

070223 – Sermon

One of the wonderful things about summer in Canada is that it is the season of vacations for many of us. The kids are out of school and the flow of our day changes. Often, we use this time of year to do activities that we don't seem to be able to fit into the winter months. Maybe those extra hours of daylight are what make the difference, making us still feel energized at the end of the work day just because the sun is still shining. So, this summer, even though I am not taking any vacation time, I have decided to try something new and move away from the Lectionary for a few weeks to explore a different topic – Women in the Bible. There are so many fascinating female characters that we seem to hear little about and we will take a fresh look at a few of them over the next few weeks. I hope you will find it interesting. It is a little vacation from our usual readings, perhaps, but I think there is a lot that we can learn from the stories of women who are part of our faith tradition and history.

I chose Miriam as my starting point in the series, mostly because she is one of my favourites, and because, even though she appears several times in the Hebrew scriptures, she is overshadowed for the most part by the epic story of her brother Moses. She is there, but in the background, as was most often the case for women in those days. Certainly, the story of Moses convincing Pharaoh to free the Jewish slaves and then guiding those people in the long exodus back to their homeland is an important one. Moses was the one who spoke directly with God, and the one who brought the Ten Commandments down from the mountain... His story is the story of the foundation of our faith.

Now, most every hero in any story – fact or fiction – has someone they rely on for support, someone who helps them put things in perspective, someone who cares about them as a person – Batman had Alfred Pennyworth, loyal and tireless butler, legal guardian, best friend, aide-de-camp, and surrogate father figure... Superman had Jimmy Olsen, colleague, friend, and the one whose courage and bravery were always there to back him up in the face of danger... Sherlock Holmes had Watson... Don Quixote had Sancho Panza... Roy Rogers had Tonto... hmmm, all men! Interesting... But the old adage is that behind every successful man is a woman... for Moses, that woman was his sister, Miriam.

It surprises me, in some ways, that we don't spend more time talking about Miriam. Her story is woven throughout Exodus and Numbers. However, there is no book or even a chapter dedicated to her. Perhaps this speaks of the woman she was – a support in the background, a rebel whose voice was dismissed, a sister who was willing to do courageous things to help her people but happy to give the credit and the glory to her younger brother. Women and children weren't listened to in the times when Miriam lived, and yet she didn't shy away from speaking up and speaking against the powers of the day – her father, Pharaoh, and even God.

Her name comes from two roots in the Hebrew language, *mar*, which means bitterness, and *meri*, meaning rebellion. She was born in a time when the oppression of the Pharaoh against the Jewish slaves was at its peak. She was raised in the heartbreaking reality of the cruelty of Pharaoh but refused to give in to the slave mentality that seemed to be engulfing her people.

Perhaps one of the reasons we fail to celebrate Miriam is that the Bible does not tell the whole story, nor does the Talmud. Until modern times, in nearly all Jewish communities, the Talmud was the centerpiece of Jewish cultural life and was foundational to "all Jewish thought and aspirations", serving also as "the guide for the daily life" of Jews. Most of the books in what we call the Old Testament come from the Talmud and so we find the stories of Moses and the Exodus in both Jewish and Christian sacred text.

The story of Moses begins in a time when Pharaoh, afraid of the growing strength of the community of Hebrew slaves under his rule, decreed that all male babies born to the Hebrew women should be killed at birth. He called in the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, and told them that they should kill any sons immediately, right on the birthing chair, but to let the daughters live. They knew this was against the wishes of God, and so they didn't, and when questioned by Pharaoh, reported that the Hebrew women were so strong that their babies were born even before the midwives arrived. A medieval French Rabbi named Rashi, wrote a comprehensive commentary on the Talmud and the Tanakh. In the tradition of midrash, he adds some interesting details! He says that Shiphrah and Puah were actually the professional names of Jochebed (Moses' mother) and Miriam. Miriam was called Puah because she had a knack for calming crying infants and her mother, Jochebed, was called Shiphrah from the root *shafar*, meaning beautiful or handsome, for her way of beautifying and cleansing the newborn. According to midrash, Miriam (or Puah) cursed Pharaoh during the meeting where he set them this task of killing baby boys, saying, "Woe to this man when God avenges him!" Pharaoh was enraged and wanted her killed but her mother said, "Will you pay attention to her? She is but a child who doesn't realize to whom she is speaking, or what she is saying!"

According to this midrash, her father, a leader among his people decided to divorce his wife and encouraged the other men to do the same so that there would be no more Jewish babies to kill. Miriam convinced him that it made more sense to have new Jewish births because, though Pharaoh could destroy them in this life, they would be given a part in the future world through God. She prophesied that her mother would give birth to a son who would set Israel free.

We next meet Miriam after the birth of Moses – in a story we are all familiar with. Jochebed gives birth to a healthy and beautiful baby boy. She decides to hide him for as long as she can. When she finds she can no longer hide her baby son, she sets him to float in a bulrush boat. When Pharaoh's daughter shows mercy to the crying baby, his sister Miriam steps in to save the day, securing their own mother to be a wet nurse for the child. In this story in Exodus, Miriam is not even named...and yet, without the intervention of his big sister, Miriam, Moses would not have lived beyond infancy.

