

Miriam the Prophet
Exodus 2:1-10; 15:20-21; Micah 6:4
October 2, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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More than 20 years ago, Dave and I were both working for Virginia Tech. There was an Exxon service station right across the street from the campus. It was the old-fashioned kind of service station, where you could actually get your car serviced. They had a great mechanic, who would service your car and do minor repairs. He was a wonderful guy, and I trusted him with my car. So, like a lot of Virginia Tech employees, when my car needed service, I would drop it off at this station and then walk across the street to work. Unfortunately, this Exxon station was old fashioned in another way, too. The owner was an older man who simply had no use for women. Even more unfortunately, I was intimidated by him. Whenever I brought my car in to be serviced, I said a little prayer that the owner would be away and I could speak directly to the mechanic.

Once, I brought my car in because there was a noise that needed to be checked out. I came into the office, and Dave stood several steps behind me. The owner was there, so I had to deal with him. I said, "Good morning! I need your mechanic to take a look at my car. It has a new noise in the right front side." The owner completely ignored me. He turned to Dave, standing over by the door, and asked, "Which side?"

Dave wisely kept quiet. I said, "The passenger side, front."

He never looked at me, but continued talking to Dave. "What kind of noise?"

Dave still didn't respond. The owner still didn't look at me. I said, "It's kind of a knocking or banging."

"I'll call when it's ready," the owner said to Dave. "What's your number?" Dave, bless him, said, "It's Cathy's car. Call her."

I wish I could tell you that I stormed out in a huff. But I didn't. My car needed work, and I trusted the mechanic there, who was actually very nice to me, and I had to get to my office really soon. So, I left my car and fumed about this story over the next few weeks while I surveyed all my women friends about which shops in town I could trust to care not only for my car but also my humanity.

Professional women often report that in meetings they will make a suggestion and it will be passed over as though it had not been said. Just moments later, a man will make the very same suggestion in almost the same words and it will be received with approval. If this suggestion is implemented and succeeds, he will get the credit. It happens. All. The. Time. And I would bet that every woman in this room today has had a similar experience of being silenced or ignored or made invisible, of having someone turn to the man behind them for the answer, of having people assume that they don't know what they are talking about, when in fact they do.

Being invisible to the people around you is a deeply humiliating experience. It is why shunning is such an effective social punishment. It sticks in your craw for a long, long time, as you can hear in my story today. The most serious, capable, wonderful women are often treated as though they are not serious or capable or wonderful at all. And I just want to say to the universe, "Stop it!"

And then I wonder, who is invisible to me? Whom have I overlooked?

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Now let us consider Miriam. You know the story of her childhood. She is Moses' and Aaron's older sister. Aaron was born before the Pharaoh gave the order to kill all the Israelite baby boys, but Moses is not so lucky. Their mother tries to hide baby Moses. It works for about three months, but then she knows she has to take a desperate risk to save his life. She makes a little papyrus basket and coats the bottom with pitch. Then she nurses Moses one last time and kisses him with tears in her eyes. She hums a little lullaby as she places him in the basket and sets him adrift at the edge of the river, where she knows Pharaoh's daughter comes to bathe. Then, praying for Moses' safety, she leaves. But she sets her daughter Miriam to watch and see what happens.

Sure enough, Pharaoh's daughter and her servants come to the river to bathe, and Pharaoh's daughter spots the basket. She lifts a crying Moses out and knows immediately that he is one of the condemned Hebrew babies. But she has pity on him and wants him to live, which can only mean taking responsibility for him herself.

Just then Miriam pops up and offers to find a nursemaid for the baby. Pharaoh's daughter accepts, and Miriam goes to fetch her mother, who is now to be paid a servant's wages to nurse her own child and to raise him as Pharaoh's grandson. This little girl Miriam is quick thinking enough to know when to insert herself into the situation, and how to negotiate a positive outcome. Even as a child, she is a key player in Israel's salvation story.

I am sure you remember that Moses comes to manhood in Pharaoh's palace, and when he is full grown, he gets in trouble for defending Israelites from mistreatment by the Egyptian task masters. Moses runs away to the area around Mt. Sinai. He takes a wife, becomes a shepherd, and fathers children several times over. He becomes an old man. All this before he spots a burning bush on the mountainside and receives his call from God to return to Egypt and free his people from Pharaoh's oppressive hand.

The Bible is silent about Miriam's life, about her growing up, her work, her faith, her leadership, until Moses returns. He is an old man, and she is older still, but when the people of Israel finally escape to the desert and then to the edge of the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's soldiers bearing down on them from the rear, and the waters finally part so that they can escape, tradition teaches that Moses stays at the rear to hold the waters back while Miriam leads the people across to safety. Then the waters come crashing down on all the Egyptian soldiers, and the danger is past.

There is great celebration, with dancing and singing. The song of the people is the oldest fragment of scripture in the whole Bible, and the very first liturgy of the great liberation movement of God:

“Sing to the Holy One,” [they sang], “for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

The Bible as we read it today says that Moses sang this song first, and Miriam sang it back, sort of call-and response. But we know that women were the singers and drummers in that culture, not the men, so I can imagine that this was Miriam's song all along, Miriam leading the women in celebration, and Moses got the credit for singing it first. When the people cross the waters safely, scripture calls Miriam a prophet. She is the first woman in the Bible to be recognized in this way, meaning she spoke to God on behalf of the people and to the people on behalf of God. She could prophesy.

The Bible doesn't say much more about Miriam until the Book of Numbers, when we read that one day out in the Wilderness, Miriam and Aaron dare to criticize Moses. God is angry at both of them, but only Miriam is punished, the Bible says. She was uppity, say the rabbis who have interpreted this passage for centuries. This little snippet of scripture about Miriam and Aaron criticizing Moses has been used in Sunday School lessons to warn little girls not to get ahead of themselves or ahead of those who are actually called to be leaders, and this passage has been used to argue that women should not be in pulpits. Don't get too big for your britches.

The writers and editors of the Bible silenced Miriam, they ignored her story, they overlooked her, as women have been silenced and ignored and overlooked forever. Most of her story is not told at all. But we know she was important in the Israel's salvation history. Without her, baby Moses would have drifted away down the river. She was a leader of the people. She sang the song of liberation. There is so much more I want to know about Miriam's life. I don't want her contributions to be swept under the rug, but the Bible writers seem to insist that the story be told only from Moses' point of view.

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Fortunately, God does not see Miriam as insignificant, as less than, as uppity. God knows Miriam as God's own gift to the people of Israel. In the book of the Prophet Micah, written 500 years after the Book of Exodus was recorded, we hear God challenge the people of Israel, who are complaining against God:

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!  
I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery,  
and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The gift that proves that God loves the people of Israel and has done extraordinary things for them. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Equal billing. Equal value in God's eyes. God sees Miriam's gifts of leadership and prophecy and song, even if the Bible writers did not.

We may be silenced and overlooked by those around us. It is built into our culture. It happens all the time. And it feels awful when it happens to us. But God sees us, even when no one else does. God knows our gifts. God remembers our contributions. God knows our name and our story. God does not forget.

May we all see with God's eyes, with God's own heart. May no one be invisible to us.

Amen