

Miriam - just a sister away...

Sisters and brothers, I would like to look at the sermon text from Numbers from the perspective and with the knowledge of a 21st century woman, and with only one focus: relationship. Relationship between the people the story contains, and especially the relationship between the two women in the story. Nevertheless all the persons in the story can be role models for all of us, men and women...

The Bible often invites us to share in the details of human relationships. We are well acquainted with the rivalry between the two brothers Jacob and Esau, the battles of David and Saul, the friendship of David and Jonathan and many more.

We know much less about the relationships between women. They are generally only mentioned when their relationships impact the lives of important men.

To the writer of the book of Numbers, therefore, it probably seemed sufficient to mention:

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses on account of the Ethiopian woman he married..." (Numbers 12:1)

Yet in this one line there is a hint to a story about a relationship between two women. A serious discord between two women: in this case, sisters-in-law. And even though there is nothing more than this one clue about their conflict, and we are left to envision the details on our own, we can be thankful that the Bible is honest about the friction that often emerges within families.

What fault did Miriam find in her brother's new wife?

What role did Moses play in the tension between his wife and his sister?

Why did Miriam turn against her sister-in-law?

What were the signs of their conflict?

While the fate of Moses' Ethiopian bride and the relationship between the sisters-in-law were obviously of no interest to the ancient narrator, for us today looking for stories about people relating to one another can become of great interest. We recognise that what has not been reported can be as important as what has been told.

We always need to listen for the untold story as well.

Miriam's story runs like an underground stream through the story of the Exodus of the people of Israel. Her story emerges at times and then sinks back into the hidden currents of the story.

Up until the time of her brother's marriage, Miriam had been satisfied with working behind the scenes. Her unique spirit of praise and gift for song had helped her to keep up the hopes of the camp, as they made their way from the slave quarters of

Egypt, through the deliverance at the Red Sea and the uncertainties of the wilderness...

Miriam was, no doubt, grateful just for the opportunity to be near her brother once again and to share, however unofficially, in his ministry as leader of the Hebrew people.

In a time when a woman was almost exclusively bound to the family and domestic affairs, Miriam, as Moses' closest female relative, probably enjoyed her brother's confidences and found herself as an often needed advisor.

She most likely experienced a certain amount of visibility as Moses' sister...

In addition to her own talents as a leader, Miriam's relationship to Moses made her a woman of influence in the Hebrew camp.

She is one of the few women in scripture identified as a prophet.

For many she is a wellspring of vision, passion and commitment to action; and besides the biblical stories a lot of legends and narrations about her can be found as sources to try to reconstruct Miriam's life story.

No doubt, Miriam was as gifted as her younger brother Moses.

Her reputation as a poet and a singer must have made her a charismatic figure not only among the Hebrew women.

She is one of the few women in the Old Testament whom we come to know for herself – both for her strengths and her weaknesses – and not only for her role as someone's mother or wife.

Noted for her courage and cleverness, Miriam played an important role in setting the stage for Israel's history of liberation.

At the shore of their deliverance from the Red Sea, where God was made known to them as liberator, she encouraged the other women to join her in praise and song and dance.

"Sing to the Lord, for the Lord has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider the Lord has thrown into the sea." (Ex 15:21)

It was Miriam whom her younger brother Moses had to thank for saving his life when he was still a baby.

When their mother could no longer hide Moses from the Pharaoh's edict to kill all newborn Hebrew sons, it was Miriam who kept watch over the floating basket carrying her brother's endangered life down the river.

When the basket stumbled into the arms of a barren Pharaoh's daughter, it was Miriam who convinced the princess to let a Hebrew slave woman nurse the hungry child. The princess never knew that the young girl who appeared out of nowhere, was providing an occasion for mother and son to be together again

While Moses was raised as a prince in the house of the Pharaoh among luxury and privilege, Miriam was spending her days in her slave quarters. She knew all the time that her younger brother was still alive. And she was looking forward to the day when they would be reunited as sister and brother.

They had achieved that and more. Not only could sister and brother be together again, but what is so much more: the Hebrews now were a free people.

But something happened to threaten Miriam's favoured position: her brother Moses took a wife. And to make things worse, the woman he married was an outsider, a foreigner – an Ethiopian woman, to be exact.

Amazingly quickly the poet and prophet of praise and thanksgiving became an uncomfortable troublemaker. The same gifts with which Miriam had once motivated and united the people under her brother's leadership, she now used to undermine his leadership.

However, a woman's word alone did not carry much weight at that time. Miriam could never have hoped to succeed in bringing a case against Moses by herself. She needed the support of a man... This was where their brother Aaron came in. Miriam set out to persuade Aaron to join her in challenging Moses' leadership. And to do this, she had to make use of what she knew to be a sore spot between the two brothers.

