

## Sermon TUMC, December 15, 2019

Exodus 15:20,21  
Psalm 146:5-10

Michele Rae Rizoli

### The song of Miriam

*I will sing unto the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously the horse and rider are thrown into the sea... (with tambourine)  
The Lord is God and (X) I will praise him  
My father's God and I will exalt him.*

*(I would have liked to lead you in singing this song. Have you heard of movies with alternate endings? This is a sermon with an alternate beginning as I still have no voice for singing ☺)*

So I'll start by asking you: When was the last time that you spontaneously combusted into singing? Have you ever? Can you think of any time that this happened or that you know about it? *(invite input)*

Here at TUMC we know the joy that it is to be surrounded by the power of singing and of rejoicing. We haven't quite *yet* captured the joy of dancing, but it will come.

During Advent, a time of waiting for God's revelation, we are focusing on stories of women in the Bible. We're calling it Bearing Light. This *is* about women's stories, but more importantly, it is about how we read the Bible together.

Today we are going to look at the story of the prophet Miriam, one of many women in the Bible who sing a song of praise to God. You may know her as the sister of her more famous brothers Moses and Aaron. She is the first woman in the Bible to be identified as a prophet and she is mentioned more in Hebrew Scripture than any other female figure.

As we learn more about Miriam today, we are going to listen to the words on the pages of the Bible. But we are going to listen in between the lines, and we are going to draw upon ancient traditions about Miriam. We are going to wonder and speculate, and ask the text some questions and see what we can hear to enrich us.

Maryam, by the way, is the same name as Mary. It is the most common girl name in the world! Miriam's name means bitter sea in Hebrew and it means beloved in Egyptian.

When we revisit Sunday School stories, as you know, or stories that have not often been told from the bible, they can become very dire, so listener and imaginer discretion is advised.



Figure 1 - Mirjam by Anselm Feuerbach, 1862

These two Bible characters, Miriam and Mary have more in common than their names, they are connected through their songs of deliverance and triumph. The deliverance and triumph isn't just out of nowhere, it is because they have been delivered and they have triumphed over the dire political circumstances that they are living in. Miriam is celebrating the end of the enslavement and attempted genocide of her people, and Mary is celebrating the hopes of her poor and oppressed and marginalized people.

Last week we heard about the midwives Shiprah and Puah who resisted the Pharaoh's "final solution"<sup>1</sup> of ending male babies lives just as they were born. When that didn't work, Pharaoh commanded the people to throw every boy that was born into the river Nile.

Here's where Miriam comes in. Let's go back to her childhood, and though she isn't named in Exodus 2, because she is Moses' sister, we can assume that this happened to Miriam.

When Moses was born, his mother hid him for 3 months, and finally, because that was no longer possible. She caulked a basket with bitumen, put the baby in and set it afloat on the Nile. Technically she did what Pharaoh ordered, she put the male child in the basket. But scripture tells us that "His sister stationed herself at a distance, to see what would happen to him."

And then, you know what happens. Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe by the river, finds the baby and Miriam negotiates for her very own mother, the baby's mother, to become the nurse. Brilliant!

It makes a lovely Sunday School story, right? But let's pause here for a moment to contemplate the horror of the situation that Miriam and her mother found themselves in as they placed that baby in the water.

British-Somali poet, Warsan Shire, in her poem: *Home*<sup>2</sup> has some memorable and often quoted lines:

*no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark.  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city  
running as well  
your neighbours running faster than you,  
the boy you went to school with*

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<sup>1</sup> Wllda C. Gafney, Womanist Midrash: Introduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybTM-aaJxS0>

*who kissed you dizzy behind  
the old tin factory is  
holding a gun bigger than his body,  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.  
no one would leave home unless home  
chased you, fire under feet,  
hot blood in your belly.  
it's not something you ever thought about doing,  
and so when you did –  
you carried the anthem under your breath,  
waiting until the airport toilet  
to tear up the passport and swallow,  
each mouthful of paper making it clear that  
you would not be going back.  
you have to understand,  
no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land.” ...*

I strongly commend the rest of poem to you. (I will post a video of the author's reading and the text along with this sermon) It captures the desperation and loss of people who are forced to flee their homes as refugees, much like the Israelites were about to do in Miriam's story.

We cannot forget that these forces of oppression are part of what drives the stories of both Miriam and of Mary. Or as one author put it “the heel of the oppressor is at their throats.” (Rene August). And that is where their songs come from: Miriam from relief and Mary from hope of relief.