Miriam protected Moses in the bulrushes, and she travelled with him in the Exodus. She and their brother Aaron, accompanied Moses on this journey and, according to the Talmud, all three were seen as part of the leadership of the group.

Early in the escape of the Israelites from Egypt, we find another familiar story. They are being pursued by the Egyptian Army. When they reach the Red Sea, it seems they are doomed – but at

God's command, Moses holds his arm out over the water, the sea parts, leaving a clear dry path, and his people are able to walk safely to the other shore. When they are all gathered on the far side, the water rushes in again, drowning Pharaoh's army along with their horses and chariots. This is the moment when Miriam leads the women in song and dance to celebrate their victory. This is what we heard this morning from our Sacred Drummers. Women in those times had a sacred role in celebrating the successes of the community... Now, think about this... It's interesting and very significant, isn't it, that in the rush to leave, when the people carried only the bare necessities and unleavened bread, the women took the time to pack their drums and tambourines. Miriam had so much faith that there would be miracles to celebrate that she ensured the women brought the instruments to make the celebrations worthy. It was a kind of rebellion for these women, a rebellion against hopelessness and apathy. They didn't worry that their physical needs would not be met, they prepared instruments, music and dances for the celebrations that would surely take place.

Later in the Exodus story, we meet Miriam again. She and Aaron have spoken negatively about Moses and the three are called to a meeting with God. According to midrash, Miriam sensed that something has changed between Moses and his wife, Zipporah. Because she is no longer taking care of her appearance, Miriam realizes that Moses had stopped conjugal relations with her. She is angry with her brother that he thinks he can't be both faithful to God and still a good husband. After all, Moses has his brother and his sister to help carry the load. They are both loyal and capable leaders. Surely God will give them some of the responsibility. So, she conscripts Aaron to go with her to set Moses straight. God speaks to both Moses and Zipporah after all, and they stay married... Miriam, however, underestimated the job God has given to Moses. There is no time for him to be anything but God's right-hand man. For daring to question what God was doing, Miriam is punished with leprosy – just Miriam. It seems that Aaron gets off scot-free. Moses sends prayers to plead on his sister's behalf - and it isn't just Moses who launches the appeal process. The leadership of Miriam is so respected by the people, that the camp refuses to move until she is back with them again. And so, rather than a life-sentence of leprosy and all the cultural implications of that, she is exiled for just 7 days. She never completely recovers, however, and never speaks again.

There are some interesting aspects of the story of Miriam, things that we might miss because she appears just briefly here and there throughout Exodus and Numbers. There seems to be little linking of the stories and certainly little celebration of her contributions. However, there are some signs of the important and unique place she held in that ancient society. Listen to these few verses from Exodus 15 about what happens when the Israelites have safely crossed the Red Sea...

¹⁹ When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. ²¹ Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.

Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

... “Miriam the prophet”

She is the first woman in the Bible to be called prophet ...and yet, there was no fanfare at this naming, no book written about her, no direct mention of her wisdom in the many books that follow – just this small excerpt from a longer song that has been attributed to Moses – a song that most scholars agree would have actually been written by a woman – by Miriam, the prophet - as this was a woman’s role in a time of military success.

There is never any mention of Miriam marrying or having children. That’s unusual for a woman of those times. So unusual, in fact, that later writers such as Josephus, create a husband and a son for her, though they can’t seem to agree on who those men might be. In fact, after her run-in with God over her criticism of Moses, there is no mention of her at all until her death at Kadesh. Like Moses, she never made it to the Promised Land, but in the account of her dying in Numbers 20:1 we hear that “there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron.” Biblical scholars make note that they had not been without water for the 40 years they had been wandering and so the people attributed this to Miriam, the well ran dry when she died.

So, what can we learn from Miriam?

Her leadership doesn’t come from being in front of the people but from her place among them.

She uses her wisdom and skills to ensure that God’s mission for Moses succeeds.

She is courageous and bold in a time and place where women’s voices were silenced. Even when she is silenced by the very God she serves, her wisdom and leadership are recognized by the community around her.

To her people, she is the example of hope amidst despair, faith that God will see them through the hardship, joy in the successes along the way, and courage to stand up for what she believes – even against the most formidable authorities.

Those attributes of hope, faith, joy, and courage were vital to those people who were fleeing oppression and faced with unbelievable hardships on their way to freedom, on their way to “home” – a place where they could, at last, feel a sense of belonging and where they would be respected and nurtured.

I think there are many in our world today who would benefit from the kind of leadership that Miriam offered, leadership built on love and justice rather than honour and prestige, leadership that enables and empowers the whole community to continue the work toward building a new world. I think there are Miriams in our world – quietly but boldly working to empower change.

Thanks be to God for Miriam and the countless women who follow in her footsteps. Amen.