In Egypt Aaron had worked alongside Moses to secure the freedom of the Hebrews. No doubt Miriam reminded Aaron that he, too, had been instrumental in the people's liberation.

Had he not stood in front of the Pharaoh along with Moses?
Had he not been the one speaking out loud when Moses could only stammer?
Had he not kept guard over Israel while Moses was in touch with the Lord?

Miriam had well observed that Aaron had been completely overshadowed by their younger brother Moses... even though Aaron had always been more articulate. It followed, she reasoned to Aaron, that the two of them were as much leaders as Moses:

"Is it through Moses only that the Lord has spoken? Has he not also spoken through the two of us?" (Numbers 12:2)

Miriam and Aaron were soon to discover that the difference between their leadership and Moses' lay in the fact that Moses had been appointed by God to be the leader of the Hebrew people... and that that made all the difference.

And it makes me think: if Miriam dared enough to challenge her brother's sacred leadership... how far would she go with her sister-in-law who could not show any official or even spiritual position?

If you remember the story: in the end God came to the defence of Moses. But Moses' new wife was not so lucky. She was an easy target and was left to defend herself.

In all fairness to Miriam – she might have had good reasons to be concerned about her brother's marriage...

Could this marriage to a foreign woman be interpreted by some as a compromise in his loyalty to his own people? His new wife was not a Hebrew: she was a Cushite, an Ethiopian and, therefore, an African.

Perhaps Miriam feared that, in some people's heads, Moses' new wife would be seen as somehow being related to just the people from whom God had set the Hebrews free?

Perhaps Miriam simply wanted to protect her brother from all sorts of gossip and suspicion that surely would spread through the camp as soon as some realised that Moses had married a neighbour of their former slave masters?

Perhaps Miriam's concerns were justified?

But certainly she was not right in making something like a public crime out of Moses' marriage.

Moses was a prominent leader. And that alone could have made life difficult for his wife – whoever she was.

The fact that she was a foreigner did not help her.

Moses' wife was a stranger, strange to the customs and ways of Moses' people, strange to their God.

And to Miriam she was more than an outsider, she was a threat.

...a threat to Miriam's position among her own people.

Unlike the former days when Miriam could go in and out of Moses' tent to confer whenever she needed...

...to get his attention... to give or ask for advice...

her younger brother was no more as accessible to her as he used to be. The confidences that sister and brother had once shared became the privileges of his new wife.

Naturally, Miriam's influence and visibility suffered.

She no longer accompanied Moses in public or even spoke on his behalf at special occasions.

She no longer got as much attention from the people as she used to. Miriam had to come to terms with the bitter fact that there was a new woman in her brother's life. And she resented her sister-in-law, the intruding stranger.

Miriam might have remembered: how she had given unselfishly for her brother's ministry; how since she was a young girl and he a crying baby, she had made a career of working on his behalf and in his shadow.

It wasn't fair.

Was this the thanks she got?

All her years of sacrifice and hard work were about to be wiped out by a woman who, Miriam felt, was not suitable to her brother.

Hurt and frustrated Miriam set out to make life for her Ethiopian sister-in-law miserable.

And she counted on the other Hebrew women's support.

Many of them might have envied the woman who was lucky enough to marry their celebrated leader... And they possibly were ever so glad to be on Miriam's side – against the "intruder" in the camp.

Admittedly, the details of this reconstruction of the tension between Miriam and her sister-in-law may be taken from tiny almost invisible biblical hints.

Nevertheless, it is always true that petty jealousies and lack of communication can create a considerable amount of conflict within families.

And admittedly, it is not always easy to share... a sister with her husband... a brother with his wife... a child with a new partner in life and so on...

In the case of Miriam, her envy and her insecurity made her blind to the possibility that in her Cushite sister-in-law she might have found a friend, not an enemy.

Had she taken the time to cultivate a relationship, instead of conspiring against her sister-in-law, Miriam might have found understanding, sisterhood and solidarity.

Possibly – when Moses married the African woman, Miriam was not losing a brother but gaining a sister...

But: Miriam's jealousy distorted her view.

It did not allow her to share power and responsibility, to build bridges and be enriched by the presence of another person...

by the stranger with new and interesting insights, with a new cultural background, and a new approach to life.

Saying Yes to the stranger and being open to new relationships can make our lives rich and whole.

Miriam did not try it out.

But we can!

Let us remember from today's story that we are always just a sister or a brother away from each other, and that God wants us to be family.

Amen.