Picking up Miriam's story, I will read you another poem, by Chava Romm, speaking as Miriam

*“That morning when we left you in the bulrushes,  
Scrubbed clean and freshly swaddled in your simple basket,  
I knew you were too precious to abandon.  
And when the princess was taken by your innocence,  
And claimed you for her own,  
It was no mere fate that restored you to the full breasts of your rightful mother,*

*but your sister's cunning.*

*You lived a stranger in the house of the oppressor.  
I grew among midwives  
stubborn tribeswomen,  
who spared the newborn sons  
in rank defiance of the pharaoh's orders.*

*You learned to speak for us before kings and officials.  
I coaxed children from the narrows into light  
with singing,  
tempered by our kin laboring long in huts and brickyards.*

*My brother, we have both been chosen.  
What you witness on the mountain  
cannot live without the miracles below.  
I have packed bells and timbrels.  
Let us go"*

We're going to fast forward a bit at this point and skip a few episodes to when Miriam re-appears.

*(speaking faster)* So Moses grows up in privilege, identifies with "his people" who live in slavery, has a rush of righteous anger where he murders a man, leaves Egypt, goes into the wilderness to tend sheep for a few decades, God speaks to him in a burning bush, yada yada, back to Egypt, gruesome and cruel plagues, staffs that change into snakes, Pharaoh finally agrees to "let my people go." Then just as they are leaving Egypt he changes his mind and sends an army after them.

You remember, right?

More miracles, the Reed sea is parted, the people cross on dry land, then the sea closes up again and annihilates, drowns Pharaoh's army, horses and all.

Some traditions say that Miriam led the people through the sea while Moses held up the waters.

OK, time to address the horse in the room: Yes, this is a violent story. That discomfort is for a different sermon, or a different conversation with me. What I'll say is that we are not reading about the way things are supposed to be, but the way they were perceived at the time. And we're going to move past the drowning horses and soldiers and stick with Miriam's story.

Then in Exodus 15, just before the text we just heard earlier, there is an extended "song" of victory. It follows a format that is common in the ancient cultures of the time. It extols God's role in this military victory. This poem is very ancient; it dates to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12 century B.C.E.

“Without the prose version, the sequence and details of the crossing [of the Reed Sea] would be unclear. However, without the poetic one ... the soaring emotion of escape and the realization of God’s role in deliverance would be lost.”<sup>3</sup>

So it is a liturgy of liberation!<sup>4</sup> We need poetry and songs to give us access to deeper truths.

And this is where Miriam is named for the first time in the biblical text, as a prophet who has the “lucky task” of echoing her brother’s words. (*sarcastically*) Isn’t that lovely?

Not, so! say biblical scholars.

It is widely agreed that it was women who composed and performed this song of victory. There is a lot of evidence that in Ancient Mediterranean cultures women performed celebratory ritual songs; there was a whole genre of drumming-dancing and leading in song. It is Miriam who leads the celebration. “So the women of Israel singing at the sea, under the leadership of Miriam, would have been connected as a community of female performers, and as such, accorded a high measure of status.”<sup>5</sup>

This means that in this text, as we now read it (as it was put into writing over the centuries), gradually the women were erased, they are down to two verses in an extended section that would have been written by them. Which is not to say that Moses didn’t play his crucial role, of course he did, only that Miriam had hers as well and it deserves to be lifted up.

Picture it: They’re on the shore, the rush is past, a sigh of relief is breathed, even as the debris from the violence floats to shore. Miriam picks up her drum and strikes it with the flat of her hands, timbrels shake in the hands of the dancing women, “Sing to the Lord! Our God has triumphed gloriously!”

Here are a few lines from the women’s poem that Moses gets to say:

The Lord is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;  
‘In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;  
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

Does that sound a bit familiar to us now during Advent?

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Meyers, *The Woman’s Torah*, p. 80

<sup>4</sup> Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*

<sup>5</sup> Carol Myers, in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Alice Bach

Miriam's is the first of several recorded victory songs by women in scripture, including Mary's song we often love to quote. This includes Deborah (Judges 5:2-31) – also celebrating a very gruesome violent military victory. And Hannah, Samuel's mother. (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Who prayed in the temple asking for a baby and then found out she was going to have one...

These are a few lines from the song that Hannah sings:

My heart exults in the Lord;  
my strength is exalted in my God.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my victory.

...

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

That sounds even more familiar. That's almost even a more direct quote to Mary's song. So you see how this gets passed on. The connection of these women's songs, and of joy arising out of suffering is very very clear.

But, after that song of joy and triumph, it's not all smooth trekking for Miriam.

Later in Numbers 12, Miriam speaks against Moses because of the woman he marries. It's not clear what the problem was. But anybody that is going to visit family knows that stuff comes up.

Then, when the people are fed up with wandering in the desert, and Moses is complaining about the burdens of leadership, Miriam and Aaron, decide to come and talk to him. They challenge his leadership and they ask: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?"

Then comes a troubling bit.

"God" is said to reprimand both Miriam and Aaron. But he only gets a warning, while she is punished with a skin disease. Aaron speaks up for her and Moses cries out to God to heal her but God's answer is to shut her out of camp for seven days of purification before allowing her to return. My question of this text is, was it really God?

