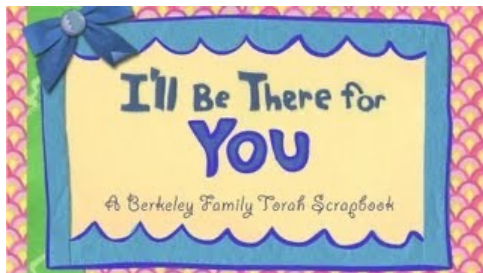
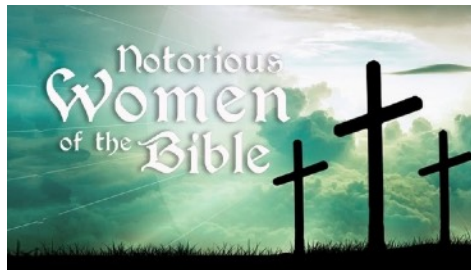


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
The Reverend Dr Scott Everett Couper  
Second Sunday after Easter Sunday  
April 18, 2021  
Third Sunday after Easter

"Miriam: The First Female Prophet"

Second of six in a series entitled "Happy Easter (Thanks to Women)!"

Exodus 15:19-21

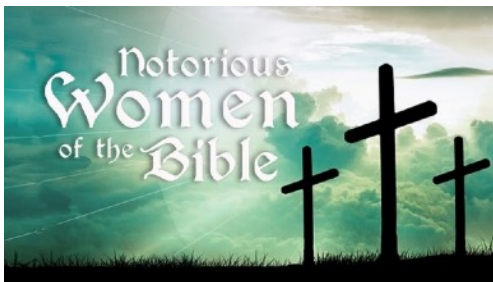


For our lesson about Miriam, the first female prophet, let us watch this music video entitled "I'll be There for You" rather than listen to boring ol' me recount the history of the Exodus: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155576077037449> (3:48)



So, we learned a few things about Miriam in this wonderful music video.<sup>1</sup>

Miriam is Moses' older sister and thus also Aaron's brother. Many of us already know that Moses was the first prophet. Some of us know that Aaron was the first priest. Yet, not many of us know that Miriam was the first female prophet. The fact that there is a gradual decrease of knowledge from the two brothers to the sister is, in and of itself, a bit of a scandal, I think. That we know little about Miriam demonstrates that there exists a gender bias in our religious education and thus a gender bias in the biblical narratives from which our spiritual education derives.



It is this scandal that is the thesis of our sermon series entitled "Happy Easter) Thanks to Women!" wherein we give credit where credit is due: to women

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<sup>1</sup> Performed by six families studying the Torah in Berkley, California.

for our spiritual heritage. Women were the first to the tomb, the first to proclaim “He is risen!”, and among the most dedicated servants who constituted the early Christian Church born on Pentecost (May 23) and, as we will see later in the series, often bankrolled it.



Miriam is the sister that watched over Moses as he floated down the river to Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2:4). Next, Miriam rather cleverly negotiated the Pharaoh’s daughter to have her mother *paid* as a wet nurse to her own biological son (Exodus 2:7-9). Much later in the Exodus story, we hear how Miriam with Aaron and Moses, led the Hebrew people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea. Our scripture this morning, designates Miriam as a ‘prophetess’. Therefore, Miriam was the first female prophet who led her people in worship and praise (Exodus 15:20-21).<sup>2</sup>

Yet, let us get right to the heart of our thesis about giving credit where credit is due. I speculate, with some biblical research, that Miriam was not just the first female prophet, but she was the first victim of plagiarism or artistic copyright theft!

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<sup>2</sup> The designation prophetess is also implied in Numbers 12:2 and 12:6.



If we look at Exodus 15:21, it says Miriam sang the lyrics to what is known as ‘The Song of the Sea’: “Sing to the Lord for he his highly exulted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea”. Earlier in Exodus (15:1), we read that Moses sang a song often known as the ‘Song of Moses *and* Miriam’ with lyrics “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exulted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea”.  
HmMMMM. They are the same.



