

## CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: MIRIAM<sup>1</sup>

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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### **Exodus 2:5-10**

*The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”*

### **Exodus 15:20-21**

*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.”*

### **Numbers 12:1-16**

*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); and they said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it. Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.*

*Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them came out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed.*

*When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. Then Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed...” And Moses cried to the Lord, ‘O God, please heal her.’ But the Lord said to Moses, ‘If her father had but spat 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.’ 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.*

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to a lecture given by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg at Congregation B’nai Jeshurun, New York, New York, on May 6, 2019, entitled “Sing Now – to God.”

It is a delight to be sufficiently back and hopeful about our trajectory into the future that I am going to do this summer what I have done for most summers except 2020: to preach a summer sermon series.

The series I am going to preach for the next eight weeks is based on a class I am teaching whose last session meets today. It is called “Characters with Character.” We will explore and follow eight Biblical characters – two men, six women, four Old Testament, four New Testament – who exhibit strong moral character. After this series, Maggie and I will go on vacation and I will come back to see if all this preaching on character will have improved my own or ours together!

Let us pray: *Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove; Come kindle the flame of sacred love; in these cold hearts of ours.*”

## I.

There was once a Hebrew girl Miriam, whose father Amram, according to ancient rabbinic legend, withdrew from and divorced his wife Jochebed, Miriam’s mother, when Miriam was a teenager and Jochebed was three months pregnant with their third child. Some rabbis say that Amram took to celibacy out of a zealous commitment to his role as a prophet, as throughout history religious zeal has often led to monastic living. But others say his celibacy was a protest against the Egyptian Pharaoh’s order that all male babies be killed at birth, a move Pharaoh had made to keep the population down among the Hebrew slaves over whom he ruled. Miriam took it upon herself to confront her father, request that he remarry her mother, and serve as father of the child to be born.<sup>2</sup>

Miriam’s approach to her father was gutsy and courageous. For a daughter to confront a father, for any female to confront a more powerful male, is courageous and bold. Whatever initial instincts Amram may have had to reject his daughter’s request, he accedes, remarries her mother, and Jochebed gives birth to Moses.

When Miriam’s story opens in the Bible, her mother is placing Moses, now three months old, in a *teva*, or Ark, that Jochebed has prepared with care. She places the Ark on the waters of the Nile among reeds, hoping against hope that someone will rescue her child and spare him from downing or murderous death. Miriam, meanwhile, “stands...at a distance” to see if God might be present and intervene.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, the daughter of Pharaoh, accompanied by attendants, comes down to bathe in the river. She sees the Ark, sends an attendant to retrieve it. When the attendant opens the Ark, Pharaoh’s daughter sees the child, hears him cry, has compassion and says, “This must be one of the Hebrew children.”

At this point, the quick thinking and fast acting Miriam steps forward. “Shall I go and get a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” Miriam retrieves her own mother who is then hired by Pharaoh’s daughter to nurse the infant as he is raised in Pharaoh’s court. Miriam thus joins Jochebed and Pharaoh’s daughter as one of three women who rear Moses into what he will become.

In the overview of Miriam we get from the Books of Exodus and Numbers, we can see that it is *her trust* that God will not allow the deadly decree of Pharaoh to have the last word, *her trust* that God will “stand by” her infant brother as God will later “stand by” the boy Samuel in the Temple,<sup>4</sup> *her trust* that her brother will be well cared for in Pharaoh’s court in the arms of the daughter of Pharaoh and at the breast of Moses’ mother that leads Miriam to act boldly, quickly, and with great ingenuity.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus Rabbah 1:17.

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot\\_Rabbah.1.19-22?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Shemot_Rabbah.1.19-22?lang=bi).

<sup>4</sup> I Samuel 3:10.

Miriam thus is virtually midwife to the *Liberator* and *Lawgiver* of the people of Israel, to the one who will *lead* the people out of slavery<sup>5</sup> and *receive* the Ten Commandments.<sup>6</sup> For these character traits, Miriam earns the title of *Prophet*, the *third* person<sup>7</sup> and *first* woman to be so designated in scripture,<sup>8</sup> a title by which she is remembered centuries later.<sup>9</sup>

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The title first appears matter-of-factly when the people of Israel cross the Red Sea and Miriam leads women in a circle dance:

As they men had crossed – walking on dry land, parted waters on one side, dying Egyptians on the other – her brother Moses had said:

*“I will sing to the Lord...”*

But Miriam says:

*“Sing (or I sing) to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously”*

*Moses* believes God’s presence *awaits* the future; *Miriam* believes it is already *inbreaking*. Miriam has seen God rescue Moses out of the Nile and the people of Israel across the Red Sea, instilling within her a belief that God is already present. Miriam believes God’s future is here and now. *Miriam the Prophet*.

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In addition, it is only Miriam who brings a *tambourine* to the march across the sea. As the people of Israel had received the order to gather at the River,<sup>10</sup> they had fled in haste, leaving everything behind, including bread that had not yet risen in the oven.<sup>11</sup> But Miriam had thought to take a tambourine.<sup>12</sup> She trusts they will have something to celebrate. She trusts God will act. She trusts there would be an occasion for singing and dancing. Miriam shows up with a tambourine. *Miriam the Prophet*.

