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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Numbers 12: 1-16; Numbers 20: 1; Hebrews 13: 13
March 22, 2026

Discerning Voices: Miriam's Question

Let us then go to him outside the camp… Hebrews 13:13

Many of us have been immersed in a year long read-through of the Bible, and one of the questions that we've wrestled with is what to do with the absence of women, and more particularly the voices of women, from the pages of the Bible. None of us have been surprised by the misogyny and patriarchy embedded in the Bible - that's not exactly news. But the daily accumulation of stories that denigrate, humiliate, and quite often violate women is distressing for a number of reasons. It is distressing because these are stories that have a sacred veneer - they're embedded in a book we have been told is somehow "inspired" or "divine." It is distressing because what is understood to be the voice of "God" is often violent and cruel, certainly toward women, but toward others as well. And it is distressing because these are texts that are now being used to authorize, in part, catastrophic violence around the world, against women, yes, but against a lot of other people besides.

So what are we to do with the Bible? Should we stop reading it, given its legacy of harm? Should we, perhaps, walk away from faith itself, given that our faith is attached to the stories found in this book? That's what a good many people have done over the years. One of our number shared a quote from Bertrand Russell, to the effect that actually reading the Bible may turn you into an atheist, while merely having it quoted at you will make you a good Christian. It's a telling response, and not wholly inaccurate. Still, for many of us a different question emerges: despite some of the more brutal aspects of the Bible, might there be ways of discerning more life affirming voices stirring beneath the surface of the text, voices that point toward a more credible, and a more humane form of faith, for women and men alike?

You won't be shocked to learn that for my part, the latter option seems most attractive, despite the work that it requires. I wish to read the text of the Bible sometimes with the grain, but also sometimes heavily against it, to find the living and freeing Spirit that it may contain.

Last week, we did just that by exploring the Songs of Moses and Miriam, both found in the 15th chapter of Exodus. The Hebrew people had just crossed the Red Sea, fleeing their captivity in Egypt. And the Pharaoh's armies had been drowned in the same sea that the Hebrews had safely crossed. It's then that Moses and the Israelites launch into a ferocious song of war that anticipates their coming conquest of Canaan. Shortly after that, Miriam sings her own song, shorter, and shorn of the boasts of military conquest. Reading between the lines, we can see how Miriam led a community of women, one that the book of Exodus fails to mention except in little hints, such as that found in Exodus 15. It's one of the places that we can sense a counter-tradition just behind the dominant, male centered, conquest narrative of the Bible. Indeed, she represents a wholly different conception of God, one that I believe can help us now.

This week I'd like us to look at the only other story in which Miriam appears in the biblical narrative.[4] It's found in the Book of Numbers, and we heard it in full a few minutes ago. The Israelites are now in the wilderness, where they've been destined to wander for forty years. And things aren't going well. It's difficult to find food and water, and some of the people wish to return to captivity, where they know at the very least that their basic necessities will be met. Most of the book hinges on Moses and his struggle to retain leadership amidst these challenges.

Throughout the book, he and the God with whom he consorts become more and more isolated, and the authority Moses and God exert together becomes more and more dubious. Indeed, it becomes despotic. In the chapter prior to the one we read, some of the people develop a craving for meat, which leads them to complain to Moses. It is, in reality, a displaced criticism of the direction of Moses's leadership, and implicitly, of God. Moses and God conspire together to trap those critics, after which God inflicts a plague upon them, killing them. Read carefully, the entire book of Numbers can be read as a study not so much about the necessity of obedience to God and those who claim to speak for God, but rather about how leadership can devolve into authoritarian misrule when it goes unchecked.

Immediately after that inexplicable punishment, Miriam, along with her brother Aaron, poses a decisive question. It is one that resounds down through the ages, including in our own. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" This is not the expression of petty resentment or jealousy. It is not the wish to be accorded the same status that Moses holds. It is, rather, a protest against the kind of God that Moses has come to represent. As one writer puts it, "if Moses speaks for God, which God? And if this is "our" God, then what sort of liberation are we talking about, and what sort of people are we becoming?"[2] Miriam's question is an insistence that another tradition was available to the people, and that a wholly different understanding of God was possible.

