



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

October 13, 2019

Prioritize Him "Our Lives for Your Lives"

Raise the Sails Sermon Series - Christopher Pan

Good morning. I'm Chris Pan. I'm on staff at the church as Executive Director.

This past summer, my family was traveling in Washington DC, so we went to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, because that's the kind of fun dad that I am. The kids wanted to go to the Air and Space Museum, and I'm like "Nope, we're going to the Holocaust Museum." (Don't worry, we went to the Air and Space Museum on another day.) If you've never been, the Holocaust Museum is powerful and horrifying and an incredibly moving experience.

Towards the end of the permanent exhibition, after the sections on the rise of the Nazis, the war, the concentration camps, the stories of survivors – there is a whole section dedicated to the thousands of people who risked their lives to help their Jewish neighbors. I was so moved by that section. Pastor Dan preached a few weeks back about how Jesus calls us to be a good neighbor, and how during tragedies, Mister Rogers would always look for the people helping. This was a whole section on people helping during the worst of tragedies.

I'm sure you all know about Oskar Schindler, because of the movie about him. But he's just one person who helped. There are walls and walls listing the names of people from different countries who risked their lives to rescue their Jewish neighbors, with short descriptions for some of them.

Here's the short description on the plaque of Arie Van Mansum, from the Netherlands.

"A traveling salesman and member of the underground, in 1941 Arie van Mansum began to find hiding places for Jews and to forge ration cards – eventually as many as 250 a week - to feed them. He visited hidden Jews regularly. Arrested in October 1943, van Mansum was put in solitary confinement for six months before being sent to the Amersfoort concentration camp. "There was nothing special about what I did," he said after the war. "I did what everyone should have done."

We are in week two of our Raise the Sails Sermon Series. We're going through the first six chapters of the Old Testament

book of Joshua. Today, we'll be looking at the second chapter of Joshua, on page 23 in your Raise the Sail Navigational Guide. Our sermon title today is "Prioritize Him: "Our Lives for Your Lives."

As we go through our sermon this morning, ask yourself two questions: What is God saying to me? What does He want me to do about it?

Will you join me in prayer? God, open our eyes. May we prioritize You, and may we love and live like You. In Jesus' name, all God's children say, Amen.

"Our lives for your lives" is a line from Joshua 2:14 in our passage today. We'll get there soon.

But just to provide some context, the book of Joshua describes how the nation of Israel finally moves into the Promised Land.

God made a promise to Abraham, way back in Genesis 12 about the Promised Land. And that promise went through Abraham, to Isaac, Jacob, to Joseph, it went through 400 years of slavery in Egypt,

To Moses leading the people out of slavery and across the Red Sea, then for 40 years wandering in the desert. And now, finally, under Joshua's leadership, the people are poised to finally enter the Promised Land. Pastor Dan preached last week about the command to "Be Strong and Courageous" in Joshua 1. Next week in chapter 3, Israel will be crossing the Jordan River. Today, in Joshua 2, we get a great spy story, and an even better story of faith and priorities.

In Joshua 2, Joshua sends two spies ahead of the Israelites, across the Jordan River, into the Promised Land, and into the first city there named Jericho. There, the two spies meet and are helped by a woman of amazing faith named Rahab.

Joshua 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.

This past summer, our sermon series was on amazing women in the Bible, and Rahab is another amazing hero of the faith, embodying grit and grace. Rahab is a resident in Jericho. She is not an Israelite. She's a Canannite - a pagan in the foreign land. And she is a hero of our faith. She is also a direct ancestor to Jesus Christ - she is his great-great-great-great... grandmother.

In verse 1, the spies enter Jericho, and stay at Rahab's house. And here's where I'm not convinced that these two spies are the greatest spies. Because in the very next verse, verse 2:

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."

These spies had one job! Sneak in, sneak out. They are so bad at sneaking, that not only does someone see them, they know exactly what they are up to, know exactly where they are from, where they are, and they get reported all the way up to the king in the city! These guys! You had one job! And so they put Rahab in immediate danger.

And now Rahab has a choice. Give up the spies, and protect herself. Be loyal to her city and her king and her country. Or... choose the side of a God that she has never seen, but has only heard second-hand or third-hand stories about. Protect herself... or prioritize God.

Rahab chooses God. She has heard about the God of the Israelites, the miraculous things He has done, and she chooses to prioritize that God over her own pagan gods, over her country allegiance, over even her own safety.

Rahab hides the spies on her roof, and then lies to the king's men searching for them. In Verses 4 to 7, Rahab tells the king's men: "Yeah, those guys came here. But I don't know where they're from, and I don't know where they went. If you leave now, maybe you can catch 'em." So off the king's men go rushing off, and the spies are safe.

