

## **“MIRIAM THE PROPHETESS.”**

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**First Christian Reformed Church**

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**Text for the Sermon: Exodus 15:19-21**

### **Introduction.**

Women have always played an important role in the Bible. This is true in the OT, in the life and ministry of Jesus, in the history of the early church in Acts, and to the present day. More than any other religion, women have been elevated and honored in the Christian faith from the beginning.

For the month of November we will spend our Sunday evenings considering the four named good prophetesses in Scripture. There are three in the OT and one in the NT.

The four named prophetesses we will consider are Miriam, the older sister of Moses; Deborah, the prophetess and judge when Israel was ruled by judges; Huldah, the prophetess in the time of the monarchy during the reign of King Josiah; and finally Anna the NT prophetess in the temple at the time of Jesus' birth.

Let me begin by reminding you again when we are studying the people in the Bible, the Bible is not a history of what people did for God, but what God did through people.

There are no perfectly righteous people in Scripture. Many of them are deeply flawed and broken.

**I Corinthians 1:26-31** For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ... 31 so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

### **Miriam the prophetess.**

#### ***Exodus 1, background.***

Exodus begins with God's people suffering as refugees in a foreign nation. They are slaves in Egypt suffering under the rule of severe taskmasters. They have been abused and oppressed for 400 years.

**Exodus 1:11, 13-14** Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. ... 13 So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves 14 and made their

lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Think Jews in Germany under Hitler; Muslims in Myanmar and China, Christians in northern Nigeria.

And then to add insult to injury, it gets worse, Pharaoh decrees to kill the Hebrew sons.

### ***Exodus 2, birth of Moses, and Miriam saves Moses.***

This is the situation when we come to Exodus 2. A Levite by the name of Amram took a Levite wife named Jochebed they had three children, Miriam, Aaron and Moses. Moses was born during the time of the Pharaoh's decree to kill the Hebrew boys.

You know the story, Jochebed hides baby Moses in the reeds on the banks of the Nile River and Miriam watches nearby when Pharaoh's daughter finds the baby. Miriam must only be about five years old, but already she possesses great wisdom, courage and bravery when she offers to find a nurse for the baby.

Miriam is the instrument in the sovereign providence of God who saves the savior of the nation of Israel.

Moses is delivered from great danger and even death, both from the water and from Pharaoh's command to kill all the baby boys. Miriam was there for this great miracle of God's providence in sending just the right person to save Moses.

All of human history is a history of God's plan of redemption. Moses is the first redeemer of Israel, a savior rescues from death, to save his people from death.

This rescue from the waters of the Nile prepares us for another greater rescue of all the people of Israel from the waters of the Red Sea where we next encounter Miriam again, some 80 years later.

### **Miriam praises God with Moses, Exodus 15:19-21**

**Micah 6:3-4** 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.

What a glorious thing to behold, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, leading Israel through the Red Sea, escaping the bondage of the land of slavery, standing now on the other side victorious.

Exodus 15 contains *two songs*, two hymns of praise, a song of Moses and a song of Miriam.

**Exodus 15:1** Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying,

“I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

**Exodus 15:20-21** Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. 21 And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Moses set the example, he gave the leadership, and sang a song of his gratitude. Then Miriam is introduced, and she sings a song with the women, like an antiphonal response.

These are the first recorded songs/hymns in Scripture. From the beginning of the history of the people of God, they have been a singing people and there have always been new songs.

Both Moses and Miriam are celebrating the deliverance of God over their Egyptian oppressors. The purpose of these songs is to give heartfelt worship to God. The focus is on the redemption of the Lord. God has become my salvation and I will exalt and praise Him. This is doxology.

***Our faith is a doxological faith***, a singing faith, a giving-praise faith. God manifests his glory most gloriously/magnificently through His redemption. God is worthy to be worship, praised, glorified.

This same hope and joy belong to all who flee from the bondage of sin and pass through the waters of baptism, and keep covenant with their God. This is why we are still singing. We sing about what we love.

Christianity is a singing religion. A Christian who doesn't sing is a contradiction in terms. A faith that has no reason to sing, or doesn't break out in singing, is a weak, lame faith.

Remember the hymnal of the church of Jesus Christ is not closed, it has no back cover. Every generation has its own heart language and is always writing a new song.

New songs help us see old truths in a new light, like different facets of a diamond. Every single old hymn we sing was once a new song, once pressing us to try something new, break out of a mold.

Next time a new song is introduced in worship, listen to it closely and listen for old truths expressed in a fresh way and open your heart and mouth to sing to the Lord a new song (Psalm 96:1) which we will be doing for eternity.

Those in the congregation who assist and lead us in praising God are to be considered a great blessing and are owed our deepest gratitude.

We are told Miriam is a *prophetess*. Miriam is the first woman to be called a prophetess, meaning she had some kind of prophetic calling and gifting. She is the first woman to be given the rare privilege of receiving and disseminating a word from the Lord.

In some way the word of the Lord came to her. The only recorded word we have from her is her song which focuses on the Lord's greatness and the greatness of His redemption.

This gives us a glimpse into her heart. She worshiped the Lord with heartfelt emotion. Her song, as brief as it is, as simple as it is, centers on the Lord being highly exalted. She worships in word and melody with instruments, and she leads others in exuberant thanksgiving.

She is in a way the first lady of Israel. She is the first mother of Israel. Miriam was a divinely chosen leader of the people during their sojourn in the wilderness.

