



**Women Prophets of Scripture I: Miriam – Courage, Humility, Propriety**  
**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 1, 2024**  
**Exodus 15: 19-21**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

In the next four weeks of September that I am with you, we will be delving into the stories of four women prophets of the Bible who to many are little more than footnotes in the margins of Biblical history.

Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Anna: Their names may be only vaguely familiar from books that we rarely encounter -- Numbers, Judges, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. But I invite you to come along with me in bringing these women into the spotlight. We'll witness not only the ways in which they shaped the Biblical story and the faith they modeled in difficult circumstances, but also, I hope, we'll discover how their lives are reflected in our own even today.

Most of all, I am hoping that we'll develop a new awareness of how the Spirit calls and empowers each of us to fulfill God's purpose, regardless of gender or status or age or any other barrier that culture might impose on us.

A Biblical prophet is not a fortune teller but a truth teller, whose truth come from God. God speaks to them, but their call also demands that they proclaim fearlessly what God tells them in their current context regardless of the social or political implications. The miracle of Holy Scripture is that, although they were addressing their own people, their words speak to us just as powerfully today. Any number of prophetic images from more than 2,000 years ago accompany us daily -- for example from Isaiah,

*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous hand. OR, And you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

Today we are focusing on the prophet Miriam - not only for her faith and courage early in the Israelites' wilderness journey, but for the expression later on of human frailty that, but for God's grace, might have undermined her ministry and entire place in Biblical history. This was the sin of pride to which we all fall victim at one time or another on the rocky road of our lives.

Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron, the trio who led the Exodus from Egypt: Moses the deliverer, Aaron the high priest, and Miriam the prophet. But she is mentioned briefly only three times – first in the passage we heard from Exodus 15 after God has parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow the people across and then swallowed up the pursuing Egyptians; then later in Numbers 12, and finally in Numbers 20 which records her death. Why should we care about one who is barely mentioned?

First, because of the impact of her song. If you look at all of Exodus 15, you see Moses singing the same thing first in a longer version. Then it looks as if Miriam repeats just the first line. So

what? But if we look at the verse more closely we can see the glorious effect of her song, which Moses' apparently didn't have:



<sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Miriam is not merely echoing Moses. She is providing a space for women, who as a group in that culture were subservient and oppressed, to have their own moment of celebration. In the entire Torah, the first five books of Hebrew scripture, this is the only place where women act as a separate body. This act of leadership establishes Miriam as a prophet and spokesperson for God. Moses' song may have come first, but Miriam's galvanized an entire people.

Miriam's calling was to discern the presence and work of God, and her song proclaims that the vanquishment of powerful oppressors — and the deliverance of marginalized people — is a divine triumph. Her role in the liberation of her people, and the atmosphere of communal worship she created, reminds us that women have always been suited for positions of spiritual authority.

Miriam is also the first woman to contribute a song to the Bible and the first woman named a prophet by scripture.

It's another story altogether when we meet Miriam again in Numbers 12, later in the wilderness journey.

At the beginning of that chapter we are told, "While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married [Cush being a country in Africa] <sup>2</sup>and they said, "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it."

Miriam and Aaron had become jealous of Moses because God did not speak to them directly as he did to Moses. Sadly, they use a racist judgment against his wife to try to diminish Moses' stature.

Angered, God comes to them in a pillar of cloud and declares that only with Moses does he "speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles." When the cloud vanishes, Miriam finds herself struck with leprosy - the terrible whiteness of her skin perhaps a punishment for the cruel judgment against Moses' wife. Moses pleads for her to be healed, but God declares that she will "bear her shame" for seven days, during which time she was shut out of the camp. It is a mark of her status that, despite being punished in public, the Israelites do not continue on their journey until Miriam is healed.

In Miriam's story can we not find our own, if we are brave enough to see it? Who among us has not stumbled out of anger or jealousy? Who has not, out of insecurity, been tempted to cast aspersions on others? Who has not suffered from the consequences of such acts? Who has not given in to prideful attitudes of thinking we know best, imposing our will on others, and then finding ourselves afflicted by the fallout that follows?

Early in her career Miriam was on top of the world. She was hailed as a leader, a prophet and the embodiment of women's empowerment. But the sin of pride brought her crashing down. In the language of today's Gospel reading, what came out of her mouth (and her brother's as well we might add, although God's judgment fell only on Miriam) was defilement – an attempt to reduce Moses' stature by speaking a racist judgment against Moses' wife.

Miriam was redeemed, but only after a period of punishment and exile. The good news for us is that, even as we stumble and even fall, we too are redeemed – but we don't have to endure a period of painful punishment as she did. Because we are already saved by the blood that Jesus shed for us, for the forgiveness of sin.

These words from our communion liturgy, are engraved on our hearts as we take into our bodies the life-giving sacrament and the truth of what Jesus has done for us. From our reading from James today, this is "the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

In the shadow of Miriam, let us cling to those words with our whole heart – the body of Christ, the love of God, given for you, for the forgiveness of sin.