"In July 1941, the Nazis, together with Ukrainian collaborators, carried out terrible pogroms against Jews in the Polish town of Buczacz. Manko Szwierszczak, a third generation undertaker and a devout Catholic, gave some of the survivors refuge inside specially dug excavations in the local cemetery. At great risk, he brought food regularly to those he hid. The Nazis, suspicious of his activities, beat him up twice, but Szwierszczak never betrayed the people he had hidden."

Joshua 2:8 continues, with Rahab, speaking to the two spies she has hidden:

8 Before the spies lay down for the night, Rahab 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 the God in heaven above and on the earth below."

In both the New Testament books of Hebrews and James, Rahab is praised for her FAITH. In Hebrews 11, Rahab is listed in the Hall of Fame of Faith, with the likes of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and Samuel. In the book of James, the author makes the point that "Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." To illustrate this point, he cites only two people. The first is Abraham. The second is Rahab.

Rahab has heard of the mighty works of God, drying up the Red Sea for Israel many years earlier. She's heard of the military victories. Rahab knows that God is a righteous Judge.

Rahab chooses a side, and shows her faith, saying: "I know that the Lord has given you this land... for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below."

Can we have the same faith as Rahab? Do we really know, that the Lord our God is God in heaven above and on the earth below? If we had that faith, would it change how we lived? How we made decisions about ourselves and other people?

"Gertruda Babilinska was born in Danzig, Poland to a

religious family that based itself on the Golden Rule. She was working for the Stolorowitzkys, a rich Jewish family, when the war began. The father was deported to Auschwitz, and the daughter died. Later, the mother became ill and died as well. Only the young son, Michael, remained. Babilinska took him home and raised him as her own child. Later, she brought him to Palestine aboard the ship Exodus 1947, a refugee ship, so that he could be raised as a Jew [in the Promised Land.] She took a job as a maid there to be able to pay for his schooling."

Rahab is a hero of our faith, not because she knows that God is a righteous Judge. All of Jericho knows that God is a righteous Judge, which is why they're trembling in fear. Rahab knows something more than God is a Judge. Rahab knows that God is also a Savior.

In verse 12, Rahab, who has risked everything, including her very life, to protect the spies, asks the spies to protect and save her and her family:

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."

"Our lives for your lives." When I read this passage, that's the phrase that sticks with me. These two spies may be terrible at sneaking, but they are great at theology. They make an oath to Rahab, that she and her family will be saved. They say: We promise that we will answer with our own lives, if anything happens to you. We will be as concerned for your safety, as we are for our own. Our lives for your lives. Rahab has risked her life for them. And now they say, in return, we'll risk our lives to protect you. Our lives for your lives.

I think I'm so moved by Rahab's actions, moved by the stories of the people who rescued their Jewish neighbors, moved by the spies oath, "Our lives for your lives," because we look around, and in our world today, we don't see a lot of people living, "Our lives for your lives." We see a whole lot of, "My life for my life."

"My life for my life," we get. The vast majority of Europeans were bystanders, who did little to deter the Nazis or aid Jews and other victims. We don't have to look too far to see people behaving only for themselves. You don't have to look past this podium. You know, every Tuesday our whole church staff gets together for lunch downstairs in the kitchen. And a few weeks back, I went down with my lunch.

And I generally pack a lunch and bring a piece of fruit for a snack in the afternoon. That day, I had packed a white peach for later. I love white peaches and nectarines. They're only around for a few weeks in the summer. They're my favorite. That day for lunch, I sat next to Christian Schroppel, our Middle School Coordinator, who didn't have a lunch. He forgot his. So I said, "Do you want my peach?" He said, "Sure," and I *immediately regretted* offering him my peach.

But I've been thinking about generosity for months now as we prepare for this Raise the Sails journey that we're on, and you know what, thinking about generosity actually makes you do crazy things like offer someone your peach, even though it's your favorite fruit.

During this Raise the Sails series, we hope you also meet and get in the presence of our generous God. And then see what happens. Let's meet a generous God and then wrestle with our default attitude of "My life for my life." My peach for my belly.

Let's also wrestle with our attitude of "Our lives for our lives." Because I get stuck there, too. I think, look, I'm doing better! I'm not selfish about me, I'm just looking out for the best interests of my family, or for the people I care about, or for my country. Our lives for our lives. When we flew to the mainland this summer, we flew on Southwest. So before our flight, I sat my kids down and prepared them. I said: "Listen, Southwest doesn't have seat assignments.