Note what happens after that. First, the text gratuitously asserts that Moses was the most humble man on earth - it's the kind of flattery insisted upon by all the petty dictators the world has known. Then, speaking in the voice of God, the text reasserts the authority of Moses. Miriam alone is stricken with leprosy for daring to voice her objection, and she is forced to dwell outside the camp - a phrase I'll return to shortly. She speaks no more - not to defend herself or to apologize. She doesn't have to. She knows that she has done no wrong. She has spoken against the patriarchal God of domination and warfare, not the God of the exodus who liberated her people.[3]

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[4] In all that follows, I am depending heavily on the insights of Allan Boesak, *Children of the Waters of Meribah* (African Sun Media, 2019), especially chapter 4, "Drinking from the Waters of Meribah," pgs. 89-121.

[2] Boesak, pg. 102.

[3] Boesak, pg. 108.

Aaron, on the other hand, speaks on Miriam's behalf, and then Moses pleads to God for her life. God's response is as ugly as anything contained in the Bible: "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again." It is, in essence, God's own way of spitting in Miriam's face. She doesn't die, not right away at least, but she is ritually humiliated by this patriarchal deity.

And so Miriam is driven out of the camp. But I want us to note one more thing. While Miriam is kept in isolation, the people refuse to move until she is among them again. It is a curious detail, suggesting that there is a loyalty to Miriam and to all that she represents among the wider community. That suggestion is strengthened by several references in chapter 20, which we also read earlier. When Miriam dies several chapters later, the text goes out of its way to mention, three times, that the whole community was present to witness her death. "The Israelites," it begins, after which it adds, "the whole congregation," followed later by "the people."[4] Reading carefully, we're left with the sense that Miriam was an enormously popular figure, with a wide following, even if her legacy has been downgraded by the text as we have received it.

Scholars such as Phyllis Trible and Allan Boesak believe that the tensions in this story reveal a later power struggle between competing communities and traditions within ancient Israel. There were, on one side, those who had organized themselves under the name of Moses, who used that name and tradition to create a patriarchal and authoritarian form of rule that could be used to justify military conquests. And there were those who gathered in a countertradition under the name of Miriam, one that was critical of patriarchal authority, and that remained centered in the experience of liberation. The text as it now stands is a spiteful put-down of the Miriam tradition, and an assertion of power by those who are busy supplanting the Exodus tradition with their own vision of a patriarchal, punitive, and war-like God. Even so, those who edited the final story left enough clues that we're able to sense some of these wider dynamics occurring beneath or behind the text.

If you are tempted to think this is merely an academic exercise for scribes or scholars, think again. Earlier this week, I read an account of a visit that Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist, made to the Pentagon shortly before Christmas. He was there for one of the weekly prayer services now being held in the Pentagon. Graham said, "We know that God loves. But did you know that God also hates?" Christmas trees and a Hanukkah menorah were in the background as Graham went on to say, "Do you know that God also is a God of war? Many people don't want to think about that, or forget that."[5]

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[4] Boesak, pg. 109, noting an insight derived from Phyllis Trible, from her article "Bringing Miriam Out of theShadows."

[5] See *The New York Times,* "Hegseth Invokes Divine Purpose to Justify Military Might," March 20, 2026. https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/20/us/politics/hegseth-christianity-military.html

To Graham, and to everyone else who worships at the altar of the God of war, the God of hate, and the God of misogynistic cruelty, we do well to pose Miriam's question: "Has the Lord not spoken through us also?" That is to say, is there not a counter-memory, a counter-tradition that is revealed by the women on the banks of the Nile, refusing Pharaoh's decree that children should be murdered? Is there not a counter-tradition that sings a different song than the bellicose Song of Moses on the shore of the Red Sea? Is there not a tradition that remains critical of patriarchal assertions of authority, one that stands up on behalf of those who have been crushed by that authority? Has the Lord not spoken through them also?