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Years later, forty be exact, the Israelites have wandered in the wilderness, *complained* about lack of food and water, wished they were back in Egypt – complaints to which God has responded with gifts of manna and quail and water from the rocks of Masah and Meribah.<sup>13</sup> Miriam and her other brother Aaron add to this list a complaint that Moses has a Cushite wife. Since Cush is another name for Ethiopia, this complaint may be rooted in racism; but Cush also refers to the land from which Moses’ wife Zipporah comes. It may be that like his father before him, Moses has separated from his wife and adopted celibacy in service to his role as prophet.<sup>14</sup> When Miriam and Aaron – who have taken no such vow of celibacy – complain against Moses, they ask: “Has the Lord not spoken through us also? Is it only you, Moses, through whom the Lord speaks?”

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<sup>5</sup> Exodus 15.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham is referred to as a prophet in Genesis 20:7 and Moses in Exodus 7:1.

<sup>8</sup> This occurs in Exodus 15:20.

<sup>9</sup> Micah 6:4.

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 14.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 12 :37-39.

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 15 :20.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus 15:22-17:7.

<sup>14</sup> Phyllis Trible, ‘Clashing with Moses,’ in “Miriam: Bible,” in *Jewish Women’s Archive*, available at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/miriam-bible>.

At this point *the narrator* interjects that Moses is “the most humble man” in the world, hardly one to brag about celibacy or any prophetic role he has. *God* then appears in a cloud to all three siblings – Moses, Miriam, and Aaron – and counsels that Moses is in an *entirely different category* than Aaron and Miriam; that they *are* indeed prophets who see God in visions and dreams, yet Moses *alone* sees God face to face. When the cloud lifts and God is nowhere to be seen, Miriam (as ringleader) is covered in the whiteness of leprosy, and by law led outside the camp for seven days.<sup>15</sup>

No one in the story is pleased with this disciplinary action God has taken toward Miriam, and it troubles us as well. But people around Miriam spring into action: Aaron intercedes *with Moses* on Miriam’s behalf, and Moses intercedes *with God*. Their intercession works. God limits Miriam’s time to the seven days necessary for her to be rendered clean after leprosy, and then she is welcomed back by the members of her tribe, who have delayed carrying out God’s instructions to prepare to enter the Land until Miriam is able to join them. This is one of several places in the Bible where it appears God overreaches and the people pull God back not the least because sometimes people speak up and God sometimes listens and acts accordingly.<sup>16</sup>

Miriam has stood up for her own prophetic role, has accepted that Moses was in an entirely different category, has been defended by both her brothers and welcomed by her people. *Miriam the Prophet*.

## II.

So what does this all this say about Miriam’s character and what might it offer ours?

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It says, *first*, that Miriam always *expects God to be present* and come through, when she is

- Requesting her father to reunite with her mother
- Waiting on the banks of the Nile to watch her brother in the Ark
- Taking a tambourine to the Red Sea as everyone else has fled home empty-handed
- Singing not “I *will* sing to the Lord” but “I *do* sing to the Lord”
- Accepting her role as prophet and Moses’ role as something entirely different
- And waiting outside the camp for the welcome she will receive upon her return from her leprotic quarantine.

Miriam expects God to show up and come through. And God does.

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Second, Miriam’s confidence that God will *show up* leads her to *speak up*:

- She speaks up to her *father* on behalf of her mother and on behalf of the child her mother is carrying
- She speaks up to her *brother and father* on behalf of intimacy, family, marriage, love, procreation, quietly defying Pharaoh’s attempt to keep the population down among the Hebrews
- She speaks up to *God* on behalf of the gift of prophecy being given equally to her two siblings and herself, to celibate and not celibate, to male and female, almost telegraphing Paul words over a

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<sup>15</sup> See Leviticus 13-14, various verses and laws.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 18; Exodus 32; Hosea 11.

thousand years later: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>17</sup>

Because Miriam has confidence that God will come through, she gains the courage to speak up.

### III.

Shakespeare writes darkly of human life in words many of us have committed to memory:

“Life's but a walking shadow,  
A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And is heard no more.  
It is a tale told by an idiot,  
Full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.”<sup>18</sup>

These words – spoken by Macbeth right before his death – are tragically true for far too many of us, but they do not describe the Miriam who comes to us in the Books of Exodus and Numbers.

- Her life is not a “walking shadow,” but a “bright, shining star.”
- She is not a “poor player that struts and frets [her] hour upon the stage and is heard no more,” but one who graces our lives – whenever we are exposed to her – as learner and teacher, leader and sage.
- “Sound and fury” are not what Miriam emits or embodies, but “wisdom and courage.”
- Her life signifies not “nothing,” but trust in the power and presence of God, here and now.

Miriam can teach us  
As women and men,  
As girls and boys,  
As youth and seniors,  
If we but notice her,  
Read her,  
Listen to her,  
Pay attention to her,  
Let her live in our heads and hearts  
As if she is a member of our household.

Miriam the Prophet.  
Miriam our Teacher.  
Miriam our Prophet.

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Galatians 3:28.

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V, v, 26-28.