You just get in this line, and when you get on the plane, it's a free for all. So you gotta keep your elbows up, stay focused, find those window seats, block out those little old ladies traveling by themselves! You got look out for your family, so we can all sit together!"

Our lives for our lives. I think the church sometimes thinks it's our lives for our lives. We want to sing the songs that we like, have the programs we want, protect the stuff that's for us.

Can I tell you, that's not what the capital C Church is about. The capital C Church, and this church, First Prez, is about walking out of those doors, into a world in need, and saying, "Our lives for your lives." Our lives for your lives.

The motto for the Coast Guard Helicopter Rescue Swimmers is: "So others may live." These are the people who jump out of helicopters in full gear into high seas and floods, to rescue drowning people from sinking boats and hurricanes. They are trained EMTs and have to be able to survive being left at sea for over 24 hours.

All their training, all their facilities, all their budget – what's it for? Their training's not for themselves, so they can admire their muscles. Their facilities aren't for themselves, so they can have a fancy clubhouse. It's all "so others may live."

Isn't that also the purpose of the church? Why we're here. These wristbands, this Navigational Guide, this

Commitment Card – it's not for us. It's not so we can get big spiritual muscles and have a fancy clubhouse for ourselves. It's so we can wrestle with the idea of "My life for my life" and "Our lives for our lives." It's all so others may live. It's so we remember to go where the Holy Spirit leads, and walk out those doors into our island in need, into our world in need, and say, "Our lives for your lives."

The pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men and women of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others."

That quote from Bonhoeffer is from his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. If you know about Bonhoeffer, you'll know that he was a German pastor imprisoned and later executed for trying to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Like Rahab, like the spies, Bonhoeffer risked his life, and gave his life, for the lives of others.

"In August 1938, when Switzerland closed its borders to Jewish refugees, Paul Gruninger was police commander of the Saint Gall district. Disobeying government orders, he allowed refugees to cross freely into Switzerland. After the Gestapo informed the Swiss government about his actions, Gruninger was dismissed and put on trial.

Accused of allowing 3,000 refugees to enter the country illegally, he was found guilty in 1941 and fined heavily. Later, Gruninger declared: "It was a question of saving people's lives. How could I consider bureaucratic procedures?"

If you hear these stories and are inspired to live so others may live, great! If you hear these stories and think, how am I ever going to live like that, join the club. I couldn't even give away my peach without regretting it, how am I going to give away my life?

But, I have good news for you, and for me. Let's finish the rest of Joshua 2 to get there.

Rahab helps the spies escape out of the city. They climb out her window, and she tells them where to hide and for how long to escape capture. They hide for three days in the hills. And before they go, the spies make this promise to Rahab – tie a scarlet cord in your window, and make sure your whole family is inside your house when we come back in a few days with the whole army. That scarlet cord will be a sign that everyone inside will be saved. That death will pass by where that red cord is. And that's exactly what happens in Joshua 6. Rahab's whole family is saved.

Does that remind you of anything? When Israel fled Egypt, they put lamb's blood over their door frames, and the angel of death passed over their houses. When Noah was saved,

he brought his whole family into the ark, and they all were saved.

I get it that Rahab and Noah had great faith and were saved. But what about Noah's family, or Rahab's family, what did they do to "deserve" to be saved? Mike Pilavachi writes in the book *Storylines*, did they have to pass a test to be Noah's relative or Rahab's? Did they have to be good?

No. They just had to be family. And so, the most important idea isn't, My life for my life, or Our lives for our lives, or even Our lives for your lives. The most important truth is HIS life for our lives.

Jesus sacrificed His life so that we might have life. His blood, a scarlet mark over us, a sign that His family inside will be saved. He died, was buried for three days in the hills, and then rose again. His life for our lives.

Pilavachi writes: "Jesus Christ died on a wooden cross for our sins, our ark of salvation. Anyone who puts their trust in Him and becomes part of His family, even though they deserve to die, because of Him they will live."

Not because of anything we do. Not because we deserve it. Not because we're good. But only because we are adopted into God's family when we decide to follow Jesus. Because Jesus' blood covers us, like blood over the door frame or a scarlet cord in the window, and just because we're His family, we are saved.

His life for our lives. That's the only reason we can say to a world in need, "Our lives for your lives."

1 John 3:16 says:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

That verse captures everything we've been talking about this morning. His life for our lives. And in turn, our lives for your lives.

You know what the very next verse says in 1 John 3:17?

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

It's is the very next verse. It seems relevant somehow.

