

Sermon, September 15, 2024 Miriam The Prophetic Musician

Today, we saw during Experiencing the Story, how the prophet Miriam modelled using music and dance to lead the Israelite women in expressing thankfulness to God for making things better when things weren't right and giving them hope. Scripture gives us three snapshots of Miriam's life.

In Exodus 2, we find the story of Miriam's participation in saving the life of her baby brother Moses. In Exodus 15, we find the story of Miriam with timbrel in hand leading the Israelite women in song and dance after God rescued them from slavery. And in Numbers 12, we find the story of Miriam being guided by pride and jealousy, instead of love when she responded to what she thought wasn't right.

In addition, Miriam is referenced in other scriptures e.g. when God spoke through Micah saying In Micah 6.4 "I rescued you from Egypt, where you were slaves. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to be your leaders."

Jewish tradition gives us additional pictures of Miriam. One Jewish tradition suggests that the spirit of prophecy came to Miriam when she was still a child. She prophesied that her mother was going to give birth to a son who would free the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage.

Another Jewish tradition suggests that a rolling rock accompanied the Jewish people in the desert, providing fresh water for them and their cattle and sheep. In honour of Miriam and the importance of water at different points in her life, they named it "Miriam's Well."

Before we look more closely at the three scriptural snapshots let's do a quick overview of the history of the Jewish people to see where Miriam fits in.

Most of us will remember stories of the Jewish patriarchs,
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whom God later renamed Israel.

We remember how Jacob favoured his son Joseph and gave him a coat of many colours. Out of jealousy, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Eventually Joseph rises to second-in-command in Egypt due to his gift of interpreting dreams and prepares Egypt for a coming famine. Jacob and the rest of his family, numbering 70 persons by now, moved to Egypt when they experienced famine in Canaan. Let's listen to Miriam pick up the story from here as she looks back on her life.

My name is Miriam, the daughter of Amram & Yocheved. I was born in Egypt over 400 years after my forefathers moved there from Canaan. My brother Aaron was born three years after me. My people grew in numbers from the 70 persons that originally accompanied Jacob to Egypt to several million. We called ourselves the children of Israel.

Over the years, the Egyptians forgot how Joseph helped them prepare for the famine. The current ruling Pharaoh saw us becoming a mighty people and was afraid that some day we might turn against the Egyptians, so he made us his slaves.

Life was difficult for my people. When we continued to multiply, even with the harsh labour Pharaoh imposed on us, he ordered all male babies to be thrown into the Nile River at birth as a means of population control.

I was seven years old when my brother Moses was born. I helped to hide Moses in our home for 3 months, constantly fearing a visit from the authorities. When my mother came up with the idea of making a floating basket for him and placing him in the Nile River close to the palace boundary, she asked me to hide in the reeds and watch over him. I was scared. What was going to happen?

When I saw Pharaoh's daughter discover Moses, I got up my courage and ran to her asking if she would like me to find a Hebrew woman to nurse him. When the princess said "yes," I was so relieved. I immediately ran for my mother who came and arranged with the princess to have Moses live with us until he was weaned. When he was 3 years old, he went to live at the palace with the princess. In this way we were able to save his life.

To make a long story short, I grew up to be a leader of my people along with my brothers, Moses and Aaron. We were prophets or God's messengers.

After many, many difficult years of slavery God told Moses and Aaron to tell Pharaoh that God said for him to let us go, It took a lot of convincing, but Pharaoh eventually agreed. We left immediately. Unfortunately, when Pharaoh realized he had no one now to build his cities and harvest his crops, he changed his mind and sent his army after us. His army was behind us and the sea in front of us. We were trapped. In desperation, we cried out to God and God miraculously saved us by parting the waters of the sea long enough for us to walk through on dry ground.

When I realized all our people were safe, I was overwhelmed with gratitude and praise to God. Moses led all the people in a song of praise and thanksgiving. Then I took a timbrel and invited all the women to join me in singing and dancing with joy.

One might think that we would be full of worship and praise for the rest of our days for the miraculous workings of God. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. Time after time we complained against God.

One personal example that I am most ashamed of, was when I criticized Moses for marrying a foreigner and I challenged his special leadership role. I said to my brother Aaron, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well? Eventually I realized that what was really bothering me was that I was jealous of my little brother Moses and his special relationship with God.

