



Finding Miriam

TEXT
Exodus 2:1–10;
15:20–21

June 23, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

I don't think I really *heard* the story of the exodus until I was an adult, already ordained as a pastor. I was teaching religion class at our church school, down in Miami, Florida. And that particular year I had this group of second graders that ... required a lot of my attention. Their classroom teacher had decided, for a play day early in the year, to split up this class into girls vs. boys. And this particular class carried their competitive spirit far outside of play day and into my religion classroom.

My initial attempts to insist we should all work together failed. I was at their mercy, and they knew it. How this played out in my class was that the *girls* began to heckle my lessons. My girls were quick. It didn't take them any time at all to realize how many of our faith stories had a male lead. If the story of the day was about Abraham, they made sure I gave Sarah equal airtime. If I talked about King David, they wanted to know where was his queen?

It was when we got to the story of the exodus that they got the best of me.

One of my little female leaders was a Jewish student named Miriam. And she was *not* happy

with my introduction to the exodus. I don't remember entirely, but I assume I was introducing them to the land of Egypt — to the Hebrews who had lived peacefully within the land for many years; to the new pharaoh who was now afraid of these Hebrews, and set out to get rid of them. I'm sure I jumped right to baby Moses in the basket, floating down the river to the pharaoh's daughter, and then to the burning bush.

And my little Miriam interrupted me to let me know I was getting it all wrong.

I don't remember what led me to do this, but I finally just sat down and let this child take over — easily one of my best teaching decisions. Little Miriam explained that this pharaoh was, in her polite 8-year-old use of the English language, *silly*. It's not that he was just evil; he was. But he was also *not smart*. She added, with an eye roll in my direction, that this was apparently part of the joke I wasn't getting.

He's so silly he tries to enslave the Hebrews, but they just get stronger. Then he tells the midwives to kill all the baby boys. But Shiphruah and Puah, they don't do it! They lie to the pharaoh because they know he's not smart. Then pharaoh gets

madder and tells all the people to throw the baby boys in the water!

She paused here to explain that he was so concerned about getting rid of the boys, so they wouldn't grow up and fight him in an army, that he missed the girls who were outsmarting him the whole time.

Jochebed has a baby. She births this baby with the same language as our creation stories: "She saw what she had made, and he was good." They hide the baby as long as they can, and when he gets too big and too noisy, they put him in the river like the pharaoh wants. Only *first*, they make a little boat for him. And his mom and big sister, Miriam, find a spot upstream from the princess's palace. They wait for her to be outside in water. And then they let the baby go.

My little Miriam proceeded to tiptoe along the front of the classroom, reenacting Miriam as she followed the basket along the river. She was probably about the same age as this little one, watching her brother the whole time.

When the princess finds the basket, like they knew she would, Miriam swoops in and offers to bring a nurse for the child. The princess winks, and Miriam goes to get her mom to nurse the boy.

She concluded her lesson by telling the class that this is who she is named for: Miriam, the hero of the exodus story. I am certain every Bible teacher needs a group of tiny feminists, heckling them to get our stories right.

It's been more recently actually, while searching for Mary Magdalene, that I've stumbled into our ancient hero again. Like my young student, our Jewish friends have much to teach us here. So with some help from our Hebrew scholars, my little Miriam's wisdom and current womanist interpreters, let's see if we can find Miriam again.

We find Miriam again when the sea is parted. The plagues and Passover have come. And the Hebrews take off for 40 years in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. We find Miriam now with her tambourine, leading the congregation in a song of liberation as praise.

And the title Miriam is given here is "prophet." It's the first time that title has been given in our Hebrew Bible. She is the first person named as prophet in all our Old Testament text.

Reading this part in English, it sounds like Miriam is singing maybe only with the women. But the Hebrew is using *masculine plural language*. The women are with Miriam, but she is leading the entire congregation.

If we dig just a little deeper, we'll learn that these two little verses of Miriam's Song are the oldest part of the entire exodus story. These words are written and repeated before all the rest of this story is ever composed. These two little verses, Miriam's

Song, are the anchor of the exodus. This song Miriam sings sounds similar to one we hear later, from the voice of Mary, who sings in response to being told she will birth the savior of the world.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls even reveals some of the Hebrew songs in our book of Psalms may have first been attributed to Miriam, their authorship lost, or intentionally changed, in our compiling and translating. Miriam's influence on the early Israel community was strong. Her tradition would have been alive still in Jesus' day. That's why you'll find her while searching for Mary Magdalene. Miriam's name is Hebrew. Translated into Greek, it's "Maria." In English, it's "Mary." All those Marys of our gospel stories, they're named for our first prophet.

