

October 28, 2018 - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Women of the Old Testament: Miriam - The First Prophet

Scripture: Exodus 2, Exodus 15, Numbers 12

In remembrance and in honor of the 11 faithful worshipers who died at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA on October 27, 2018. The Lord welcomes the righteous into his loving-kindness. May the Lord's home be theirs forevermore.

We are now in the Book of Exodus. In Genesis, the focus is on individuals who have been commissioned to carry out the will of God to form a people who are devoted to God throughout history. In Exodus, we have the beginning of the story of those people, of whom Moses is their leader.

Moses is born into a time when the Hebrew people have been enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt. The Hebrew people seemed to be thriving, so Pharaoh called on the Hebrew midwives to drown newborn boys.

Upon hearing this decree, the Hebrew women organized a passive resistance campaign, a secret civil disobedience movement. When two of the Hebrew midwives, Zipporah and Puah, are called before Pharaoh to explain why there are still Hebrew boys around the neighborhood, they tell Pharaoh,

“These Hebrew women, they are so strong, they deliver the babies even before we arrive. They are not like the Egyptian women. There is nothing we can do. Nothing at all”

Then Scripture says,

“God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous” (Ex 1:19-20).

The increase in population triggered a decree from Pharaoh that all newly born Hebrew boys must be thrown into the Nile. And so it was into oppression and resistance that Moses was born. Moses was the third of three children. His brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, were born, according to the Rabbis, about 10-15 years earlier. Miriam's name has several meanings: “Bitter tears” and “Rebellion” are the most popular.

When he was born, Moses' mother took him down to the Nile and wove a basket for him and set him into the flowing river. Just down the shore, Moses' sister watched and then followed the basket to the shore whereupon Pharaoh's daughter pulled Moses out of the water. Moses' sister, who is not named here, shows up as if she is one more slave girl and asks if she should get a wet-nurse from among the Hebrew women. Miriam returns and brings her mother and Moses' mom back to raise him.

Right in the beginning of the story of God's people, we receive a story of civil disobedience organized by women for the sake of the future. Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, says of this passage,

“What the women do for Moses, God will do for Israel”
and,
“The courage of women is the beginning of liberation”¹.

The next time we hear of Miriam, she leads the women of Israel with tambourine and dancing in celebration for the successful crossing of the Red Sea. There, Scripture says,

*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.”*

This is the first time the word *prophet* ever appears in Scripture and Miriam is the first prophet. Just as the women of Israel provide the template for the liberation of Israel, so also Miriam provides the template for all the prophets in Scripture who will follow her, including Jesus.

There are three aspects to the template Miriam provides for us.

Prophets

1. Watch and observe
2. Celebrate and teach God's people
3. Challenge authority at great cost

1. WATCH AND OBSERVE

Prophets are chosen by God to speak God's truth into particular situations so that the people can act according to God's will. Sometimes, a prophet will speak to the consequences and effects of either acting or not acting.

The prophet watches and observes what is going on around them. Remember Tamar last week? A trickster also does this. The understandings a prophet and a trickster have of the world around them is often indistinguishable.

Miriam watches and observes her baby brother as he is set afloat in the Nile River. Only by watching and observing can a prophet interpret the message they need to bring to the people. Miriam ensures the liberation of the Hebrew people by watching and

¹ pg 40. Interpretation: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, by Terence Fretheim.

observing her brother, and then acting on what is happening around her. This tells us prophetic work in the name of God can happen with action as well as word.

Elijah was a great prophet of God, in the model of Miriam. We learn from Elijah that sometimes the work of watching and observing means going to where God sends you and then finding out what will happen next. In 1 Kings 7, God sends Elijah to the woods to hang out with the ravens. After a while, God says,

“Now you can leave. Go find the widow of Zarapheth.”

When Elijah finds her, he watches and observes how the widow struggles for food and oil. Elijah follows God’s lead and provides her with food and oil that will last many years.

Jesus watches and observes. Jesus as a boy watches and observes everything that happens at the temple. With the disciples, he watches and observes the widow put a few pennies in the charity box at the synagogue. He watches and observes the people in power around him and calls them out once he sees what is going on.

Watching and observing are the first call of prophets of God. Only by watching and observing can the prophet begin to interpret what is needed so that God’s presence and grace can be among the people.

2. CELEBRATE GOD’S PEOPLE

When we think of prophets of the Old Testament, we often think of them speaking of God’s judgment and the calling out of the people for breaking rules. But many of the prophets also celebrate God’s presence and God’s future for us. Miriam does this on the shore of the Red Sea after the crossing. She leads the women in celebration.

The song Miriam sings is one of the oldest songs in the tradition of the Hebrew people. She is considered to be the author of this hymn of praise.

Jonathan Edwards says the singular goal of faith is our happiness and joy. Edwards says it makes no sense that glorifying God would be our highest joy, since glorifying God is a self-evident result of being eternally with God. The goal must be focused on us, he reasons, and if that is the case, the goal can only be our happiness and joy. This is a prophetic way of speaking, and Miriam would be the first example of what Edwards is talking about.

Singing and dancing and celebrating God’s work for God’s people is the work of watching and observing and discerning, and when freedom comes for the Israelites, Miriam leads the people in dancing and singing that joy.