And is that not the question of the Black prophetic tradition? Is that not the question of feminist and LGBTQI theologians and laypeople? Is that not the question of Latin American and African liberation struggles? For that matter, is it not also the question of FCCOL, and the tradition of theological liberalism to which we belong? Has the Lord not spoken through us also? The evangelical and Zionist warlords are usurping all these traditions, while claiming to speak in the name of a blood soaked deity. It is ours to challenge that authority, in the name of Miriam and all she represents.

But let us push this logic even further. Though the language would be different, Miriam's question could also be the question of Muslims who are now being bombed throughout Iran and Lebanon - does not the Divine speak through us as well? The same question could be voiced by

Indigenous communities, and the African diasporic traditions like Santeria and Vodou - does not the Sacred not flow through us? Add to that Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, and secular folk alike, all of whom represent ways of accessing the mystery of what it is to be alive, and all of whom, each in their own way, have their own prophetic instincts that stand against patriarchy, warfare, and domination? Has some version of the Divine not spoken through them as well? What gives the evangelical and Zionist warlords now occupying the highest offices of this land and of Israel the right to speak as if they alone had access to the Divine? What gives them the right to impose their bloody vision of conquest upon the rest of the world, and upon all of us? Miriam's question hangs in the air as a provocation, as a challenge, and as a promise.

I mentioned last week the link between Miriam, bearer of a feminine counter-tradition in the Hebrew Bible, and Mary the mother of Jesus, bearing the Prince of Peace into the world. But Miriam shows up in another place in the New Testament as well. In the Book of Hebrews, we find this phrase, applied to Jesus: "Let us then go to him outside the camp." It's the only place in the New Testament that such a phrase appears, and it comes in a book - a letter, really - that is immersed in the stories and figures of the Hebrew Bible. It's an image that seems to refer to Miriam herself, forced to dwell "outside the camp."[63] Jesus, it would seem, is now explicitly identified with Miriam, and with all of those who fall outside the dominant patriarchal structures of society. Perhaps in some strange way, we can say that Jesus, or the Spirit that is later enfleshed

[6] Once again, I am following the insights of Allan Boesak. See pg. 117.

in Jesus, comes to dwell with Miriam when she is cut off from her community, “outside the camp.” And perhaps we can say that it was Miriam, and those who guarded her memory, that helped to create the conditions for Jesus’s own ministry, which was conducted among those “outside the camp” - among the lepers and the lame, among the blind and the infirm, among the poor and the lowly. When he is executed, when he is buried, and when he is resurrected, he is, like Miriam, outside the camp.

He comes to find all of those who, like him, and like Miriam before him, have been forced to dwell outside the camp. Maybe you have felt that way at some point in your life - cut off or shunned by the community around you. Maybe because of your economic status, or your upbringing, you were made to feel as though you didn’t belong. Jesus came to find you in that place outside the camp. Perhaps because of who or how you love, or because of your sexuality and gender status, you were made to feel as though you were not welcome among certain people. Jesus came to dwell with you outside of the camp. Perhaps because you could not believe in the patriarchal God of obedience and warfare, you were made to feel as though you were somehow “less than” in a religious community somewhere. Jesus came to seek you out in your place outside the camp. Perhaps because of your race or your nationality you were made to feel that you did not belong. Jesus came to find and embrace you outside the camp. Or perhaps you have a memory, as a young child, of being told you were not welcome at this lunch table, or at this sleepover, or on this team - Jesus came to heal those parts of you that still feel as though you were made to dwell outside the camp. In one way or another, at some point in our lives, we have all been made to feel as though we are outside the camp. Jesus, like Miriam before him, comes to find those places within us all, and to reside there.

I’ll conclude with this. Immediately after Miriam perishes in Numbers 20, it is revealed that the people have no water. It is not a coincidence. To live in the ways of Miriam, to follow in her footsteps, is to drink from living waters. To live without her is to live in a dry and desiccated landscape. Even among the ancient Hebrews, the people understood that she watered their lives, and they refused to go anywhere without her. Perhaps we too must be among those who refuse to move without Miriam. Perhaps we too are called to be those who drink from the springs of life that she provides. And perhaps we too are called to ask her question, “Does not the Lord speak through us as well?”

May we have the courage to answer: Yes. Yes.