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Sermon Manuscript

Joshua 2:1-21 (NIV)

2:1 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, they 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.

8 Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof 9 and said to them, “I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. 10 We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. 11 When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.

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 13 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.”

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.”

15 So she let them down by a rope through the window, for the house she lived in was part of the city wall. 16 She said to them, “Go to the hills so the pursuers will not find you. Hide yourselves there three days until they return, and then go on your way.”

17 Now the men had said to her, “This oath you made us swear will not be binding on us 18 unless, when we enter the land, you have tied this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down, and unless you have brought your father and mother, your brothers and all your family into your house. 19 If any of them go outside your house into the street, their blood will be on their own heads; we will not be responsible. As for those who are in the house with you, their blood will be on our head if a hand is laid on them. 20 But if you tell what we are doing, we will be released from the oath you made us swear.”

21 “Agreed,” she replied. “Let it be as you say.”

So she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

Joshua 6:17-25, 7:7-26 (NIV)

6:17 (Later, at Jericho, God said,) “The city and all that is in it are to be devoted* to the Lord. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent. 18 But keep away from the devoted* things, so that you will not

bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. 19 All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury.”

20 When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city. 21 They devoted* the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.

22 Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, “Go into the prostitute’s house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her.” 23 So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother, her brothers and sisters and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel.

24 Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the Lord’s house. 25 But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day.

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7:7 But the Israelites were unfaithful in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the Lord’s anger burned against Israel.

2 Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, “Go up and spy out the region.” So the men went up and spied out Ai.

3 When they returned to Joshua, they said, “Not all the army will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary the whole army, for only a few people live there.”

4 So about three thousand went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, 5 who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted in fear and became like water.

6 Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the Lord, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. 7 And Joshua said, “Alas, Sovereign Lord, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! 8 Pardon your servant, Lord. What can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? 9 The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?”

10 The Lord said to Joshua, “Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? 11 Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. 12 That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

¹³ “Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: There are devoted things among you, Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove them.

¹⁴ “In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe the Lord chooses shall come forward clan by clan; the clan the Lord chooses shall come forward family by family; and the family the Lord chooses shall come forward man by man. ¹⁵ Whoever is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the Lord and has done an outrageous thing in Israel!”

¹⁶ Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was chosen. ¹⁷ The clans of Judah came forward, and the Zerahites were chosen. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was chosen. ¹⁸ Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Karmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was chosen.

¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the Lord, the God of Israel, and honor him. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

²⁰ Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw in the

plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³ They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the Lord.

²⁴ Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold bar, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The Lord will bring trouble on you today.”

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶ Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the Lord turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

**The Hebrew term translated ‘devoted’ refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them.
^Achor means “trouble”*

Israel’s Conquest, Pt 3: Sin Still Matters

As we’re coming nearer to the end of Lent, I wanted to consider sin from an angle we haven’t yet this season. This morning, I want to invite each of us to consider whether there is any sinful habit that in our past we turned our back on - where we saw the bad fruit it bore in our life, in our hearts, or in how we interact with others - and so, with God’s help at some point we left it behind, but *have since returned to it*? Old habits die hard, and if we humans are experts at anything it’s probably rationalization. So is there some sinful habit or posture that we once walked away from but have since returned to? Or perhaps there is something we’ve *never* given up - and still just can’t - because it (even though we have a sense God has something better for us, that sin gives us the illusion of control instead of having to trust in God or wait upon Him to give us what we need). So perhaps there is some sinful habit or posture we don’t feel like we *can* give up or perhaps we’re not willing to do what it would probably take to partner with God or receive help from others to move beyond it and put that sin in the rearviewmirror from our daily lives.