### **Prophet/Prophetess/Prophecy.**

God gave His Word to His people and then He gave them preachers to proclaim His Word and call them to obedience. The word prophet means speaker, spokesman. One who pours forth words with fervor or under divine inspiration. One who utters revelations from God's Spirit. A prophet is a person authorized to speak for another.

**Deuteronomy 18** gives us God's definition of a prophet. First, he must be raised up by God from among the Jewish people. It requires a special revelation from God. There is no such thing as a self-proclaimed prophet. Second, God puts the words in the prophet's mouth. The prophet cannot say whatever he wants, and cannot limit God's word in any way. He must speak it all. Third, whenever the prophet spoke in the name of the Lord, his message had to be consistent with revealed truth (13:1-3), and if he made a prediction, it had to be 100% true. False prophets were to be executed.

We know from Numbers 12 that God spoke to Miriam in a way similar to the way He spoke to Moses and Aaron. She was a true prophetess of God.

It is cause for worship that God dealt with His people in so gracious a manner as to give them His servants, representatives, spokesmen to declare His Truth. He gave us His Law and mediators of it.

The divine office of prophet is not to be confused with the *spiritual gift of prophecy*. Prophets spoke for God and gave us divine revelation. The gift of prophecy is not giving divine revelation. You can exercise the spiritual gift of prophecy without being a prophet.

Paul teaches us about this gift in his letters to the churches. I will mention just one.

**I Corinthians 14:1, 3** Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy. ... 3 the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

The spiritual gift of prophecy is the Spirit-given special ability given to some to serve and strengthen the body of Christ by speaking God's truth in ways that challenge, comfort, guide, warn, or reveal sin in a way that leads to repentance and spiritual growth.

Know what God has gifted and called you to do, and receive that with joy. Faithfully obey what He has called you to do, and don't look with envy or jealousy at another person's gift or calling.

Aspire to use your God-given gifts to serve the Lord.

## **Miriam criticizes Moses, Numbers 12**

**Numbers 12:1-16** Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. 2 And they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it.

Most see this as a case of a family quarrel. There is really just one issue, Miriam's jealousy and criticism over who the Lord speaks to. The real concern is not Moses' Cushite (Ethiopian) wife, he has had her for a long time by this point. The time for a complaint was long past. The issue is Miriam thought she was not being recognized as much as Moses.

Miriam is the instigator of the complaint. She is mentioned first, and the verb is feminine. "Now Miriam and Aaron, she spoke against Moses." She led Aaron into the sin.

Her jealousy of Moses leads to finding reasons to complain. Aaron and Miriam question Moses' leadership. They didn't like being subordinate and wanted to be equal with Moses.

This is even though God had honored both of them. Aaron was elevated to head of the priesthood and was the keeper of the Urim and Thummim used to determine the will of God for His people. Miriam was a prophetess and had an honored place among the women of Israel.

All three were gifts from God to His people (Micah 6:4).

But they were still dissatisfied, it was not sufficient. They want God to speak with them in the same way He spoke to Moses.

Miriam had a gift from God, and it was a high calling, but it was not the same gift as Moses'. Instead of rejoicing in the one who gave her the gift, she was focusing on the gift. She should have been filled with awe and gratitude that God had so singularly honored her among women.

This is the sin of doubting God's ways, God's plans. Their ingratitude and arrogance is a disgrace. Her actions were a most serious, she is punished severely with leprosy.

What was her downfall? Jealousy, envy, coveting, desiring gifts she didn't have, desiring things God hadn't given her, wanting what wasn't hers. She let bitterness grow in her heart, bitterness toward her own brother.

Miriam's sin is a warning to all women, to guard your hearts, your affections, your tongue. Do not speak ill of your husband, your family, your pastor, your elders. Don't speak ill of those God has given to you. Do not make yourself unclean by your lips and your heart.

Guard your heart for out of the heart the mouth speaks. Do not grow bitter over the honors, successes, gifts of another. Guard your heart from bitterness, from hardness, from a critical spirit, from lack of forgiveness, from unrepentance.

Bitterness, pride, envy, unforgiveness, unrepentance, all of these are leprosy to the soul. All of these eat away our flesh.

Spend a week like Miriam, spend a week in prayer, reflection, examination, fasting from the world, set apart, separated from all the distraction.

Spend a week in prayer and repentance, in turning over your soul to the Lord in a fresh way.

### **Implications and application.**

Miriam was one of three siblings called by God to bring about the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt. Twice she witnessed the great deliverance of God, first from the waters of the Nile and then from the Red Sea. She led the people of God in joyful celebration and song.

I want to close with pointing out the *parallels between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Miriam,*

Both women were connected to great deliverers.

As Miriam watched over the savior of Israel so another Miriam, Mary, watched over the Savior of the world.

Both Mary the mother of our Lord, and Miriam. Miriam connected to Moses, the foremost human deliverer of the Old Testament, and Mary connected to Jesus, the Messiah Himself.

Both women watched over these deliverers when, as infants, their lives were endangered by wicked kings.

Both women sang songs of praise to God in response to His deliverance - Miriam in Exodus 15, and Mary in Luke 1.

Both women were used by God in the unfolding of His plan of redemption. Miriam was privileged to look after her baby brother, the one whom God used to redeem Israel. And Mary was blessed to give birth to a baby boy, the One who would redeem the world.

Mary was more highly favored, mother of the prophet greater than Moses, and of the greater high priest.