Sadly, silencing, punishment, and being sent to the margins is still an extremely familiar pattern in the lives of women, especially in religious settings – and in the name of God! <sup>6</sup> Especially for women who speak out against abuses of power, or demand changes to the system.

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<sup>6</sup> vide Lynn Japinga, in *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who they were and why they matter*

So it's important to know that sometimes the Bible stories tell us how things were, not necessarily how they are supposed to be. Not everything we read in the Bible is meant to be read as having a "moral to the story" or a rule for living. Sometimes it's just a description.

After this incident of Miriam being silenced. She indeed does not speak again in scripture, neither in voice or action. But the people speak for her. When Miriam is excluded from camp because of her skin disease, they refuse to march until she has returned to them (Numbers 12:15). People remained loyal to Miriam in spite of the conflict with God and with Moses.

Nature too honors Miriam at her death. The waters of Meribah dry up and Moses needs to bring water from the rock. Finally, in Micah 6:4, much later, Miriam is recognized as an equal to Moses and Aaron.<sup>7</sup>

You might have noticed that there are a lot of references to water in Miriam's story. Water in the River Nile, crossing of the Reed Sea and then there's this little bit in Numbers 20 that says the following:

"The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam died there, and was buried there. Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and against Aaron."

This connection between Miriam dying and there being no water, is something that has developed into a legend among Jewish interpreters of Scripture. This connection is part of midrash, or a "sanctified imagination," as we heard last week (Wilda Gafney). It's an imaginative interpretation that comes from the verse I just told you about.

This is how the rabbis put it: At the twilight on the sixth day of creation God created a miraculous well which in time past to Abraham and from him to Hagar and then on to Isaac. The well was lost during Egyptian captivity.

Because of Miriam's merits – her power of prophecy, her protection of her baby brother Moses, and her victory song at the Sea of Reeds – this well was restored to the Jewish people and was called by her name, Miriam's Well.

Immediately after Miriam died, the people complained that they lacked water. And so we learn that with her death disappeared the miraculous well that had accompanied the Israelites throughout their desert journey.

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<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Lyn Fraser, *Advent Women*.

As long as Miriam was alive, a well sustained the people; but as soon as she died the well vanished resurfacing periodically in Jewish legend ... Sometimes at Shabbat meals, an extra glass of water is set on the table as a remembrance of Miriam's well.

In our day Miriam's well has become a symbol of Jewish women's creativity, spirituality, collective experience, healing, and wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

The stories of women are indeed a well of healing and wisdom for us.

To the Miriam's among us, I urge you to keep on singing your songs, and keep on tending your people, and keep on leading in your way.

To the Moses' among us, I tell you that you are not alone. Your leadership will be less of a burden if you share it with others, your power will receive some necessary correction if you listen to the voices of the people who are often silenced.

And finally I ask you: How will you open your mouth and bravely let your community know, as Maryam did, that our God is a God who "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly."

God is on the side of the oppressed and the marginalized, whatever their gender identity.

Sing that truth out loud for future generations ....<sup>9</sup> Amen.

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### **Home, by Warsan Shire (British-Somali poet)**

no one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark.

you only run for the border

when you see the whole city

running as well

your neighbours running faster

than you, the boy you went to school with

who kissed you dizzy behind

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<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*

<sup>9</sup> Susan Chorley (Radvent 9)



the old tin factory is  
holding a gun bigger than his body,  
you only leave home  
when home won't let you stay.  
no one would leave home unless home  
chased you, fire under feet,  
hot blood in your belly.  
it's not something you ever thought about  
doing, and so when you did –  
you carried the anthem under your breath,  
waiting until the airport toilet  
to tear up the passport and swallow,  
each mouthful of paper making it clear that  
you would not be going back.  
you have to understand,  
no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land.  
who would choose to spend days  
and nights in the stomach of a truck  
unless the miles travelled  
meant something more than journey.  
no one would choose to crawl under fences,  
be beaten until your shadow leaves you,

raped, then drowned, forced to the bottom of  
the boat because you are darker, be sold,  
starved, shot at the border like a sick animal,  
be pitied, lose your name, lose your family,  
make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten,  
stripped and searched, find prison everywhere  
and if you survive  
and you are greeted on the other side with  
go home blacks, refugees  
dirty immigrants, asylum seekers  
sucking our country dry of milk,  
dark, with their hands out  
smell strange, savage –  
look what they've done to their own countries,  
what will they do to ours?  
the dirty looks in the street  
softer than a limb torn off,  
the indignity of everyday life  
more tender than fourteen men who  
look like your father, between  
your legs, insults easier to swallow  
than rubble, than your child's body  
in pieces – for now, forget about pride  
your survival is more important.

i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
unless home tells you to  
leave what you could not behind,  
even if it was human.  
no one leaves home until home  
is a damp voice in your ear saying  
leave, run now, i don't know what  
i've become.