Well, I’ll leave it to the Holy Spirit if He wants to bring anything particular to mind for you. But if He has, *or does*, I hope you will hear this good news this morning: that the grace of God in Christ is never reason for us to become complacent about sin, but His grace does mean He is always waiting to help us begin anew. {repeat}

This morning I’m gonna give a third and final go at employing Chris Green’s framework to grapple with the violence of God in Israel’s conquest of Canaan (in the box to the side) though I won’t go through it again.¹ Without

Summary of Chris Green’s presentation on Responses to the Violence of God in the Old Testament

- **OPTION A: Tear It Out of the Bible** [heretical option: Marcionism]
 - Ignore difficult Old Testament passages
 - Decide there is a mean Old Testament God and a separate, loving New Testament God. [Penal Substitutionary Atonement arguably does this]
- **OPTION B: God is God and we are not.**
 - God does what God does, who are we to question?
 - Weaker Version: God was good in it, but it is a mystery how.
- **OPTION C: God revealed himself gradually in the Bible**
 - Jesus is the fullness of God’s self-revelation
 - In the Old Testament, God is showing *some* of Himself, but choosing to work with people where they are by letting them think what they do at that time and then later teaching better thinking (ultimately in Christ)
- **OPTION D: More than meets the eye**
 - The historicity or depiction of God in troubling Old Testament stories is not as important about what God is doing now, spiritually, in our relationship with Christ.
- **Option E (the Best): Leave behind option A and integrate options B, C & D, with the weight on how it relates to JESUS.**

¹ Or if I do: On our first Wednesday night Lenten teaching, I introduced a framework for grappling with the violence of God in the Old Testament derived from the work of theologian Chris Green. And to summarize Green’s framework, He warns against just throwing out or avoiding scriptures that seem to depict God as violent (option A) and instead he recommends approaching these passages with the combination of three principles:

making light of the violence, I want to consider what these stories have to say about Jesus and our discipleship to Him today?

In today's readings from Joshua, there is certainly a stark contrast between Rahab & Achan. Essentially, the story of Rahab provides us with an example of an outsider to Israel - a Canaanite - becoming an insider, and in the story of Achan an insider - an Israelite - becomes an outsider, as He doesn't end up any better off than the walls of Jericho.

And I want to start with him. The story of Achan in Joshua 7 is where some violence at the behest of God shows up today. In a command to Israel that strongly echoes God's command to Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden, God is clear before the battle of Jericho that Israel was not to take any of the devoted things or it would end in destruction & trouble for them (6:18), but Achan does it anyway; and *incurs* that trouble & destruction. But if we spiritualize Achan's demise, his story is a reminder to us that sin still matters, even if we're in relationship with God through Christ and even if we rationalize that it's no big deal: all sin still has consequences, in the very least: in this life. #

While many catch the theme from Israel's conquest that God is using Israel as an instrument of judgment toward the sin of the Canaanites, or at least as a way to keep the sin of the Canaanites from leading the Israelites into sin, Achan is a reminder that sinfulness runs through every human heart. Just because Achan is an Israelite, he is by no means immune from temptation, or sin's consequences. In the context of what God's doing with Israel in the conquest, it is necessary for God to remove His blessing from Israel in their first campaign against the people of Ai and then to remove Achan from among the people to show that sin is communal and contagious. And this also remains true today: there is no such thing as personal sin - whatever any of us does in the supposed privacy of our own home or lives - it will absolutely have an effect on how we engage one another here, as well as others in the world around us.²

And so, for us as followers of Jesus, the demise of Achan - as an insider among God's people - is meant to teach us that the sin in our lives doesn't stop mattering just because we have forgiveness in Christ. While God's grace to us in Christ *does* mean that God still accepts and loves us just the same, the effects of sin-we-persist-in can still be a tremendous detriment to the spiritual freedom & joy we experience and the fulfillment of God's purposes in our lives! And so, the good news is that while the grace of Jesus is never reason for us to become complacent about sin, it does mean that He is always waiting to help us begin anew. #

Jesus teaches us that sin begins within the heart; in our desires.³ And back on the First Sunday in Lent, I spoke some about unforgiveness & resentment - which is really the desire to punish those who have wronged us or to play God in their lives. And it's easy to carry around resentment, not recognizing that it's like poison to our own souls: it harms us exponentially more than it harms those we hold it against.

