



Persistent Women: Miriam

Exodus 2:1-10

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Rev. Grace Imathiu, a United Methodist Pastor from Kenya, talks a great deal about the power of story telling. She names that when we tell stories – whether they be stories of our family history, our national history, or the history of our faith – we have to prioritize what details to include to make the story worth telling. It’s hard to retell a story in full, and we tend to chastise those who can’t weed out the unimportant details. We call these people *ramblers*. “Stop rambling,” we say, “get to the point.”

Think about it, we do this all the time – I even do it to my own children. They come home from school and want to tell me something that happened during the day. In the process of telling me the one meaningful thing that they really wanted to share, they go through the details of the entire day. I hear about the books they read while waiting for the first session of the day. I hear about the games they played on the playground – and whether they got in trouble for playing tag or not. I hear about what they had for lunch, and whether they ate all the food or not. I hear about what the teacher said to *every single student* during quiet time, when the kids couldn’t be quiet. All great details, but they have nothing to do with the intended purpose of our conversation. So, finally, 10 minutes or more in to this epic saga of a school day, with no clear end in sight, I tend to cut them off and say, “What is it you wanted to tell me?” ... And they finally cut to the chase, “Oh, oh, right. We had art today, and that was fun.”

We force ourselves to cut through the details to tell a story – story telling is a craft that is hard to master.

Rev. Imathiu says that in prioritizing what details we ultimately decide to share, we are also making a decision to leave other things out. Whether intentional or not, when telling our stories, we often cut out the details about events and people who we have already deemed to be insignificant. Thus, when telling stories of national, personal, or Biblical history, we tend to further marginalize those who are already marginalized. In this way, story telling is used by those in power to maintain power over others could potentially lessen their power. If we don’t tell the stories of those seeking power, those on the margins, or those who have been silenced, we can further subjugate them to the margins, and keep them in silence.

James Brown sings of this reality in his 1966 ballad, one of his more famous songs, “It’s a Man’s World.” Perhaps you’ve heard it, or sung it, yourself:

*This is a man’s world.
This is a man’s world.
But it wouldn’t be nothing,
Nothing without a woman or a girl.*

Brown's song picks up on a sorrowful and toxic reality that pervades our culture – we have for too long minimized and neglected to give credit to the power, gifts, leadership, wisdom, and role women play in our world. We have written them out of our stories. Sadly, this designation of women as secondary, perhaps limiting them to supporting roles in the stories we tell, or the claim that women are somehow less capable than men in our historical story, has long been a false narrative that has plagued our globe. What makes it worse, the marginalization of women in the stories we tell has long been argued in favor of by the Church, and such silencing of women has been maintained because of our focus on select stories of our Biblical faith.

Sadly, there are many denominations who still today do not let women hold authority in the church; women can't be ordained; women can't speak from the pulpit. Many of these churches will claim a verse or two from Paul's letters to maintain the marginalization of women. Yet, no doubt, one of the reasons women have been silenced or limited in their roles in the church is that those in power – that is, the men who have held the majority power in the church – have done all they can to maintain their power. Without question, our select focus on certain Biblical texts, on story telling about the greats like Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Job, the 12 Disciples, or Paul, has been to the detriment of giving credit to and offering support for women who are just as skilled, called, gifted, and passionate about being leaders in the faith.

Over the coming month, we're going to debunk this claim that women have not played a significant role in the life of our faith by intentionally looking at some of the stories of our Biblical heritage that speak of women of faith. All of the women we will learn from over the coming month have something in common – they are all women living in a patriarchal society wherein they are thought to be little more than the property of their father, their husband, or their master. We're calling them *Persistent Women of the Bible*. As you will see, in these stories, persistence is not a negative or demeaning term. Persistence is defined as "standing firm in a course of action in spite of difficulty or opposition." Though designated as being of marginal significance – as women in a society where only men were seen of any substantial worth – the persistence of these women should *only* be seen as their faithful willingness to go against the powers of society that each may live in line with the eternal will of God.

We begin today with Miriam – the older sister of Moses.

Most people of faith have at least heard the name of Moses. They can probably recollect stories taught them in their childhood of Moses and the burning bush, or Moses as the one who splits the Red Sea to lead the people Israel out of captivity from Egypt, or Moses who leads the people through the wilderness in quest of the Promised Land, or Moses who calls on God to rain down manna from heaven, or Moses who hits his staff against the stone to cause a well to spring up to give the people water for their thirst. But do you know the name of Miriam? If not, go back and listen again to James Brown: *This is Moses' world. This is Moses' world. But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without Miriam.*

To understand the significance of Miriam's role, you have to know the context in which Miriam makes her first appearance.

The Hebrew people of Israel were held in captivity – they were slaves – to the Egyptians. They were at the mercy (or the lack thereof) of the Pharaoh and the Egyptian people. The Pharaoh was becoming increasingly concerned about the power of these foreigners living in his land. Though the people Israel had little if any rights, and though they were seen as an inferior race, the quantity of the Israelites was increasing in rapid fashion. The Pharaoh would have just as much assumed full genocide – to completely kill every one of the Israelites. Yet, because of an increasing number of births among the Israelites, Pharaoh was becoming more and more concerned that the Hebrew people would propagate to such high numbers that they would out power the Egyptians. Yes, even some 3500 years ago, national leaders grew weary of foreigners having too much power.

To try and keep the Israelites from growing too strong in number, the Pharaoh instructs some of the mid-wives who were helping to deliver the Hebrew babies to kill all newborn males. The mid-wives could enact this practice without drawing too much attention to the Pharaoh's purpose, as they could write off the deaths as accidental. The mid-wives said they would do as the Pharaoh had ordered, but instead, in private, they refused to enforce his practice. Instead of killing the newborn males, they came back to the Pharaoh and told him the Hebrew women were too diligent in delivering their babies, and that the newborns were already born by the time they were able to show up to assist. Thus, they couldn't by accident – or on purpose – kill the children without it being obvious.