Isaiah understands this need for celebration. Many of Isaiah’s pronouncements, as Israel’s most prominent prophet, are judgments. Perhaps a better way to think of Isaiah’s judgments are as calls to return to the path that leads to joy and happiness. In other words, the goal of prophetic talk is to lead us or call us back to a way that leads to our greatest hope and happiness.

Think of Isaiah 25, one of my favorite verses in Scripture. Isaiah 25 has the same celebratory flavor as Miriam's song on the shores of the Red Sea.

*On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.
The Lord has spoken.*

In Jesus' time, almost 40% of the women were named Mary, in honor of Miriam. And so it is significant that Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John is at the Wedding at Cana. There, Jesus is told by Mother Mary to watch and observe the situation. The situation is that the groom, who is responsible for caring for all the guests at his wedding, has run out of wine. Mary compels her son to fulfill his prophetic call by helping the people celebrate the presence of God among them. Jesus does this by turning 80 gallons of water into wine. That is a prophetic celebration!

3. CHALLENGING AUTHORITY AT GREAT COST

After the Israelites have been in the desert for a long while, Moses decides to get married. He marries from outside the tribe, and his brother and sister have some concerns about this and express them to the leader of the Israelites. After their complaint, they say,

“You know, bro, does God only speak through you? Doesn't he speak through us, too?”

God hears the challenge to Moses' authority and calls all three of the siblings into a meeting inside the tent. God tells Aaron and Miriam what the difference is between them and Moses. God says,

“When I speak with prophets, I come to them in visions and dreams. Then, you, as the prophet, need to figure stuff out and tell other people. But with Moses, I speak to

him face to face. What is weird to me, being God and all, is that it doesn't scare you that Moses does this with me" (paraphrase of Num 12:6-8).

Miriam is punished with a skin disease that turns her skin white as if she were just born. Aaron turns on his brother and asks why he did that to his only sister. And Moses calls out to God for Miriam's healing. God does heal Miriam, but she has to follow the traditional rules governing skin diseases that were given in Leviticus. That means Miriam must wait outside the campground gate for 7 days until she is declared clean. Miriam was considered one of the leaders of Israel with her brothers Moses and Aaron, and so the people wait for her to complete the ritual before they move on.

Prophets throughout Scripture challenge the authority structures all the time. Most often, they do this to call Israel back to a just and righteous path. Something in the governing of the people, the economy of the country, the way the leaders of the faith treat people brings the prophetic voice to the forefront and the prophet confronts the authorities of the day.

The prophet Daniel, for instance, was a devoted follower of God and an interpreter of dreams. He drove the cabinet officials of King Nebuchadnezzar crazy, so they plotted to get rid of Daniel. The officials got the king to sign a law that anyone who did not pray to the king would be put to death by being thrown into a lion's den. Since part of being a prophet means trusting God and God alone, a prophet only prays to God and God alone. And so, Daniel, merely by praying to God (prayer as an act of defiance and a challenge to the authority structure!), is condemned to death. The cost is very high for Daniel to follow God's will rather than the reigning powers of the day.

But the next morning, the king and his cabinet go to the lion's den, and they find the prophet Daniel unharmed.

"I was found blameless before God, and also before you, O King, I have done no wrong." Then the king was exceedingly glad and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God" (Daniel 6: 22-24).

King Nebuchadnezzar was manipulated by his people, and upon realizing the mistake, recognizes Daniel as the prophet he truly is.

Jesus is in the tradition of the prophet Miriam when he challenges the authorities of the day. While it is reasonable to place Jesus in the place of Moses, we need to remember that the tradition of the Temple in Jesus' time presumed the Levitical priests and the rabbis of the Temple were all in the place of Moses. Even so, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus goes on a tear about Jerusalem and the religious problems of the day. There, in chapter 23, Jesus challenges the authority of the rabbis and priests, saying:

13 "But woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You keep locking people out of the kingdom of heaven! For you neither enter nor permit those trying to enter to go in.

15 "Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You cross land and sea to make one convert, and when you get one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves!

When Jesus challenges the authority of the priests and rabbis, he is in the position of Miriam than Moses, at least from the perspective of the residents of Jerusalem. Many people would have considered Jesus' challenge in the tradition of Miriam, an act of honor rather than condemnation. This is, among other reasons, why so many people followed Jesus around the countryside.

Jesus' challenge to the authority structure eventually requires him to face interrogation and sentencing by the Roman leader of Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate. Jesus pays the high cost of the Cross for his challenge to Temple and State alike.

This, though, is the path of prophets, even by Jesus' own words:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would have none of it! (Mt 23:27)

The way of the prophet is a high calling. God calls a prophet to be a watcher and witness to the world around them. Once discerned, God calls a prophet to tell the people what they have seen and observed by the power of God. When possible, the prophet celebrates when God is present among the people in small ways and big ways, when the people are walking the way of happiness and hope and love. And sometimes, the prophet is called to challenge the authority structure around her, sometimes at great cost to her physical well-being.

Miriam is the model for prophets in Scripture, and she left footprints for Jesus to walk.

Let us watch and observe closely for the shadow of Miriam in our faith. Let us listen for opportunities to celebrate small and large moments of God in our lives. Let us share in the courage of Miriam when we are compelled to challenge the authorities around us, even if we must pay a price.

Amen.