- So I invite us to consider this morning: is there anyone you've gotten in the habit of resenting for one thing or another? It's usually those who are closest to us where this temptation is the most powerful. Would you be willing to surrender that resentment to God and ask Him to take it from your heart? And if it *still* persists, to bring it into the light with someone else, which is sorta second-level surrender?

But in addition to unforgiveness, sin can also often come from coveting, like it did for Achan.

- Now, maybe for us it's a habit of coveting wealth or material things, like him. Jesus said it's impossible to be operating in His kingdom while we are also worshiping money.⁴ Growing up a rich kid, I witnessed first hand how tempting it is for folks to use an excess of money to insulate themselves from many of the experiences God wants to use to form our character.

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- Principle B: God is God and we are not, so we can trust that He is good and just even if it remains a mystery how
 - Principle C: In Biblical history, God revealed himself gradually to humankind, and not in full until the life and teaching of Jesus.
 - And Principle D: there may be something more going on in the passage that meets the eye, including that it may be intended to test us. So, if we are disturbed at the violence of God that we see in some scripture, this is actually good, because it indicates we're the love of Christ is having an effect on us.

But because none of these three options are fully adequate on their own, what Green ultimately suggests integrating these three options, but with an emphasis on considering how it relates to Jesus and our life with Him.

² Firth: "In spite of claims that certain activities 'do not hurt anyone else' and should therefore be accepted, this passage is clear that sin does not work that way."

³ Mt 15:19 - "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander."

⁴ Mt 24:19 - "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

- But we also know coveting can manifest in other ways, by comparing ourselves to others, or by fixating our desire on our preferred mode of addiction that helps us numb discomfort and feel excitement.

An addiction to lust seems to be what the two spies are consumed with in our first reading from Joshua 2. Narratively, we get a hint that things are about to hit the fan, when verse 2 says Joshua is sending them out from Shittim.⁵ Though it's not because this place name sounds like a cuss word in our language, but because Shittim was where the Israelite men had been sexually immoral with the Moabite women back in the book of Numbers.⁶ And, sure enough, when these two spies head from Shittim down to Jericho, they don't seem to be too focused on spying.⁷ As scholar David Firth observes, "They don't appear to do *any* spying. They don't inspect the enemy's defenses. They don't map out the city. They don't sabotage Jericho's weapons or supplies. Instead, they (go) straight to the house of a prostitute!" As another scholar Matthew Lynch observes, "Most English translations downplay the innuendos here,"⁸ but the Hebrew contains euphemisms that indicate what these guys were up to. So, here they're supposed to be spying out the land, but instead their addiction to lust consumes them and precludes them from living into God's purposes. And it makes them really bad at what they were supposed to be doing, as the king of Jericho's men find them there.

- I wonder if any of us can relate to how habits of our thought life *preoccupy us*, whether unforgiveness or coveting - whatever idol our desires tend to fixate on (money, sex, substance, doom scrolling, or some other app on our phone) - do you have a sense for how that preoccupation inhibits you from really being able to be present and love people you so badly *want* to be Christ to? Well, the good news is that the grace of Jesus is never meant to make us complacent about sin, but it does mean He is always waiting to help us begin anew.

And this notion of *beginning anew* leads us to Rahab. In Rahab, we have sort of an arch-sinner. She's a Canaanite, a prostitute, and in Hebrew her name sounds extremely similar to the name of a mythical sea monster named *Rakhab* who was viewed as a threat to "all that is good and right", such that in verse 10 of our Psalm today they just go ahead and translate this sea monster's name as "Rahab".⁹ Being named Rahab to an Israelite would be almost like being named Lucifer or something. So, it's like the writer of Joshua wants us to view Rahab as having been really bad, an arch-sinner, so that whatever we have done or gotten caught back up in, it doesn't feel worse than her. Because even though she is *the arch-outsider from God's people*, when she turns to Him, the faith she demonstrates in Him was all that was needed. And when I say 'faith', it's not even so much the words she says in verses 8-14, cuz talk is cheap. It's that she actually trusted in God: she heard what He had done for others and she trusted that His power & plan would be better than anything she was trying to contrive for herself.

