

BEHIND THE SCENES

Unsung Heroines of the Old Testament

Have you ever heard the saying behind any good man there is a great woman? In the Bible many of the grand movers and shakers seem to be men, but if you read deeper into the famous stories you will find that although it may appear that men have the biggest influence you will find that if it were not for the women in their lives many of Gods plans would never have come to fruition. With this in our minds let us look a little bit closer at three particular heroines from the Old Testament.



Sarah

The beautiful wife of Abraham, and the mother of a nation. "It was by faith that even Sarah was able to have a child, though she was barren and was too old. She believed that God would keep his promise" Hebrews 11:11



Miriam

The older sister of Moses, who watched over him in the water and who would be a prophet of God as she walked by the side of her brothers as they led the people of God to the Promised Land.



Rahab

A prostitute in the city of Jericho, who put her self in great danger to save the Israelite spies and in doing so, saved herself and her family. Rahab the mother of Boaz and an ancestor of Jesus.

SARAI – SARAH’S STORY

Pre read Genesis Chapter 11: 27-32 – Chapter 23

Background

Sarai has left everything she knows to follow her husband and his family into the desert. The consequences of which, lay the foundations of the people of God.

Sarah’s story is told in Genesis 11-25 and she is also mentioned in Isaiah 51:2, Romans 4:19, 9:9, Hebrews 11:11 and Peter 3:6.

What can we learn from this extraordinary woman whose story of patience, forgiveness love and faithfulness resonates throughout the bible to nearly the end of the New Testament?

As we read through her story I think you would agree, her life would not look out of place in a drama programme or film. A sad tale of young woman who, though beautiful cannot have the very thing she wanted, a child of her own; a woman who leaves everything she has to follow her husband to who knows where. A wife given, not once, but twice to rulers of foreign lands to save the skin of her husband. A woman, who though promised by God that she will have her hearts desire of a child , takes matters into her own hands. Believing she is too old, Sarah tells her husband to lay with their slave so that a child may be born; only to be ridiculed and left feeling worthless when a son Ishmael is born to the servant Hagar, making her jealous, vindictive and ultimately cruel.

But as we read her story, we see that God keeps his promises making a covenant with Abram, saying he will make him the father of a multitude of nations. God changes Abram’s name to Abraham meaning father of many nations (Genesis 17:4-5) and Sarai’s name is changed to Sarah (17:15), both meaning princess. Amazingly even though she is far past child bearing age, Sarah does have a son who is named Isaac, meaning he laughs, just as Sarah laughed to herself with incredibility, when she heard the news that she would soon be with child.

Proverbs 12:13 says: **“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life”**

1. What do you think of the above scripture? Is it true? Discuss with your group if you have had any experiences in your life when you have hoped and prayed for something and felt that God was not listening or did not answer your prayer as you wished.
2. Looking back have you been grateful that your prayers were not answered as you wished or in the time span you thought was right or has it left you with a feeling of bitterness?
3. See how Sarah takes matters into her own hands by telling Abraham to lay with Hagar only to end up distressed at the outcome. Have you done something or forced an issue only to regret doing it?

THEMES AND APPLICATION

Read through Genesis 18: 10-15.

1. From what you have read, can you point out the strengths and weaknesses of Sarah? Can you see anything of these in yourself?
2. What do you think of Sarah and her treatment of Hagar who was only doing as she was told?
3. What does God seem to know about Sarah?
4. What does Sarah learn about God?
5. Is God's knowledge of your private thoughts and fears a comfort or a distress to you, can you explain why?
6. This story tells us how hard relationships can be especially when those we love or have lots of contact with let us down, sometimes it is almost impossible to forgive. But the Bible is radically littered with instructions to forgive others. Discuss together how we, as followers of Jesus, can help each other to forgive those who have hurt us?

Action

Light a candle.

Sarah is the Matriarch of God's people. We see how much she suffered and hurt others, yet God was beside her through out her whole life. Many people put God in a box of just being our Father, but God is all things to us- our father and mother. Some of us may have or had lovely mothers, some not, and others may have been too young to remember anything of their mothers.

