

Exodus 2, 15, Numbers 12  
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell  
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## **Miriam: Silenced Mother of the Women Prophets**

I visited the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul in 2003. It was a 6th Century church for a thousand years, a mosque for 500 years, a museum for 85 years, then back to being a mosque in 2020. During its museum phase, restoration uncovered stunning mosaics once plastered over. The painstaking work brought their glory back to light, a challenging but deeply rewarding effort.

This is how I feel about this series on forgotten women of the Hebrew scriptures, and this story of Miriam is no exception. You have to dig through layers and layers of patriarchy and politics to unearth the glory of Miriam. Seems like remembering a courageous, heroic, woman is just what we need at this cultural moment.

Let's look at Miriam in 3 parts.

### **Part 1 - Miriam the Courageous**

I mean we know the Hollywood story well, don't we? Charlton Heston is placed in the river so he can grow up to be besties with Yul Brenner after marrying Yvonne De Carlo. END scene.

The setting is Egypt, with Israel in captivity. Pharaoh decrees, "Every Hebrew boy must be thrown into the Nile, but let the girls live." In this world, where sex determines life or death, young Miriam watches her baby brother Moses and their terrified mother, Jochebed.

*Terrified* because she has been hiding a child she can hide no longer. *Terrified* because she has to make the awful choice of putting her newborn in a basket on the Nile in hopes of keeping him alive from deathly government policy that has othered her and her kin and *terrified* because how can she go on not knowing if he will be safe?

Enter a princess, a daughter of Pharaoh, with a maternal heart, who saw the basket of flesh and blood, saw the child was foreign, and had compassion on him. Two women, a bereaved mother and a Princess, worlds apart: Hebrew and Egyptian, slave and free, common and royal, poor and rich, relinquishing and finding, silent and speaking. Who will bring them together?

A little girl — a brave older sister. Miriam watched as her baby brother was placed in a floating cradle and followed it at a distance, a daring and dangerous act. She took the initiative to shape his destiny. She spoke. Imagine the courage it took for her to open her mouth, her brother's life — and her own — hanging in the balance.

Sit with her by the riverbank, hidden among the reeds. This little girl who has the courage to speak words that could get her killed:

*"Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"* Skillfully, she proposed the perfect plan: nursed by his mother, the child becomes Pharaoh's daughter's son. Miriam's initiative begins the Exodus story.

Miriam represents all the women who quietly, courageously hold things together — preserving and demanding life amidst death. She stands for you, whatever your gender identity or expression, who have held families, vocations, or relationships together, often unnoticed. Consider yourself seen.

Who are those people in your life? What might you say to them today?

## **Part 2 - Miriam the Prophetess**

There are two other Miriam sightings in this story. She isn't mentioned again until after the Red Sea. She was there through it all, even during Moses' exile. For decades, while Moses was in hiding, Miriam served as the people's prophet.

Sidebar: Miriam remained single, needing no validation through marriage. As Wil Gafney notes, she chose "not to offer to the Egyptian empire any children of her body, her womb."

At the shore of the Red Sea, the Song of the Sea begins with Moses (Exodus 15:1-18):

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea," followed by details of their safe passage. Then, in verse 20, this: "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'"

Miriam the prophet, the musician, the liberation liturgist, leads all of them, including the boys, in prophetic song as she commands them all to sing.

Miriam the prophet next appears in the book of Numbers, which is a sort of retelling of the Exodus story.

First some context: In Exodus 18, we have the story of Moses abandoning his wife, Zipporah, along with her two sons. File that.

Here we are in Numbers 12:

*While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman)*

The issue here is the abandonment of Zipporah and her children and now showing up with another woman. While Moses is her little brother, he is also Moses, and she is speaking truth to power.

As we have learned, very few people will risk losing their status to speak truth to power. Miriam takes an enormous risk to speak up for Zipporah and her children. Moses, like anyone who has accrued power and status, needs people like Miriam and Aaron to say what others will not. Do you have Miriams in your life?

Miriam then contracts leprosy, interpreted as God's judgment for speaking against Moses. This idea that sickness is punishment is something Jesus completely debunked but that idea persists. Moses prays for her deliverance, and Miriam is told to camp with those who are impure/unclean for 7 days.

And now for my favorite part:

*"So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again."*

Israel votes with their feet on the banishment of Miriam, refusing to march without her, waiting alongside God for their prophet. She is their prophet, and they are her people.

### **Part 3 - Miriam the Legend**

Miriam dies rather unceremoniously a few years later. She never reaches the promised land. Neither would Moses or Aaron.

Why would I call Miriam a legend? I would go as far saying she was the equal of Moses and Aaron. They formed a trinity of leadership. Have I lost my mind?

Well, let's turn to Micah the prophet, some 500 years later after Miriam's life. As Micah prophetically challenges Israel to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, he reminds them of their redemption story:

Micah 6:4

*For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.*

Biblical Scholar Phyllis Tribble, in her book "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows" sums it all up this way:

*Stepping back to view the whole, we see a story beginning at the bank of the river, moving to the shore of the sea, continuing into the wilds of the wilderness, disappearing in the new land, and recovering there through prophecy and song. Let all women and men who have eyes to see, join Miriam in singing an updated version of her song of deliverance. Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously! Patriarchy and its horsemen, God has thrown into the sea!*

Prayer: God whose name was called upon by Miriam, give us her courage, give us her moxy, give us her resilience, give us her insistence on justice, give us her celebration of life, for these are the values of Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.