

Miriam's Song of Hope

Exodus 1.22-2.4, 15.19-21

St Mark's Lutheran Church

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Today's reading from Exodus bookends the most significant story in the Hebrew Bible and within the Jewish faith. It is a story about salvation, about new life in the most desperate and hopeless of times. The story begins with a tormented young girl standing on the shores of the Nile, watching her infant brother float away in a basket. The story ends with the infant, now an old man, and Miriam, his even older sister, leading a nation of people in a jubilant song and dance celebrating their freedom.

To understand why Miriam was standing on the Nile watching her infant brother float away, we must go back to the beginning of the Exodus. Last week I preached about Joseph – the young Israelite man, who after being sold into slavery, became the right-hand man of Pharaoh, entrusted with the care and keeping of all of Egypt. While he served Pharaoh, the whole region was suffering from famine. Joseph's extended family, the 12-tribes of Israel, came to Egypt seeking food and at Joseph's invitation with Pharaoh's blessing, they ended up staying, claiming Egypt as their new home.

Exodus begins with this sentiment – I'm offering you my translation of the Hebrew text,

“A new king came to power in Egypt who didn't know or care about Joseph. He spoke to his people in panic. ‘There are way too many of these Israelites for us to handle. We've got to do something: Let's devise a plan to contain and control them before they turn on us and take over.’ “

Though the Israelites fled to Egypt in severe poverty, seeking help, were invited to stay in Egypt, welcomed to claim Egypt as their home, had become integrated into the community, and loved their

new homeland, the new king declared them a threat and began a court-sponsored campaign of oppression and control.

Pharaoh's campaign began with forced labor. The biblical translation "The Message," describes this forced labor as a "chain-gang." The type of forced labor endured by those who are incarcerated – men, women, and children shackled together at the waist as they dig ditches, cut irrigation systems, and build monuments and whole cities to Egyptian gods.

Despite the oppression the Israelites were enduring, their families continued to grow. When Pharaoh realized his plan wasn't successful, he escalated his campaign of oppression and control. He increased the already unreasonable expectations for worker production and the consequences for failing to meet those expectations. Now, scripture tells us, the Israelites were being crushed under their labor. They were literally dropping dead while working. And yet, their families continued to grow.

Since Pharaoh was unable to stop the Israelites from having children, he instituted a government backed genocide. He instructed the midwives to kill all Hebrew baby boys. When they refused to cooperate, he then instructed all Egyptians to kill all Hebrew baby boys. Scriptures says "Pharaoh issued a general order to all his people. 'Every (Hebrew) boy that is born, drown him in the Nile.'"

And this brings us to young Miriam, who is standing on the banks of the Nile, watching her 3-month old brother in a basket float away...

Scripture does not tell us how Miriam was feeling. Scripture tells us very little about Miriam, in fact. As soon as Moses is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam disappears from the story. She is absent from the story until the time when we meet her again, nearly 80 years later.

This gaping literary hole is our invitation to enter into the story with Miriam - to stand next to her on the Nile and see and feel with her.

For as long as she can remember, in her fairly short life, Miriam has heard stories of the “good old days” - the days when Joseph was in charge. The elders say that when Joseph was in charge, the Israelites swam in a river of blessings. It’s difficult for Miriam to even imagine the goodness they describe. They speak of tables overflowing with savory food – bowls of rice seasoned with cinnamon and dried grapes, legs of roasted lamb bathed in rich, fatty drippings, and platters of sweet dates, sticky figs, and buttery nuts. They speak of plump, tan children running free, chasing after even plumper chickens who were easy to catch, and stray cats who were not for they were chasing their own plump mice. They speak of a time that was calm and safe enough for old men to sit around the noon-time fire shaping and reshaping their own mundane stories into those of epic myth and legend. And they speak about old women who sat nearby, pretending not to hear the old men, keeping their eyes fixed on the fabric and baskets they were weaving, while they gossiped, clucked and laughed among themselves. These were the good old days, the days of Joseph, that Miriam had heard of.

As Miriam stood on the Nile, watching her brother float away, she wondered if those stories were myth rather than history, for they were in no way reflective of her reality. She was witnessing, living the opposite. Emaciated, lethargic children were proof that food was scarce. The old men and women now stayed inside, quiet and still, trying to be invisible, worried any attention might result in them being forced to labor in the fields with their children and children’s children. Men had been shamed into shells of themselves due to their inability to protect and provide for their families. Women had been robbed the joy of pregnancy, for each day was filled with the weeping and wailing of their sisters, sounds are unique to women whose children are legally abducted from their breasts.

As Miriam stood on the shores of the Nile she reflected on the conversation her parents had the night before. In their nearly dark home, nestled under a sheep skin blanket, the warm, orange glow of a single candle casting dancing shadows on the ceiling, Miriam laid perfectly still, rigid with terror, as her parents spoke truth: “The child has a better chance of survival on the mighty Nile than in our home.”

Watching the basket carried away by the current, Miriam dared to hope for the impossible – she dared to hope that her brother would survive.

And within moments, her hope was realized. The Egyptian princess was bathing in the Nile. She saw the basket, heard the wail of the baby, and had compassion for him. Miriam, who must have been an exceptionally courageous and bright girl, ran to the princess and offered to find someone who could nurse the child. The princess approved of the idea and for the next few years Moses lived with his family and was nursed by his mother, all while under the protection of Pharaoh's own household. The impossible which Miriam dared to hope for happened as well as that which was beyond her capacity for hope.

