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Texts: Exodus 15: 1-3; Exodus 15: 20-21

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Discerning Voices: Miriam by the Seashore

I've been hearing an insistent and important question over the past several months, as many of us have been making our way through the Bible. The question is this: where are the women? Or more to the point, where are the voices of any of the women who do show up in the pages of the Bible, but are mostly consigned to the background, while Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, and Moses, Aaron and Joshua carry on their conversations with God?

It's been the subject of more than a few dinner conversations in our house, and it's a question that was raised at our last gathering of readers. For both me and for Rachael, and perhaps for many of you, it's not exactly new information that these 2500 year old narratives are riddled with patriarchal assumptions. That's no less true of any other ancient culture from that period, but to witness it daily on our journey through the Bible, a book we have been told we ought to revere, is dispiriting. For some of us, it may be more than dispiriting.

There are, however, cracks within that patriarchal facade, and I'd like to explore a few of them with you in the next several weeks. There is, for example, Judges 5, which contains the Song of Deborah, which many scholars believe is the oldest part of the Hebrew Bible. What does it mean that, within this overwhelmingly patriarchal narrative, there were, evidently, women who served as judges? There is the Book of Ruth, one of the gentlest books of the Old Testament, and one of the easiest to preach from. And then there is Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, who, together with several other women, open the Book of Exodus.

We spent a number of weeks reflecting on those early chapters of Exodus a little more than a year ago, as we watched Miriam crouching in the bullrushes, plotting how to save her baby brother, Moses, from the Pharaoh's murderous plot. She does manage to save her brother, but then she disappears from the narrative, reemerging only much later, in two key stories - one later in Exodus, and the other in the Book of Numbers. Both stories are cracks that allow us to see a more complex world behind the dominant narrative of the Bible. And they both allow us to imagine a more holistic and humane side of God than the one we see so often in those early pages of the Hebrew Bible. Most important of all, though, the stories of Miriam provide insights into some of the struggles we're having today, as people of faith and conscience witness the manipulation of the symbols of Scripture for violent and nationalistic ends.

Today I'd like to explore the first of those Miriam stories in Exodus 15, where Miriam presents a subtle alternative to the bellicose and domineering God that Moses seems to represent in that chapter. If we are learning anything in our read through of the Bible, it is that the old

adage about God being the same yesterday, today, and forever is simply mistaken. The Bible is a record of different conceptions of God, developed over a long period of time. Just when one conception comes to feel dominant - the warlord of the conquest narratives, for example - another intuition peeks through the pages of the text, waiting for later generations to develop the possibilities contained there.

Let's look a little closer at Exodus 15 - and this is going to get a little wonky, but it's important, so bear with me.¹ The Hebrew captives had just gained their freedom. Pharaoh and his army had been drowned. And a celebration takes place on the far side of the Red Sea. But it takes place in two distinct phases. The first is led by Moses. The second is led by Miriam. There are some revealing differences that allow us to sense some cracks in the surface of the text, along with some tensions simmering beneath those cracks.

First, I want us to pay attention to the Song of Moses, the first part of Exodus 15. We're told that Moses and the Israelites sing a song unto the Lord. But notice how that God is characterized: the Lord is a warrior, verse three declares. Though I didn't include the whole Song in our readings this morning, it goes on to develop that warrior imagery: "Your right hand shattered the enemy," verse six declares, and then says, "you overthrew your adversaries, you sent out your furies."

Several verses later the Song introduces a curious temporal displacement, speaking in the past tense about events that, in the narrative, won't happen until much later - in the Books of Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua. Here, the warrior God is said in verses 14 and 15 to have instilled fear and trembling into the hearts of the kings of Edom, Moab, and Canaan, kings and territories that, at the level of the story, Moses and the Hebrews had not yet encountered. It's a clue that even if the Song of Moses is said to take place beside the Red Sea, it's a much later composition, stitched into the Exodus narrative. It's also reflective of a particular and patriarchal conception of God - bellicose, vengeful, authoritarian and cruel. "Terror and dread fell upon them by the might of your arm," verse 16 says. In total, the Song of Moses contains 18 verses celebrating the violent military prowess of God.

Contrast that with the brief Song of Miriam which follows. Scholars believe it is a very old fragment of text, perhaps even the oldest portion of the Hebrew Bible. Which means that the Song of Moses, and the God that the Song of Moses celebrates, is a later product, one that actually subsumes and appropriates the Song of Miriam for its own patriarchal purposes.

¹ I am drawing upon insights about Miriam from Allan Boesak's excellent book *Children of the Waters of Meribah* (Sun Media, 2021), pgs. 58-88.

Clearly, as the final version of the text was being shaped, there was a power play happening, where a belligerent and nationalistic conception of God, and those who wished to use that God

for their own war-like purposes, suppressed and supplanted a different vision of the Divine, one represented by Miriam.

But there are some other surprises in this brief Song and its prelude. First, the text informs us that Miriam is considered a prophet, that is, one who consults with God. It's a revealing detail. Apart from her appearance early in the book of Exodus, there is no other mention of Miriam, and the action has been confined solely to the men. It is Moses and Aaron who have exclusive access to the Lord God. So at the level of the story, the text is hinting that perhaps there was a parallel set of practices happening behind the scenes, under Miriam's leadership. Was Miriam too speaking with God? Was she hearing the same things that Moses and Aaron were hearing? Or was she sensing something different about God - something other than the hyper-masculine warrior God that Moses represents?

