

St Andrew's on The Terrace Sunday 12 May 2019 Easter 4

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

The Song of Moses and Miriam

Selected verses from Exodus 15.

15 Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: "I will sing to the LORD, who is highly exalted./ Both horse and driver have been hurled into the sea.../.⁴ Pharaoh's chariots and his army have been hurled into the sea./The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea. ⁵ The deep waters have covered them; /they sank to the depths like a stone./ ⁶ Your right hand, God, was majestic in power. /Your right hand, God, shattered the enemy.../ ¹⁰ you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them./ They sank like lead in the mighty waters. /¹³ In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed./ In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling...."/ ¹⁹ When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, God brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. ²¹ Miriam sang to them: /"Sing to God, who is highly exalted./ Both horse and driver have been hurled into the sea."

Micah 6:4

I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.

Gospel

Matthew 23:37

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing

Responsive Contemporary reading 'Miriam's Psalm' from *WomanWisdom* by Miriam Therese Winter

All: in dark italics, Left hand side: in italics, Right hand side: in plain font

Sing to Her with joy, / ***we are Her sisters and Her daughters. /Our liberation is at hand/ we are coming through the waters. We who were once enslaved will not let past pain overtake us. They brought our courage to its knees, but they could never break us. We who were so long silent shout the word we are discerning. We took the long way out and we will never be returning. Sing to Her with joy,/ we are Her sisters and Her daughters./ Our restoration is at hand we are coming through the waters. A short while in the wilderness will strengthen and prepare us. They tell of the heat and aridness, but they will never scare us. We are intimate with barren wastes, our very lives were aborted. Our deserts bloom from hidden springs that have yet to be reported.*** Dance for Her with joy,/ ***we are Her sisters and Her daughters./ Our transformation is at hand, /we are coming through the waters. We can see into the promised land, there are giants there to top us. They may delay our coming in, but they will never stop us. We managed to make it on our own, but no more isolation. Together we turn our world around. We are a new creation. Sing and dance with Her,/ we are Her Sisters and Her daughters./ Our celebration is at hand, we are coming through the waters.***

Reflection for the Gathering

When I was studying for the ministry in the 1990s, feminist biblical studies scholars were just making the discovery that the long song of triumph in Exodus 15 was in fact not necessarily the Song of Moses, as it had been attributed and is still attributed in older translations of the Bible. They were discovering that there are signs that the whole chapter, not just the chorus at the end, is a song which may well have been authored and sung by women, led by female leadership. Scholars who specialise in looking at sources of the words within the Bible have found evidence for "identifying the song more closely with Miriam than with Moses. "...the identification of the song with Moses was likely secondary,"...there is "evidence of ancient women's leadership roles, particularly in composing and performing songs of triumph, to suggest that the song may have been ascribed to Miriam before it was transferred to Moses." Also. "...we can see evidence that Miriam, not Moses, sings for the entire people. Whereas Moses opens his song with אֶשְׂרָא, "I shall sing" (Exodus 15:1), Miriam says שִׁירוּ, "sing" (15:21), in the imperative plural, suggesting that she is leading the entire congregation." While older translations of the Bible label this chapter "the Song of Moses", the NIV version from which Gavin read earlier names the chapter Song of Moses and Miriam. Some writers would argue that the more accurate title is "Song of Miriam"

When an ancient myth or story comes to us from a thoroughly patriarchal society, women are not going to be to the forefront of the telling. So, when women are named in a narrative from a patriarchal setting it is a truly special

occasion, suggesting a truly special woman or women. The Exodus story is populated with such women. Moses' mother and father are not named, nor is his sister in the story of Moses being left in a basket by the bulrushes. Named, however, are the two Hebrew midwives who cunningly used their womanly arts to preserve the lives of many male Hebrew babies, tricking Pharaoh with women's talk. That is a fascinating little side story which you can find in Exodus chapter 1. Miriam's role is key, it