Two weeks back, Jason Waldrep, our Associate Worship Director, preached a great sermon about the power of sharing our stories. You've heard a lot of stories this morning. I've got one more, about how Jesus's life for our lives moves us into the world so that others may live. Jason said that we don't tell other people's stories second hand, we share our own. So rather than me tell her story, I'd like to invite Mary Francis Nelson up to tell her own story.

Many of us know Mary as “Miracle Mary” and you’ll find out why. A warning for parents with young children, Mary will be sharing very vulnerably about her life, and some of it is not suitable for small children.

Mary Francis Nelson’s Testimony:

Good morning, I’m Mary Francis Nelson. I’ve been a member of this church for almost seven years, and I would like to share my story. Trigger warning: Be prepared, the first part is pretty rough.

When I was 13 years old, my single mom committed suicide. My siblings and I were ripped apart. When I was 14, I was raped by several men. The friend I confided in betrayed me so my whole school found out. I had no self worth and my hometown didn’t feel like home anymore. When a young man I knew invited me to go away with him to the big city, I did. He turned out to be a predator.

I ended up on the streets of New York City, in Times Square in the 1970s, which was rough back then, not like it is now. I was a prostitute. I was beaten and stabbed and left for dead. I was sent to prison for 40 days on Riker’s Island. I was 14 years old.

When I was 18, my pimp sent me from New York to Hawaii, by myself. I worked Waikiki for the next 34 years. I’ve had over 20 surgeries to change my body and my looks. I had six Rolexes and luxury cars and crazy money.

Even with all of that, I was a living corpse. I didn’t know what love was. I was dying from a broken heart.

In 2012, a little Japanese woman from this church named Sharon, would walk the streets of Waikiki where I worked with a ministry called Red Light Angels. And I would run from her! But she never gave up on me. We would talk, and she prayed for me, and when she invited me to the Christmas service, I reluctantly decided to go. I knew as soon I decided to go to church, that would be it.

I sat all the way in the back that night and cried. I started coming to church on Sundays and would rush home right after. I went to Alpha and Sharon was there for me, pushing and encouraging me.

Exactly a year later, Christmas 2013, I had an incredible experience of healing that allowed me to forgive my mother and finally accept God’s love. I was watching the movie “In Her Shoes” at home, when the tape got stuck on a woman character who committed suicide saying, “Please take care of my babies.” Those were the last words that I heard my mother say. When I heard that, I started crying and felt warmth from my feet all the way to my head. God was there, The Holy Spirit was there, And I knew it. At that moment, I forgave my mother, forgave her for everything that happened, for feeling like she left us, and I surrendered my life to God.

I didn’t want to be Christian, because I didn’t know that I

could be a Christian. But once I got right with God, I knew I would have to lose everything. I gave up everything I had, the cars, the jewelry, the condo, and after 38 years, I got a new job. I got baptized a few months later.

I want to help people. Every Sunday for the last five years, I’ve volunteered with the toddlers downstairs. I’ve been on the Women’s Leadership Team. I’ve gone with this church on missions trips and I’ve spoken all over the island and the world about my story. How God changed my life. And how you should take a chance on God.

Trust me, I still have issues. But I wanted to share my story because I’m moving to the mainland in a few weeks. I’m moving in with my daughter and my son-in-law and my granddaughter.

I could never have gone from the streets to them. But being part of this church is what helped me. I’m at a new place now where God continues to heal me, and I’m finally ready to be a part of their lives. By the way, my daughter’s name is Kristian. I named her that 32 years ago, when I didn’t know what it really meant. But God did. Thank you.

End of Mary Francis Nelson’s Testimony

Praise God for Mary and for this church. When I left the Holocaust Museum that day, I bought a magnet from the gift shop that reads, “What You Do Matters.” What you do matters – in big and small ways.

The Church exists so others may live. Out on the streets of Waikiki, saying to a world in need, "Our lives for your lives." In Cambodia and the Philippines, saying, "Our lives for your lives." In your office, and school and neighborhood and home, saying, "Our lives for your lives." Not because we're good, but because we know a generous God. A God who gave His life for our lives.

Romans 8:32 says:

He who did not withhold His own Son, but gave Him up for all of us, will He not with Him also give us everything else?"

Will you join me in prayer?

Take a few moments, in silence to pray and reflect and wrestle with God: What is God saying to you? What does He want you to do about it?

God, thank you that we are Your beloved, and Your desire is for us. Thank you that You did not spare Your own son, but gave Him up for all of us. Thank You that we are Your children, adopted into Your family. May we follow Your Holy Spirit where He leads us. In the powerful name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, all God's children say, Amen!

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Note: Sunday sermon texts, as well as audio and video recordings of sermons, also are available at fpchawaii.org by clicking the Messages tab.