The Pharaoh wasn't satisfied, and continued to grow all the more insecure about the growing population of the Israelites. So, he issued an all-points bulletin to the entire Egyptian population, commanding, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

This is the environment in which Miriam is living. She's an enslaved young female – perhaps a preteen - living in a foreign land under an oppressive god-like dictator who has ordered that every newborn male shall be killed and thrown into the river.

In Miriam's household, a newborn male is born. Verse 2 in today's text tells us that the mother (whose name is Jochebed) hides the baby for three months. She kept her newborn a secret from the Egyptians for three months, as long as she could. "When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river." ... I mean, I guess she did technically put him in the Nile?

The mother is the first to go against the orders of the Pharaoh. She herself is tenacious in caring for a child the dictator would have wanted killed. Perhaps it is from her mother's example where Miriam learns her persistence.

As the child is sitting in the basket on the river, Miriam, the sister, stood at a distance to see what would happen to him. Along came the daughter of Pharaoh, who was coming to the river to bathe. She saw the basket sitting in the river, and called her maid to bring the basket to her. When Pharaoh's daughter opened the basket, she saw the infant, who was crying. We're told that she had pity on him, and she said, "This must be one of the Hebrew's children."

Keep in mind, this is the Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh is the one who has ordered that all male children of the Israelites should be killed. And yet, here, his daughter, acknowledging this is a male child of the Hebrew community, has pity on the child.

All of a sudden, Miriam shows up – she has stepped out of hiding and is now speaking directly to Pharaoh's daughter. She says, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse this child for you?"

Do not overlook the cultural significance of this moment. First, Miriam – an enslaved female – has popped out of nowhere and is directly addressing the daughter of the Pharaoh. Think of all the enslaved populations that we have seen throughout the history of humanity. When, in any of those eras of slave populations, was it ok – was it permissible – for a slave to speak directly to a member of the royal family? Miriam is showing a bold spirit just to show up and speak in this moment. But more than just her bold willingness to speak to a member of the royal family, she asks if she can help the Pharaoh's daughter *disobey* the Pharaoh. Remember, the Pharaoh would have wanted this child – this male newborn of the Israelites – killed. And yet, she offers to help him save his life.

Pharaoh's daughter says "Yes." So, Miriam went and got her mother – the mother of the child – who served as a wet nurse for *her own son*, and she *got paid for it*. Let that sink in – this child of slavery – a preteen, who had no voice by cultural standards, who was trying to help break the law of the land, did so by not only protecting her younger brother, but she managed to have her mother get paid to nurse her own son. He then was raised in his own household until he was weaned, when he returned to Pharaoh's daughter, who claimed him as her son. And he was given the name Moses, which the Pharaoh's daughter named him because it means, "I drew him out of the water."

So truly, it may be Moses' world, but he would have been nothing without Miriam, the sister, who persisted against cultural expectations, and against unjust laws, to ensure Moses was well cared for, raised well, and stood to be the one God would call to liberate the people Israel from Egypt. The decision of Miriam entails much risk and vulnerability for God. The risk is real – not only her own life was at stake, but so was the future safety and rescue of the Israelites. Where is the Exodus without Moses? Thus, where is the Exodus without Miriam?

If we were to continue in the story of the Exodus, we would find that we don't hear about Miriam again until after the Israelites have crossed the Red Sea and the Egyptians have been swallowed up in the waters. As the Israelites are celebrating their liberation on the far side of the water's edge, Miriam appears again. The text says, "the prophet, Miriam, took a

tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out with 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." She's not just a prophet, she's a worship leader!

You know, prophets, and those who usher into God's praise, they are hailed as proclaimers of God's will. Prophet's especially are lifted up as leaders for knowing God's will before it has been made known to others. Prophets are often the ones proclaiming God's will for others.

Miriam's prophecy does not come so much in her words, but in her actions. Her faithfulness to God proclaimed Moses as a chosen child who would save the people Israel before God's will for Moses had been declared.

When we tell the story of the Exodus, we tend to focus on Moses. But such story telling forgets the faithfulness of Miriam who made Moses' part of the story possible. Our selective marginalization of the women in the story does not line up with the details of the story. In fact, not only did Miriam play such a critical role, but she was remembered by the people of Israel as a leader of the faith. Skip forward some 700 years to the prophet Micah. The prophet continues to name her as a leader of the people Israel in their exodus from Egypt. In Micah 6:4, it reads, "Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt and ransomed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."

Much to the dismay of many a man who would try and limit the capacity of women in the church, J. Lee Grady says of Miriam, "She was not an inferior appendage, smiling from her tent, washing clothes and preparing food with the other women while Moses and Aaron managed the problems of the nomadic nation. Miriam was given authority by God to lead. She functioned, along with her brothers, as a governing elder." Even when it was not expected, even when it went against cultural expectations, even when it meant stepping up to royalty, even when it meant disobeying the written law of the land, nevertheless, in faithfulness, as a called leader of the nation of Israel, Miriam persisted.

We would do well today to learn from Miriam's persistence. When the world is still dominated by those who have long tried to maintain their hold on power, when those who speak write the marginalized out of the story line, when power is maintained by silencing others ... we have to learn from the persistent women of our faith who fought against the limiting rules on their societies, who risked family and life, who spoke when they weren't supposed to speak, who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, to ensure that God's justice shall reign on earth. May we be so bold to have the faith of Miriam, to speak, to stand up, and to be a witness to God's will on earth. So may it be. Amen.