God pointed out to the three of us that in the case of most prophets, God spoke through dreams or visions. In the case of Moses, however, God spoke face to face. God was angry with me for questioning his special relationship with Moses and I developed a skin disease. I was ostracized from everyone for seven long days before God healed me. I had lots of time to repent of my sins of pride, a critical spirit and jealousy.

I am so thankful for the prayers of Moses and Aaron, God's forgiveness, and for the support of the whole community who waited to travel again until I was healed.

As I look back on my life, I am so thankful to God for all the ways God took care of us, and the opportunity to use music to celebrate our gratitude to God.

What do these snapshots of Miriam, the Prophetic Musician have to teach us today? I will point out some things I noticed in the snapshots and look forward to Worship Response time to hear what additional ideas you have.

First, from Exodus 2 when Miriam was a child. I noticed the important role Miriam played in saving the life of Moses. She helped her parents hide the fact that there was a newborn in the house for 3 months and then watching over him when he was placed in the Nile River.

I am challenged to pay attention to how God works through children today when they challenge the status quo when things aren't right and suggest ways to make things better.

Now from the Ex 15, snapshot of Miriam leading the women in praise and thankfulness to God. Initially, I thought we don't have a biblical record of any of Miriam's prophecies. But then I woke up Friday morning, wondering if Miriam's example of using music to express praise and thanksgiving to God might be prophetic for me. Might it be saying to me it isn't right to take God and all that God has given me and does for me for granted? I think God might be inviting me to do better at remembering to be thankful.

The fact that Miriam chose to carry her timbrel as they escaped Egypt suggests to me that she **expected** God to save them and that she would have reason to celebrate. This challenges me to look at my expectations of God. This snapshot also suggests to me of the importance of music in my life. Scripture has many examples of people singing, dancing and playing instruments in worship. Many are found in the Psalms e.g. Psalms 89:1& 2 focuses on singing
I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever.
I will sing, I will sing.
I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever.
I will sing of the mercies of the Lord

With my mouth will I make known
thy faithfulness, thy faithfulness.
with my mouth will I make known
thy faithfulness to all generations.

I will sing of the mercies of the Lord for ever:
I will sing of the mercies of the Lord

Ps. 150:4-6 focuses on instruments and dancing.
4 Praise him with tambourines and dancing,

praise him with stringed instruments and flutes.
5 Praise him with loud cymbals,
praise him with crashing cymbals.
6 Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.

Another example of singing, from the New Testament, is Ephesians 5.19 where Paul encourages the Church in Ephesus to: “Be filled with the spirit speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord

In preparation for today, I noticed that many songs in our hymn books are what I now see as “prophetic” songs. Songs that highlight one or more of the following: things that aren’t right, ways we can do better, and praise to God for God’s help.

For example, Bryan Moyer Suderman’s song, There’s Enough for All
has a vision of how we can do better
at responding to needs around us.
There's enough for all if we would learn to share it,
there’s enough for all if we would learn to see.
There is enough for all,
let's bring our loaves and fishes
and offer them to Jesus
there’s more than enough for you and me .

“Prophetic” music continues to be used today outside of church settings as well, to point out – often to the powers that be – that something isn’t right and that we can do better. E.G.

In July, Mennonites and interfaith allies from the US and Canada went on an 11-day, 135-mile march from Harrisonburg, VA to the powers that be in Washington, DC. singing hymns along the way. They were using music to draw attention to the suffering, death, and destruction unfolding in Gaza.

Miriam’s example of a Prophetic Musician makes me want to pay more attention to the words of songs that I sing, play and listen to both here on Sundays and during the rest of the week.

And now from the snapshot of Miriam’s story in Numbers 12. Miriam messing up ... due to her pride and jealousy suggests to me that I need to stop and discern whether I am seeing from God’s perspective or my own **before** I say something isn’t right and suggest ways we can do better. In addition, I need to always remember to let love guide my words and actions. A prayer chant that reminds me of this. “Lead me in your love, show me the way.” 2x

May God help each one of us, regardless of our age, to see the world around us from God’s perspective. Speak up when things aren’t right, share our visions and dreams from God of how they can be better, and remember to thank and praise God.