

## Sermon

What more can I do on a baptism Sunday than giving the girl with the great name Miriam a role model, a soul sister, a mother figure... a friend?

Miriam is not only a beautiful name. It is also a way of life.

Miriam is smart, courageous and creative. Miriam celebrates the moment more than anything else. She has this awesome ability to – for a moment – forget the nightmares of the past and the anxieties of the future. She takes the only possible piece of happiness and shares it with others. She sings in the face of exhaustion and fear. She dances because she is alive; and only that counts.

Miriam's story runs like an underground stream through the story of the Exodus of the people of Israel. And Miriam is one of the only women in scripture identified as a prophet.

She is a source of vision, passion and commitment to action.

When we open the book of Exodus, Pharaoh has launched a pogrom against the Hebrews. He is afraid that if they grow too populous, they will rise in rebellion against their Egyptian masters. So, he has given orders to kill every new born male Hebrew baby. But Moses' mother is determined to save her child. For a time, she hides him in her home. And when that becomes impossible, she puts him in a boat-like basket and lets him float on the Nile near the spot where the Pharaoh's childless daughter usually takes her bath.

She then moves out of sight and leaves Miriam on the scene to observe what's happening. And when Pharaoh's daughter discovers and claims the little boy, Miriam is right there to suggest that she could find a woman to breastfeed the little one.

Thanks to Miriam, the mother gets to nurse her own child, and she is even paid for it. And all because Miriam was there in the shadow... played her role... and played it well.

We don't meet Miriam again for many years.

In Exodus 15 the grown-up woman is called "the prophet" Miriam – which means that she has become a spokesperson for God.

It was Moses who stretched out his hand over the sea so that people could walk across on dry land. It was Moses who then stretched out his hand once more to bring the huge walls of water crashing down on the Egyptian army.

And "then", says our text, "the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took her tambourine in her hand; and all of the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing." And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and chariots he has thrown into the sea." (Ex15:20f).

It turns out that Miriam's song is the much older version of what later becomes Moses' long song of praise and thanksgiving, which is much more known than Miriam's original two verses.

A Jewish prayer book, the Haggada, tells us: "It is the task of every generation to see themselves as if they had left Egypt. Tell your son and your daughter on every day... the Lord did not only save our fathers and mothers, he is saving us, too - every single day..."

Each believer sees the liberation from slavery in Egypt as a personal experience with God that everybody can always rely on... That can give us safe ground on our journeys through floods and deserts and times of uncertainty and despair.

The Jewish tradition asks us to see ourselves... and imagine ourselves walking out of Egypt... (*pause*)

...each of us has to go through phases of difficult decisions in life. Either we put up with what we have or what is there – or we dare to leave, set off for something new, risk something and leave behind what is well known.

Each of us knows life situations causing pain and worry. It makes us feel uncertain, frightened and exposed....

And often we don't quite know where we belong, what to believe, how to cope.

In whatever phase we are right now, the Jewish tradition of prayer asks us to see and question ourselves:

Who am I at the moment?

What must I leave behind in my life?

What holds me back?

Which doors are open for me?

What am I called to?

What must I get rid of?

What must I risk?

How much can I dare?

And how much can I cope with?

The ancient story of crossing the Red Sea is telling us drastically, what will happen to that which wants to hold us back: it gets drowned.

And only if I dare to walk through the floods trusting in God and the liberation ahead will I eventually arrive at something new... experience something new or change into somebody new and be able to rejoice again.

God saves us all - that is Jewish and Christian believing and thinking: it is God offering us stable ground and safe places again after storms and threats, after fear and despair.

In Miriam's case relief and gratitude are expressed by singing & dancing...

What she and her people experienced was far beyond what words could tell.

Their flight from Egypt had been their only chance. And failing in this escape would have certainly meant cruel oppression, slavery again, or even death:

the Egyptians followed them with heavy chariots... a highly developed weapon of their time... Some high-tech stuff, if you like, that hardly any other nation could call their own. But even though they were armed to the teeth they drowned and died. The ground gave way under their feet... and none of their terrific weapons were any help to them...

Miriam sings about a God who abolishes slavery and destroys weapons to free his people and lead them to the Promised Land.

Miriam herself never reached the Promised Land.

The Bible refers to her grave as a place for pilgrims outside Israel. But she has succeeded in setting off and leaving life conditions that were just not bearable anymore.

And thus, Miriam becomes a mother of faith for us and many others.  
She is living in all those who have to leave their present lives behind for whatever reasons.  
She is in all those who conquered their fear, and fought against oppression, violence and despair, who never lost their belief in the dream of a better time and a new earth and a promised land where milk and honey flow....  
She is in those who never lose hope however much life is asking of them.  
...and in the end, she is celebrating new life with a new song.  
She is thanking and singing for a moment of peace and a short period of rest.  
She knows well that new struggles lie ahead (for the Israelites it was the desert that lay ahead of them), but she finds the courage to celebrate the tiny moment of joy and relief...and share it with others.

We all are Miriam – in one way or the other.  
We all know Miriams, people we have met, people who survived pharaohs, deaths and devils, and carried on.

We all are invited to sing with our lives God's great song of a human world full of love and peace.

“Sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously...  
he has abandoned the wars and destroyed the weapons  
and he will always be there in spite of the floods  
to encourage us and to save us.”

Remember that always:  
Miriam is not only a name, it is a way of life: it is the moment that counts... the moments of happiness in all that life holds in store for us!  
Amen.