“... brackets the Exodus story at its beginning and end. The story begins with Moses' sister standing by the threatening banks of a river, watching as her baby brother is drawn safely from the water. It ends with Miriam standing by the previously threatening banks of the Re(e)d Sea, watching as the people are drawn safely out of the parted waters, and then singing and dancing in triumph.¹

Miriam's role does not end there. She dares to speak out, with Aaron, against their more famous brother's behaviour in marrying a Cushite woman. The story makes it sound as though this is why she is stricken with leprosy. This illness though, gives another important clue as to the people's affection and loyalty for Miriam. In Numbers 12:15 we are told that when it was found Miriam had a skin disease, she was “...confined outside the camp for seven days, **and the people did not move on till she was brought back.**” (italics mine) Miriam was a key leader in the Exodus and when she fell into trouble the people did not abandon her in the wilderness.

Miriam first comes to light as a young girl, speaking up to an Egyptian princess and cleverly arranging for her own mother to wet nurse her own baby. She one of a trio of leaders key in assisting the movement of the people out of Egypt. At the crossing of the waters, she leads the women in a triumphal dance and song of triumph. When she is in need, the people wait for her recovery. Then, at the last, in Numbers 20:1 we read “In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.” Again, this legendary woman is named. The location of her death is identified. Both indicate Miriam's standing in the community of faith.

In more than one place in the Bible songs of triumph occur and frequently no woman's name is identified. But, if you read that tambourines are being played, then you can be sure women were present. Tambourine's were a woman's instrument and their presence indirectly identifies the presence of women. Some of those women will be anonymous mothers and daughters and sisters, aunts, grandmothers and daughters in law. Women who worked within the frameworks of their society at the time, women who baked and cooked and created clothing, who kept the household operating as the people moved through wilderness places and desert spaces. Some of us get to be a Helen Clark, a Jenny Shipley or a Jacinda Ardern. More of us work within a smaller sphere, creating music for the partners, children and wider families in which we move and have our being, as well as working within the workforce and for the community. Some of us get to be a Margaret Reid Martin, a Joan Anderson, a Marg Schrader or a Pamela Tankersley or, more of us simply work where we are placed, taking up leadership roles which are hidden and obscure. I counted the proportions at the recent Presbytery Minister's day and found women in this area had made it to a third of the group. In our Parish Council the women are far in the majority as leaders of this parish.

Here Miriam took a tambourine in her hand and led the women in dancing and music. May we be able to lead others in a dance of gratitude for the bondage from which we have been liberated, for the slavery we have left behind, for the addicted traps from which we have been released. Sometimes it is only a woman who can provide the leadership and companionship needed for someone to get out of the black hole in which they find themselves.

Female leadership frequently offers a different dimension. In the brief Gospel reading we heard Jesus in a moment of deep grief, using a female metaphor to describe his love for the people. Like a mother hen, he wished to take the people under his wings to protect and care for them. Being warmed by the body heat of the mother hen can be a matter of life and death for her chicks. Jesus knew the people's acceptance of him was of that order of magnitude. Like Jesus, Miriam is a redeemer figure. Like the Christ, here she helps to bring people out of what ties them down, holds them back. She leads the people out of whatever enslaves them. Release from bondage is one of the six forms of salvation Marcus Borg names in his book 'Convictions'. There are many activities, attitudes, illnesses, ill-health and restrictions from which we need to be freed. Just as the Hebrew slaves needed to be freed from the oppression of Pharaoh, so we need release from that which binds us – it will be different for each one. We all have our own oppressions and addictions to bear. We can, however, come through the waters of difficulty. There are leaders who will take us through, Leaders like Moses and Aaron but also leaders like Miriam, who help us dance in triumph at the defeat of the enemies of the spirit and soul; who help us dance in joy Because at last we are free!

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 minister@standrews.org.nz

¹ <https://thetorah.com/re-encountering-miriam/>