Listen to the song: **"This is to Mother you"** and let God speak to you of his love for you and his interest to your needs.

Pray together as you leave your group that you may go in Peace, the peace which passes understanding. Pray to God who is your loving parent to guide you to make the right decisions and to trust in him. Ask that in his loving kindness he will continue to look upon you with grace and for the Spirit to visit you with healing and peace with whatever your needs are.

MIRIAM'S STORY

is told in Exodus 2: 3-8 and Numbers 12: 20:1

Introduction

Most people know the story of how Miriam watched over her baby brother Moses in a basket on the River Nile and saved him from being killed under Pharaoh's instructions. She is one of five women at the beginning of this great story relating to the Exodus, who work against Pharaoh in his plan to kill the baby Israelite males.

But for her and the others this immense movement of God's people may never have taken place. Miriam follows on from Puah and Shiphrah, two Hebrew midwives who go against Pharaoh when he instructs them to kill the babies born to the women of Israel (Exodus 1: 15-20) and her mother who hides her son in a basket (Exodus 2:1-3). If it were not for her quick thinking, daring and the cheek of offering Pharaoh's daughter, who took pity on the child, its own mother to look after him, we are left to imagine what may have happened.

We next hear of Miriam in Exodus 15:20 when we are told that she is a prophet who took up a tambourine and led all the women in a song of triumph after safely coming through the parted Red Sea.

Then in Numbers 12 we learn how she and her brother Aaron helped their brother Moses lead the Children of Israel through the wilderness. Up until this point Miriam sounds like the greatest sister in the world. But Miriam like all of us had her faults and when she criticised her brother for his choice of wife God was quick to show his displeasure. Maybe her protective superiority as the older sister who had saved her brother and walked beside him through the desert now rose to insecurity as he chose another to be the most important woman in his life. Or maybe she had become jealous of Moses and felt she was as much in charge as her younger brother and instead of really saying what was on her mind used the excuse of his new wife to criticise him.

Giving up our status to another is hard and who hasn't been critical of someone else and said either aloud or inwardly "Who do they think they are?" Often we do not understand the details of someone's actions or indeed have all the facts. As a result we may say things that not only hurt others but damage their loyalty and well being and in the end it may be us who becomes the outsider.

THEMES AND APPLICATION

Looking at the characters

1. What do you think are the most interesting moments in this story? Are there any parts that were new to you?
2. What do you think of God's interaction with the main characters especially Miriam contracting Leprosy, while Aaron did not, why do you think this is?
3. Miriam's story is part of an epic tale relating to the Exodus of God's people from slavery to freedom, we are told of idol worship complaining and disobedience. Are the characteristics and actions of the people in the story still present in the world? How is the story relevant to modern life, especially your own?

Leadership

Moses, Aaron and Miriam were three leaders during the Exodus, Moses the man chosen by God, his brother Aaron the Priest and his sister Miriam the Prophet.

Think about the qualities you think a good leader should have.

Discuss some of the following questions together.

1. What type of leadership is promoted by the media? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
2. Have you witnessed someone acting as a leader in a difficult situation? Describe what happened, and why you admire this person.
3. What do you think are the roles and duties of leaders?
4. What models of leadership are found in the Scriptures? Can you think of some examples that you admire, and explain why you have chosen them?
5. What forms of leadership and ministry have you identified in St John's?
6. You have probably been able to identify quite a number of ministries within the church, but where do you fit in?

Action

- Do you as a group have a vision of what you would like to do or is there any ministry that you would like to be involved with but maybe are a bit shy about or feel that you are not the right type of person?
- As the church we are the body of God, the hands that help, the ears that listen and feet that walk out into the world to help with its needs. Jesus did not stay within the confines of where he felt comfortable, he went out and mixed with the outcasts the unclean the sinners and the foreigners.
- Pray together before leaving your group and ask God to send the Holy Spirit to guide you, strengthen you and give you boldness to step outside your comfort zone in order to help the people that Jesus would have welcomed and healed.

