them. Then they went back. They are looking for him for three more days never thinking that he had already begun his ministry of listening and teaching. Apparently the last place they looked was in the Temple courts. Why would they? Jesus is still a kid. They think he’s been off playing somewhere! Imagine Mary as we read:

Luke 2:46-51 (NIV) 46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents
saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." 49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them. 51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

How marvelous that God called Mary to this transition and she served Him with her life. She had to “treasure” all she was seeing. A marvelous phrase. Words that mean she put these thoughts away as when you have a special and priceless piece of jewelry that you have hidden away and about which you do not say much. Mary has transitioned into someone she would never have anticipated as a young girl. And Rahab the prostitute was given a new life after she rescued God's servants and she herself was rescued. And Esther’s transition into the bravest woman in ancient Persia shows us what can happen when God calls us to transition and changes our lives and blesses us in ways unimagined. And it always begins with this:

“I will trust and not be afraid!”

Let us pray.