

A Family Affair
Exodus 15:1-21
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
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Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:

¹ I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

² The Lord is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

³ The Lord is a warrior;
the Lord is his name.

⁴ Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

⁵ The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.

⁶ Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power—
your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.

⁷ In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.

⁸ At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

⁹ The enemy said, "I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them."

¹⁰ You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

¹¹ 'Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

¹² You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.

¹³ 'In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

¹⁴ The peoples heard, they trembled;
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.

¹⁵ Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.

¹⁶ Terror and dread fell upon them;
by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone

until your people, O Lord, passed by,
until the people whom you acquired passed by.

¹⁷ You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
the place, O Lord, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established.

¹⁸ The Lord will reign for ever and ever.’

¹⁹ When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea,
the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the
sea on dry ground.

²⁰ Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women
went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. ²¹And Miriam sang to them:
‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.’

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

I am part of a wonderful book club here in Greenville. About half of its members take up space each Sunday here in these pews. We often laugh because we are the book club that actually reads. We love to read so much that at the end of each calendar year, we have begun sharing our individual book lists with one another, including our top five favorite reads. My 2023 top five reads should have included the book, “All My Knotted-Up Life” by Beth Moore. Alas, I didn’t finish it until January 2, 2024, so it will go on this year’s top five list. This book was published in early 2023 and is a memoir. You might be familiar with Beth as a Christian writer, speaker, and Bible study leader. Beth’s memoir is the culmination of a journey that began in the Southern Baptist tradition and has led her to many different arenas and a new church family in the Anglicans. It is also the culmination and story of the term Beth herself coined, *Family Calamity*. I first heard this term over 10 years ago when I sat in on Ladies’ Bible Study in North Carolina that was doing one of Beth’s studies. And it has stuck with me ever since. Here’s what Beth says about it –

“I wonder if it just happens to ring a bell with anybody. Anybody besides me had a little family calamity? Maybe in your family of origin? Maybe in the family that lives under your roof right now. Some of us may not have spoken to some family members in years because of a calamity. But I want you to understand from scripture that there is family calamity all the way from Genesis to Revelation.”

Today we find ourselves in Exodus. In the middle of the desert during a moment of praise, with a little bit of family calamity thrown in.

Officially the call of Moses occurs in Exodus 3, but I would argue that the book of Exodus as a whole is the call of a family...Moses’ family and, ultimately, the family of faith. So, let’s go back to the beginning. Exodus 1:8 tells us,

“Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.”

And then we learn that that king, known as Pharaoh, is threatened by God’s people the Hebrews and begins to oppress them, enslave them, and hold them down. So much so that he

orders all Hebrew male babies to be killed at birth. And this is where the story of Moses' family begins. Two brave midwives allow him to live and then his mother safely wraps him in a basket and places him at the edge of the river Nile, praying for the preservation of his life.

His unnamed sister, whom we later learn is named Miriam, keeps watch over the basket and helps orchestrate a scheme in which Moses is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, but is able to be nursed by his own mother until an appropriate time. Fast forward to Moses as a young adult. He has been raised in Pharaoh's house, but when he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew one something in him snaps. He kills the Egyptian and hides his body in the sand. Moses then flees to the foreign land of Midian. It is there, in chapter 3 that he experiences the call of God in the form of a burning bush. God has seen the struggles of his people and needs Moses to lead them and speak for them. Moses doesn't feel capable, but God reminds him of his brother, Aaron, who can accompany him and help him.

Um. Family Calamity much? I think Moses' family has it in spades. A dangerous birth, a blended upbringing, murder, self-doubt, and much more to come. In fact, the calamity is on full display in our very text for today. Did you catch it? Moses is given the credit for the song of praise. Miriam gets like a footnote at the end. But Miriam's words are the beginning of Moses' song. Hmm... Walter Bruggeman says, "Thus Moses, the official leader, has taken over and preempted the singing first done by the women. This act of preemption is not unlike the early witness to the resurrection of Jesus in Luke. The women were the first witnesses, but it took the verification of the male leaders to authenticate their report."¹

Miriam appears in more Old Testament books than any other female character in Hebrew scripture – she's mentioned in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 1 Chronicles, and Micah! In fact, Micah identifies her on equal footing with her brothers as one of the three whom God used to lead his people out of Egypt –

For 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.²

She may not have been called by way of a burning bush, but her call story is also pretty miraculous and life-long. In fact, if you look up "Miriam" in any Bible dictionary, you will find her listed right behind the definition of "miracles". As I was preparing for today, I found a book in our church library called – Daughters of the Desert: Stories of Remarkable Women from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Traditions. In it, a group of women expand upon the stories of women that we find in scripture. They use research and rich theological imagination to do so. Mary Cronk Farrell writes Miriam's story, and this is how part of it goes –

¹ Walter Bruggeman in The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, p.799.

² Micah 6:4

“Miriam sat dozing until she heard the footsteps of Moses and Aaron. A quick look at their faces told her that her brothers were bickering. *This time*, she thought, *I will not be drawn into it.*

But once they had seated themselves, she caught Moses eyeing the dead fire under her cooking pot. The heat, her weariness, past hurts – all mingled and prickled the back of her neck. She was more than just a cook and tent sweeper.