But there are a few other details to pay attention to as well. There's the matter of where Miriam's Song is directed. The text tells us that Miriam took a tambourine, and all the women went with her. There was, in other words, a community that had formed around Miriam, one separate from that of Moses and Aaron. And then it says that she sang a song "to them," which in Hebrew has both masculine and feminine connotations. Miriam's Song, then, is communal in orientation. There is the implication that this is a call and response antiphonal chant sung by the women of the community for everyone - men and women alike. They rightly celebrate what God has done in order to liberate them from the evils of Pharaoh's empire. "Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," she sings. That is to say, the military might of empire has been judged and condemned by a God who frees her people from bondage.

But then note what Miriam's Song leaves out. There is no mention of the Lord God as a "man of war." There is no celebration of a coming conquest. There is no flattery of a God who will be used to justify the slaughter of innocent people. There is no implication that this God is in the pocket of a particular set of kings and rulers. There is only a strong assertion of a God who delivers her people from a great evil.

We can therefore see a powerful throughline from the early chapters of Exodus. The book begins with the subversive activity of a small group of women who seek to undermine the Pharaoh's cruelty. And now on the far side of the Red Sea, Miriam celebrates the liberatory power of God to undo the Pharaoh's military terror, and to let her people go free. Extrapolating even further, we can say that Miriam's Song is, strangely enough, a song about love - about God's love for a people held in captivity, and about God's passionate refusal to abandon that people to the bondage of Egypt. But nowhere does it celebrate military might. It renders a judgment against that form of power.

In his book *The Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King located the symbolic power of the Song of Miriam. He said,

"The meaning of the story is not found in the drowning of Egyptian soldiers, for no one should rejoice at the death or defeat of a human being. Rather, he says, this story

symbolizes the death of evil... Within the wide arena of everyday life, we see evil in all of its ugly dimensions... we see it in inordinate selfishness. We see it in high places where (people) are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of their self-interest. We see it in imperialistic nations crushing other people with the battering rams of social injustice. We see it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which leave (people) and nations morally and physically bankrupt.”²

Which brings us to the present day. I’ve been exploring the cracks and tensions in Exodus 15 in order to help us see a dynamic that’s unfolding around us right now in this new and catastrophic war with Iran. Just as there were competing understandings of God within ancient Hebrew society, and just as a noisier and more bellicose set of voices supplanted the tradition of Miriam then, so too similar forces are at work now. Consider a statement earlier this week from our Secretary of Defense, who quoted Psalm 144 as justification for beginning a war with Iran: “Blessed be the Lord my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle,” he said at a news conference. He closed with these words, which may as well have been lifted directly from the Song of Moses: “May the Lord grant unyielding strength and refuge to our warriors, unbreakable protection to them in our homeland, and total victory over those who seek to harm them.”³ As in the Song of Moses, God has been rendered a “man of war,” and has become a kind of idol for those unleashing destruction upon another people. It’s the kind of thing that can make even those of us who are committed to a very different understanding of God and Scripture wonder if we need to rethink our allegiances.

A year or so back, it was the image of Miriam in the bullrushes that we needed, waiting for the right opportunity to intervene. To that image, we can now add Miriam on the seashore. In this new role, she serves as an invitation to discern which voices we’re listening to in our culture, and which voices are worthy of our attention in the biblical text. She serves as an opportunity to stand in the public square, and to challenge those who claim to speak in the name of the Lord of War. Miriam is our call to challenge the deceptions of our present day Pharaohs, who have sacrificed the very notion of truth telling for their own selfish ends. Miriam is our call to examine the way masculinity has been constructed, prompting us to search for more holistic ways of being human - of being men - than what has so often been modeled for us. Miriam is our call to renounce what faith and trust we have placed in militarism - horse and

² King, Martin Luther, *The Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pgs. 78-79.

³ As quoted in “The New Republic,” March 10, 2026. Article by Malcolm Ferguson.

rider he has thrown into the sea, Miriam sings. Miriam is our call toward community, rather than to individualism and selfish isolation. Miriam is our call toward compassion, understanding that God hears the plea of the most vulnerable in our midst.

Above all, Miriam is a call toward our own liberation. The crack in the text that she represents allows us to realize that we do not have to accept as our own the belligerent God that seems to prevail in much of the biblical text. Nor do we have to obey those who claim to speak

in the name of that God, then or now. She helps us to hear, then as now, a gentler voice, steering us away from warfare, a voice that, had it been heeded, might have helped the ancient Hebrews avoid the carnage they would shortly unleash, a voice that, were we to heed her now, might allow us to do the same. There are those today who sing the Song of Moses. We must be among those singing the Song of Miriam.

Allow me, here at the end, to make a simple observation. The Song of Miriam is the first of several songs offered by women throughout the pages of the Bible. They're worth paying attention to. The most famous of those songs is one sung by Mary in Luke chapter 1, just prior to the birth of Jesus, a song called the Magnificat. Mary is meant to echo Miriam. Their names are cognates of one another, and their actions more or less duplicate one another. And so in Mary, we see the Miriam tradition being symbolically revived. Which allows us to say that symbolically speaking, it is Miriam - or one in her lineage - who births the Christ child into the world. To put it another way, from the crack in the text that we've been exploring way back in Exodus 15, none other than the Jesus the Christ crawls out.

And so do not believe that those who sing the Song of Miriam are forever doomed to be supplanted and outdone by those who march to the terrifying Song of Moses. Those who sing the Song of Miriam may remain a small minority, and our voices may be softer. But God works in mysterious ways. It is from those who courageously sing her song that new possibilities of life emerge. It is because of those who keep her memory and tradition alive that the Prince of Peace is born. I wish to be a part of that community. I wish to sing that song. Don't you?