- Whatever personal struggle the Lord has brought to each of our minds today, I wonder if we know of anyone who has found victory through God in that area? If so, would we be willing to consult with them about it? It's only when we're willing to go to any lengths necessary for that freedom, do we really want to be free.

Rahab trusted God enough to take a risk in order to come into *His light*. And God shows He can work with that.

In our second reading - in the end of chapter 6 - we see God preserve her household in Jericho and in verse 25 the writer of this part of Joshua says she continued to live "among the Israelites to this day." So, henceforth,

⁵ Lynch: "In any case, things look even grimmer when considered geographically. The spies set out from Shittim (pardon my French). Shittim was the place where Israel "played the harlot" and worshiped other gods (Num 25; 25:1 ASV). Shittim is where Israel pursued the women of Moab and "yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor," so much so that "the LORD's anger burned against them" (Num 25:3). Not the fondest of Israel's memories (cf. Ps 106:28; Hos 9:10). If there was a lesson from that event, it was this: Stay away from foreign women. They'll lead you into idolatry (spiritual prostitution) and provoke Yahweh's anger.

⁶ Numbers 25:3 - "While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them."

⁷ Lynch: "So, Joshua sends the spies from Shittim, spiritual-fornication-land. They don't seem particularly good at spying, since the king of Jericho quickly learns about them (Josh 2:2). They don't appear to do any spying. They don't inspect the enemy's defenses. They don't map out the city. They don't sabotage Jericho's weapons or supplies. Instead, they went straight to the house of a prostitute!

⁸ Lynch: "They 'go into' (a term that can connote sex) the house of Rahab (whose name means 'open') and 'lie down there.' The king's messengers ask Rahab to 'bring out the men who entered you.' Sorry guys. Not a good look."

⁹ From Ps 89:10 from New Coverdale Psalter (BCP 2019): "you have subdued Rahab of the deep..."

Rahab lived in the Promised Land among God's people, which *for us* is a metaphor of the kingdom life God invites all of us to enter more fully into. Her willingness to turn her back on sin, which she may have come by really honestly by the way - and to that point in her life she may even have had little other choice - but as Rahab becomes willing to turn her back on sin, she enjoys the significance of participating in God's eternal plan. And for her this will include being part of the genealogy of Jesus, as Matthew's gospel later reveals.¹⁰ The good news is that the grace of Jesus is never meant to make us complacent about sin, but - as the Lord shows with Rahab - His grace does mean He is always waiting to help us begin anew. Friends, none of us are ever going to be without sin, not even close, but that doesn't mean that there isn't *more* spiritual freedom and more of God's kingdom life to be received. And the *blessing we could be to others* from allowing Jesus to make our character more like His - there *is* more of eternal living that we're missing out on if we're willfully compromising with what we know is sin and is bearing bad fruit in our lives.

And yet, we must also understand that when it comes to habitual sin, we can't just stop doing it. Don't lie to yourself. Our sin will always be more powerful than any willpower we conjure up, so even if we *are* able to white knuckle it through self-will, it will just pop up in some other new pathology like whack-a-mole. And this is why our only way out is to humble ourselves before the Lord and ask him to teach us to root out the sin not at the point of action - when we're about to do it - but to clean us from the inside out: first confessing our sins to Him and to another trusted believer, trusting that we are forgiven and not condemned, but then asking God teach and help-us-practice surrendering those covetous or resentful thoughts as they come into our mind. And when they persist: to view those moments as signs we are spiritually disconnected, and we need fellowship with God and others who will love us like He does.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, whatever you have brought to mind for each of us today, we give you thanks, because we know you are always at work in our lives and we thank you for inviting us to face up to this with you. And so, we do that now. Show us a next step for getting honest and receiving your help, and give us the willingness to do it.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

¹⁰ Matthew 1:5 - "Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,"