There's much more to talk about here. So, I have wondered, why did it take my little Miriam, named thousands of years after our first prophet, to help me find her? I think we see the roots of our missing of Miriam as early as that first expression of praise. Before we ever hear Miriam's Song, the text includes a longer version, sung by Moses. It's strange.

It's strange because we know he's not a good speaker. While negotiating with God at that burning bush, he says, "I've never been eloquent. . . I'm slow of speech and slow of tongue." So they work out this deal that God will talk to Moses, and Moses will tell his brother Aaron what to say to the people. Ten chapters later, Moses is leading the people

in song? My second grade girls, and our modern interpreters, would tell us to be skeptical here.

It was two months ago that I last preached with you. It was the Sunday after Easter, and our text invited us to reimagine Mary Magdalene. I encouraged us then in the need to redeem the female voices of our biblical narrative.

Since then, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination of Christians in our country, have reiterated their stance that women do not have authority to preach or teach in the church. I hadn't exactly been holding out hope for our Southern Baptists, but with women like Beth Moore and others in their midst, the debate was at least becoming a little more interesting.

The president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Albert Mohler, was quoted before their recent national conference about this, saying, "If you look at the denominations where women do the preaching, they're also the denominations where people do the leaving. I think there's just something about the order of creation that means that God intends for the preaching voice to be a male voice."¹ Hmm, I do wish Mr. Mohler could have met my class of tiny feminists!

This isn't just a dude who likes to make his own YouTube videos, teaching in obscurity. He leads the academic institution training the leaders of our biggest denomination.

This is the view held by the vast majority of Christians around our world, including the majority of Christians here in the

U.S. Even if individual churchgoers don't quite agree, they're checking the membership boxes at churches that hold this view at a rate of about 3 to 1.²

We find Miriam again in the book of Numbers, the continuation of the Israelites' wilderness journey. It's in Chapter 12 we find her again, and now she's not singing. Now, Miriam is angry. She is with her brother Aaron, speaking of her brother Moses, and she yells, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" It's a question of *authority*.

And she is right to ask. Miriam doesn't know yet that her song will find its way into Moses' mouth; that her scheme to save her baby brother will be pushed behind camp songs with culturally insensitive hand motions. But as early as those wilderness wandering days, the question of who God speaks through, who has the authority to lead the people, it's rumbling through the community. Our first prophet gifts us with the question we have been fighting with ever since.

It was after that last sermon that I was contacted by a young woman I didn't know, connected by one of you. This young woman is a member of a new church here in our city. She's been there since they started just a few years ago. It's one of these many new churches surrounding us that look very "cool," and are planted in communities booming with millennials. I confess, I have been jealous of how cool these churches look.

This young woman wanted to meet with me because she was

needing advice about meeting with her own pastor, regarding her church's recent decision to ban women from leadership. As a leader herself, she was surprised, hurt, angry.

This isn't the first conversation I've had like this since moving here to Kansas City. These churches are targeting the people you charged me to do ministry with. They're speaking the language of our millennials, and they're doing it really stinking well. And more often than not, those beautiful Instagram feeds cover up narrow theology and leadership practices that tear down our women and LGBTQ people.

When people realize this, a few end up here with us. But many more don't. Some will stay, weigh what they think is right, with community they find important. And many will leave the Church altogether, possibly for good — more comfortable having no God than one who is so small.

Has God only spoken through Moses?

I understand Miriam's anger. I have previously thought our Mr. Mohlers would slowly fade away — you know, like our belief that the earth was flat or our practice of not washing hands before surgery. But I was so wrong. I had missed Miriam's warning. This small, silly theology continues; it's just been rebranded.

I think we could all stand to find a little of Miriam's holy anger. My concern is not for this one young woman. She is brilliant and will be just fine. My concern is bigger. We do

not dance anymore. What have we conceded to those who turn God's living Word into an idol of their own image? How long can we be content with the male voice repeating what has been before we lose our ability to dream what can be? Has the Lord not spoken through us, too?

Miriam yells into the heavens, and God comes down in a cloud and scolds the three siblings into the tent. And as God angrily departs, Miriam is left pale white, inflicted with something like leprosy. Her brother Aaron turns to brother Moses and begs him to do something. And Moses turns and cries out to God this prayer we lose the beauty of in our English translations. He prays, "El na, rapha nah." ("Hear, Holy One, hear, and heal her.")