‘I suppose you’re looking for supper,’ she said.

‘N...n...no.’ He avoided her eyes.

‘Moses, we are God’s Chosen People,’ she said.

‘Sometimes you act as if you’re the Chosen *One*.’

He didn’t answer. But as usual, Aaron had plenty to say.

‘It’s not just you who speaks for the Lord, Brother. Miriam and I also know the Holy One.

We, too, are capable of leading the people in the Lord’s ways.’

Moses opened his mouth to reply, but Miriam cut him off. ‘If not for my quick thinking, you’d never have seen your first birthday. You’d have drifted to the sea in that basket instead of being adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter.’

‘If not for my quick tongue, we’d all still be in Egypt making bricks,’ said Aaron. ‘You’d never have been able to argue our case with Pharaoh, the way you stammer.’

The wind gusted and Miriam threw up her hands to guard her eyes from the blowing sand. The goatskin flap overhead nearly ripped from its lacings.

‘Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting,’ said a voice, booming like thunder, yet with such quiet Miriam heard it most loudly in her heart. Recognizing the voice of the voice of the Almighty, she gasped and bowed her head to the earth.”³

Remember how I said that “miracles” and “Miriam” were listed beside one another in every Bible dictionary? Well, miracles are described as “extraordinary events that manifest divine power, that are wonders to human understanding, and therefore what human beings perceive as signs from God.”⁴ Miriam wrote a song of praise following her people’s escape from the Egyptians because it was a miracle. And she recognized it. First.

Walter Bruggemann reminds us that “The song of Moses is commonly recognized as the oldest, most radical, and important poem in the Old Testament.” But the song of Miriam “is regarded by scholar as being very old, perhaps the oldest Israelite poem we have.”⁵

³ Daughters of the Desert: Stories of Remarkable Women from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Traditions, p.23

⁴ Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible

⁵ Walter Bruggeman in The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.

Poetry and songs are a huge part of Scripture. We have an entire book of them in the Psalms, but we also find them throughout the prophetic books and here, in the Torah. Poetry and songs are how the faith is passed down. It's how our liturgy is created. And all poetry in Scripture reveals some truth about God. In a way that our human brains can comprehend. The story of Moses and the people crossing through the sea has always been a bit hard for me to wrap my brain around. Did they really cross through the sea? Did it look like the way the 1998 blockbuster Prince of Egypt depicted?

With walls of water on each side and clearly visible sea life within? Were thousands of Egyptians really drowned while the Hebrews watched? As I studied this text over the course of the past few weeks, I realized that the details matter less than the truth revealed about God. God is the God of all creation. God hears our prayers and our cries for help. God takes the tools of oppression and does away with their power. THIS is the story Moses and his family were part of. It is the story that has been passed down through the generations and that we, by the grace of God, are also a part of.

I hope you take some time this week to reflect on this song of praise from Exodus 15. It really is rich in imagery, theology, and the truth of God. It models itself after a traditional military victory song. These were popular in the day and age of Moses. When the male warriors would return home from a successful battle, the women would run to the outskirts of town and accompany them home. And as they traveled together, the women would sing and dance and celebrate the victory the men had won for their community. But here's the difference with the song of Moses' family. It is a victory song. But God is the victor. And God is praised extensively – not human beings. This was revolutionary for that day and age. One might say it is revolutionary for our day and age. It celebrates God's might, but it also celebrates God's love and God's creative power. That's revolutionary for a world like Moses' and Aaron's and Miriam's where various gods were worshipped for various things and military alliances were tenuous and ever-changing. It's also revolutionary for a world like ours where we think we can do everything ourselves, where any worldly leader we would celebrate is disappointing, and where redemption and love don't seem to get the final word.

You know, my family is not free of calamity, either. I'm the product of a blended family. My parents divorced when I was 7 and my mom remarried when I was 9. My children have 5 grandparents instead of the normal 4. Despite the fact that I was raised in loving and safe homes, it isn't easy to deal with those realities as a child. And it is sometimes hard as an adult, too. But I have always been a part of a family of faith. And poetry and songs have shaped me. My mom is a church choir director and organist. So, as a kid, my mom and step-dad were in the choir loft while my dad, brother, and I sat in the balcony. My mom retires today after working in the church for over 50 years. She learned the faith from her father's ARP family that only sang from the psalms in their worship services. And from her mother's Presbyterian family that valued all manner of church music. She was raised in a little country Presbyterian church where she began playing the organ for her congregation at age 14. And one Sunday morning, when I was about 12, and my mom was leading the choir, I felt the call of God, too. I decided I wanted to be a preacher one day. One might say, it's a family affair.

The world needs us, the family of faith, to sing our songs, to pass down our stories, and to tell the world the truth about God. Some of us may write the songs. Some of us may sing the songs. Some of us may listen to the songs. Some of us may document the songs. But God needs us all. There is a call for each of us in the family of faith, here at Westminster and in the church universal. Thanks be to God. Amen.