Nearly 80 years later we meet Miriam again. Her brother, fled from Egypt years ago, after Pharaoh found out he murdered an Egyptian in a fit of rage. Miriam heard rumors that Moses was living in Midian, married to Zipporah, and that together they had a family, including a son named Gershom. She was grateful Moses escaped Egypt. In Moses' absence a new King took the throne, and he was equally cruel. Things were not getting better. Life for Israelites in Egypt was crushing and hopeless.

And yet, I believe Miriam had hope. I believe her ability to hope, to truly hope, to hope in God, began the day her brother was pulled from the Nile. That day she witnessed the magnificence of God's power. Her only hope as the tiny basket was carried on the current of the massive river, was that the infant inside would survive. And then she witnessed a completely unpredictable, logic-defying, miracle of epic proportions. And not only did she witness it, she was instrumental in actualizing it.

She, the young Hebrew girl, who was legally classified as less than human, who had no rights and whose voice was perpetually ignored and rebuked – she, without permission or invitation, ran to and then wove her way through the royal attendants, stood in front of the Egyptian princess, and said with full

confidence, "I can help you! Listen to me!" And the princess did listen. And the princess did accept her help. This in itself was a miracle of epic proportions.

Miriam retold this story numerous times over the course of her life. Each retelling was slightly different from the one prior. The lyrics of her story were always slightly unique, but the melody remained the same: *Place your hope in God*. Miriam sang her song of hope to the children nestled at her feet,

"Hope in human logic will never satisfy.

Hope for your desires will always disappoint.

But place your hope in God and you will be fulfilled.

My sons and daughters, you will be amazed."

So again, we meet Miriam 80 years later. She is no longer a young girl. She is now a Prophetess within the Israelite community. A Prophetess, like a Prophet, is someone who sees things for what they are, and who then uses their voice to speak God's truth in the midst of the Empire's lies. That day on the Nile Miriam learned that her voice had power - her voice had the ability to change the present as well as the future. And as she grew she learned that there was power in the telling and retelling of her story, there was power in her song. For each time she told and sang the story she and those with whom she was speaking were filled with hope. They were nourished, empowered, and equipped to keep going, to not give up, to hope in God, believing someday, somehow God would make a way for their liberation.

The next twelve chapters of Exodus are about Moses, his flight from Egypt, his call from God, his divine debate with the Pharaoh, the plagues that rain down on Egypt, and the eventual, sudden, and long-awaited liberation of the Israelites.

As Moses was dueling with Pharaoh, waves of plagues came upon Egypt with the force and destruction of a tsunami, the people were crying out for him to stop. As bad as their lives had been, they believed

Moses was now making things even worse. “Have you come to kill us?” they asked Moses. But, Miriam remained hopeful. She continued to sing her song. She continued to place her hope and trust in God.

The final plague brought Pharaoh to his knees and he ordered the Israelites to “go.” Word spread quickly, jumping from home to home like a prairie fire. “Pharaoh has ordered us to go! Hurry, before he changes his mind. We must go now!” And the people fled in an instant, moving throughout Egypt like a reverse plague. They left so quickly, in such a rush, that there wasn’t even time for the dough to rise.

They took only that which was necessary – their families, their livestock, clothing, and a few food staples. If it was not absolutely necessary it remained behind.

As the Israelites were making their way out of Egypt and towards the Red Sea, a sound began to emerge from the crowd. At first it was subtle, almost undetectable over the noise of the animals, cries of the babies, and the anxious chatter of the people. But the sound was consistent. People began to hear it and it touched something deep inside them. It was as if they had heard the sound before. As Mothers shushed their babies at swollen breasts and fathers quieted worried animals with gentle hands the sound grew louder. The people could now hear it in its fullness and they realized they knew this song. They knew it by heart. It had been sung to them their entire lives. It was Miriam’s song of hope.

While everyone else was busy packing food, Miriam packed her tambourine. Her song of hope was all she needed for this trip. Hope had carried her from childhood into old age. Hope had gotten her through when she had to return her brother to the palace. Hope had gotten her through the crushing oppression that her husband and sons endured in the fields. Hope had gotten her through when her daughters were treated like objects without feelings. Hope had gotten her through when Moses fled like a criminal into exile. Hope had been her food, her drink. Hope had been the source of her life. She had been hoping, planning for this day, since the moment she ran through the doors of her home as a little girl, breathlessly yelling “Momma! Momma! Momma! Baby brother is coming home!”

As Miriam sang her son of hope, the people joined in. They knew this song. It was the melody of their lives. And as they stepped out of Egypt, and into the sea, they sang the song with vigor and confidence, knowing that the song was true. They were living witnesses, active agents, in God's completely unpredictable, logic-defying, miracle of epic proportions.

"Hope in human logic will never satisfy.

Hope for your desires will always disappoint.

But place your hope in God and you will be fulfilled.

My sons and daughters, you will be amazed."

And then when they saw that they were free, Miriam led them in a new song.

"Sing Halleluiah to the Lord, for he has saved us. We are free!"

Thanks be to God! Amen.