And God seems to concede. There's a negotiation. "Well, even if only the smallest thing had happened, she'd still be kicked out of the community for seven days, so let her go." So Miriam is kicked out of the camp for seven days — back where the sick would be held, back with the menstruating women, and where women recovering from childbirth helped each other together.

But then, this remarkable thing happens. The text says the people did not set out on the march again until Miriam had been brought back. Until their prophet had been restored, the people would not move.

These are our people who have grumbled since their first steps of freedom — this people who has yelled at Moses and railed at God — who erected

their golden cow without hesitation — who has begged to return to slavery rather than venture this wilderness another day. This is the people who now stage a sit-in, all together, in protest for their prophet.

You want to talk about a biblical model of leadership? Tell me this isn't it. It's just that the recovery of this story requires searching. It acknowledges the cultural and historical realities of our last thousands of years. It requires literary analysis that leads us to confess our prophet has been edited. It pulls the power away from preachers who want to say this is how it's always been, and places it into the imaginations of our people, who are willing to wonder what can be.

And that is the reason for scripture in the first place. Not that we might find archeological evidence that the plagues really happened. But that we might come to be in on the joke, to laugh at Pharaoh knowing kings always lose, to trust we can outsmart power when the lives of children are at stake. Not that we might read the "order of creation" and attempt to keep that order in all we say and do. But we might see how God pulled life from chaos, how nature is responsive to holy word, and might try, with all our might, to create life in this dying planet too.

It's a harder way to study scripture. The majority of our Christian friends are unwilling to do it. And Miriam reminds us, they are not going away. Maybe if we just get angry enough, we'll

be able to live our story this way ourselves.

We don't hear much of Miriam throughout this saga, but she's there. We know she's there long before that sea crossing, for she's already earned the name of prophet. She's there in the wilderness, for the people won't move without her. We're given only a glimpse, but that glimpse ... it invites us to imagine.

All those early years while Moses was away, being raised in the palace, fleeing for his life, was it Miriam who had been ministering to the people?

While Moses and Aaron performed signs for the pharaoh, while they negotiated with power for freedom, who was it who tended to the people's broken bodies and souls, who promised them their promised day would come?

That song — that old, ancient scrap of text, whose words predate the story — were these the words Miriam had been teaching them while they suffered under slavery? Could it be the people knew what to sing when they crossed the sea, because Miriam had long been singing to them this song of liberation?

Finally, she lifts her voice in anger. Our early ancestors edited, scripted the power of authority into Moses. But now, finding Miriam for who she is, knowing the legacy she leaves, I wonder if we've heard this part wrong. Who is to say that she is punished for wanting authority? What if she's punished for doubting whether she has it? What if God's response isn't a concession; it's the proof. It's God say-

ing, "Look, my prophet, look at your brothers intervene on your behalf. Look at your people protest your punishment. Am I not the God who schemed with you for your brother's salvation? Am I not the God who taught you to sing? Trust yourself, my daughter, for I, your brothers, your people, we choose you."

We have to search to find Miriam, employ some redemptive imagination, but she is worth the redeeming. She just might be who we need — to stir our imaginations, dare us to engage holy anger and lead us to liberation.

Has the Lord not spoken through us too? Yes, our prophet says. Recover that holy anger in these wild days, for the God of the universe — the one who created heaven and earth, the one who walked in our midst and defeated death with life — she has not stopped doing impossible things.

Or do we believe the God who fashioned us from dirt, hung stars in the sky and shaped humanity in her image, do we believe that image is limited by our imagination?

Do we believe the God who was birthed from Mary's womb and embraced by The Magdalene at the tomb, would he prevent the ones he loved from speaking his good news?

Do we believe the One who plagued the powerful and parted the seas has ceased to be the God of liberation?

History's editors, yesterday's pharaohs, today's limited leaders ... there are plenty of powers attempting to tell us the best has already been, that back to Egypt

is where we should go, turning our ancient text into an idol to be protected and not to be lived. But there are little Miriams being born in our midst still today. God speaks through them too. Let us be those who commit to finding her, following her, as the God who hasn't stopped liberating leads us forward, again and again.

Let us pray: Hear, O God, hear and heal us, we pray. Amen.

¹<https://www.npr.org/2019/06/10/731405246/southern-baptists-to-confront-sexual-abuse-and-the-role-of-women-in-the-church>

²<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.