Since both Moses and Miriam are connected in the text to the ‘Song of the Sea’, I speculate that the song was originally attributed to Miriam, just as other songs were attributed to Hannah (I Samuel 2:1-10), Deborah (Judges 5:1-20), and other women (I Samuel 18:7, 21:11, 29:5, and II Samuel 1:20). “The process by which

the name of a dominant figure like Moses could become attached to a piece of poetry and supplant the name of a less common figure like Miriam” is likely.<sup>3</sup>

*Postmortem* plagiarism is a relatively minor offence. A far more serious story of Miriam’s marginalization as a leader of the Exodus comes later in the book of Numbers.



As the music video recounted, and as the scriptures relate to us, after the manna in the wilderness episode, “Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses” (Numbers 12:1). They conspired with one another, “‘Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?’ they asked. Hasn’t [God] also spoken through us?’” Well, God did not take kindly to the verbal insurrection, and worried about a *coup d’etat* among the siblings. So, “The anger of the Lord burned against them” (Exodus 12:9). Notice this whole time the pronouns are plural - “them”. Aaron *and* Miriam considered insubordination against their brother, Moses.

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<sup>3</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, “Miriam”, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 520-521.



So, how is it that when God left the three siblings, Miriam stood there alone stricken with leprosy?! You have got to be kidding me! Only Miriam, seemingly, was punished – and quite horribly. Aaron, while still admitting his own complicity pled to Moses “Please, my lord, do not hold against *us* the sin we have so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away” (Numbers 12:11-12). The story continues with Miriam being restored, but only after she is banished from the camp for seven days. I don’t know about you, but this narrative, like the one that occurs in the Garden of Eden, seems to place an unjust degree of blame and guilt on the woman.

Without Eve, there would be no humanity.



Without Miriam, there would have been no liberation, no Exodus. For it was Miriam, and Miriam alone, who was dedicated enough to watch over her infant brother and clever enough to arrange for his upbringing as the son of the Pharaoh. Other prophets, such as Micah, acknowledged her significance when he said on behalf of God, “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” (Micah 6:4). God sent Miriam to redeem God’s chosen people. Miriam’s story concludes in the desert of Kadesh where she died and was buried (Numbers 20:1). Kadesh was the same place where Moses drew water from the rock (Numbers 20:1).



Despite Miriam being the focus of this entire message, we actually know little about her. And there is a reason why we know *little* about Miriam, while we know so much *more* about her brothers Moses and Aaron. One biblical scholar,

quoting another wrote, “In presenting Miriam, biblical writers from earliest to latest periods of composition offer only glimpses of a woman in the wilderness community who exercised leadership in the cultic sphere and who claimed authority as a spokesperson for the Divinity... ‘At one time much more was told about her which is now completely lost’”.<sup>4</sup> Another scholar wrote, Miriam is “a strong and enigmatic figure. It is possible that she was a lot stronger than the Bible tells us”, “those who put together various books of the Bible toned down her influence”<sup>5</sup>. “But she was so important that they couldn’t write her out completely”.



Friends, it is my prayer that during this Easter season, especially on Mother’s Day (May 9), and leading to Pentecost, we will recognize the incredible role women have played in our heritage of faith. To do this, we must mine the

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<sup>4</sup> Rita Burns, “Miriam”, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 4, eds. David Freedman, Gary Herion, David Graf, John Pleins, and Astrid Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 870.

<sup>5</sup> “Miriam: The First Female Prophet” in “Women of the Bible” *Life Magazine*, editorial director, Kostya Kennedy (Meredith Corporation, New York, 2021), 39-40. The article quotes and cites Professor Carol Meyers, author of *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*.



scriptures, and appreciate the decree to which women have sometimes been written-out of the narratives or have had their roles downplayed by men who wrote the stories. Worse, they are often presented to be worthier of blame than their male counterparts. Miriam: sister of Moses and Aaron and leader of the Exodus liberation. Respect her.

This was the Word of God. And it was delivered to the People of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen!"