RAHAB'S STORY

is told in Joshua Chapters 2 & 6: 15-25

Introduction

The story of Rahab is one of change, hope, faith and redemption. Through her story we learn that no matter who you are or what your situation, you can still come into the Lord's presence, do what is right and be saved.

Moses has died and God has told Joshua, the new leader, to take Canaan, the Promised Land from his enemies. When we meet Rahab the Israelites are camped on the east side of the Jordan across from the city of Jericho. Joshua has sent two spies out from the camp with orders to search out Canaan, especially Jericho. The spies enter the city and spend the night at Rahab's place and we are told that she is a harlot, or a prostitute. Yet God used this woman who many would look down on. Rahab did two things for the spies, first she hid them from the King of Jericho so saving their lives; and then secondly she told them what to report back to Joshua. She wants one thing in return, that she and her family be saved.

In the whole of Jericho, the only person we know by name is the woman Rahab, we don't know the names of the King, the spies or her family. Besides knowing her name, we can assume she cares for her family, she is brave and she has insight. Like the rest of Jericho we know she was fearful of God, but we do not know why only she and her family merited being saved in the approaching onslaught by the nation of Israel. Except for one fact, Rahab trusted an agreement with the spies and as such hung a scarlet cord out her window. Just as years earlier the Israelite people trusted that they would be saved by painting blood across their door frames during the time of the Passover; just as we are saved today by the blood of Jesus when he died on the cross for our sins.

THEMES AND APPLICATION

Rahab told the spies of how she knew that the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea..., and what the Israelites did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites. The defeat of the two kings was a fairly recent happening across the other side of Jordan, but the parting of the Red Sea was some 40 years previously.

1. How old was Rahab? When did she learn this? Did it come from her parents when she was a child? Today fewer and fewer children are being told God's story in any significant way.
 2. How important do you think it to inform each generation of God's love and plans for us and how many in need, need to learn this very information?
- Listen to the track "**Nobodies Daughter.**"
3. Have we viewed Rahab through a romantic or clinically clean lens without realising the true details of her life, how must it be to be at the mercy of others, to have to sell your body to feed an addiction or to survive?

4. What about the girl in the poem? Think about the words: “Somebody’s daughter baptised in Holy Water”, what does this say to you about the hopes for her and where she is now?
5. People end up in distressing situations for many reasons and few probably would choose their way of life, but cannot see a way out of their situation.
6. Can you tell the group of anybody you have helped who has been without hope for a brighter future?
7. What do we think about those people in the margins of society?
8. Discuss as a group how you would feel if such a person came into St. John’s; ask could we see past their outer appearance and actions to see them how God sees them, as his beloved child.

Action

Light a candle and take a piece of scarlet wool and hold it while you meditate on the following:

- Do you think you are good? It is not being ‘good’ that saves us, we all have fallen short of the perfection God intended for us. There were probably better people than Rahab in the city of Jericho. Yet they were not saved.
- Do you think what you have accomplished will save you? James says: All that does not arise from faith is sin. Your works cannot save you. Read Hebrews 11:31, Rahab was one of many people mentioned in a long list of people in Hebrews 11 who had great faith. Read James 2:25, although Rahab was a prostitute she was considered righteous. There were probably people in the city of Jericho that accomplished significant and good things. Yet they were not saved.
- What will save you?

A scarlet cord was used as the signal, but it was the faith of Rahab that saved her. For us it is the blood of Jesus, our faith in what Jesus did on the cross for all of humanity not just the rich the powerful, not just those in good jobs or those we would consider successful in their lives.

Jesus blood was shed for the needy the outcast the sick, the lonely, the sinner, you and me.

Before you leave your group, keep hold of your red wool and pray together asking God to send his Holy Spirit to give you the grace, the love and the mercy that Jesus gave to those in need.

In the coming week meditate with your piece of wool in your hand and begin to think about practical ways you can take the risk of letting others know of your faith in God and in his Son Jesus, who through his sacrificial love saved us.