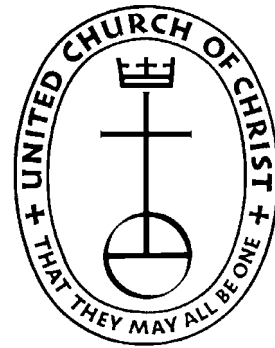


Women of Defiance: Miriam and the Pharaoh's Daughter

A Sermon By —
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This sermon tells the stories of women whose behavior challenges our human tendency to separate and divide people into "us" versus "them." It challenges the ease with which we slip into racism, xenophobia, heterosexism and patriarchy. It calls us to look at everyone, as the Quakers do, as people with the light of God's love aflame within them.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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Exodus 1:8-2:10

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The stories in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, are not descriptions of factual history, but rather imaginative stories that helped bind together the people of ancient Israel. They are also stories that can transcend their ancient setting to speak to us today.

Let me read the same passage from Exodus that I read last week. But this time from a translation by Clark University Professor Everett Fox. Steeped in Judaism, he worked for 25 years on his Torah translation, guided by the principle that the Hebrew Bible, like much literature of antiquity, was meant to be read aloud. Consequently, it should be translated with careful attention to rhythm and sound. His translation tries to mimic the rhetoric of the Hebrew language preserving such devices as repetition, allusion, alliteration and wordplay. He uses the Hebrew word Yosef for Joseph, Moshe for Moses, and YHWH for God. He uses "it" when referring to the Hebrew people and "they" when referring to Egyptians

Now a king arose over Egypt, who had not known Yosef. He said to his people: "Here, this people, the Children of Israel, it is many-more and mightier in number than we! Come-now, let us use-our-wits against it, lest it become many-more, and then, if war should occur, it too be added to our enemies and make war upon us or go up away from the land."

So they set gang-captains over it, to afflict it with their burdens. It built storage-cities for Pharaoh – Pitom and Ra'amses. But as they afflicted it, so did it become many, so did it burst forth. And they felt dread before the Children of Israel.

So they, Egypt, made the Children of Israel subservient with crushing-labor; they embittered their lives with hard servitude in the field – all their service in which they made them subservient with crushing-labor.

Now the king of Egypt said to the midwives of the Hebrews – the name of the first one was Shifra, the name of the second was Pu'a – he said: "When you help the Hebrew women give birth, see the supporting-stones: if he be a son, put him to death, but if she be a daughter, she may live."

But the midwives held God in awe, and they did not do as the king of Egypt had

spoken to them, they let the male children live.

The king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them: "Why have you done this thing, you have let the children live." The midwives said to Pharaoh: "Indeed, not like the Egyptian women are the Hebrew women, indeed, they are lively: before the midwife comes to them, they have given birth."

God dealt well with the midwives and the people became many and grew exceedingly mighty in number. It was since the midwives held God in awe, that God made them households.

Now Pharaoh commanded all his people saying, "Every Hebrew son that is born, throw him into the Nile, but let every daughter live."

Now a man from the House of Levi went and took to wife a daughter of Levi. The woman became pregnant and bore a son. When she saw – that he was goodly, she hid him for three months.

And when she was no longer able to hide him, she took for him a little-ark of papyrus, she loamed it with loam and with pitch, placed the child in it, and placed it in the reeds by the shore of the Nile.

Now his sister stationed herself far off, to know what would be done to him.

Although that story is about Moses' birth, its focus is on courageous action by five women who helped Moses survive in a time of horrendous oppression.

Last week, I looked at three women in the story. Puah and Shiphrah, two Egyptian midwives used cleverness and deceit to protect new-born Hebrew children. Using Augustine's words that, "Hope has two children. The first is anger at the way things are and the second is the courage to do something about it," I said that Puah and Shiphrah embodied that kind of activist hope.

I also talked about Yochebed, Moses' mother, who, angry at the oppression and brave enough to rebel, found ways to hide her infant for three months. But knowing she could protect him no longer, she put him in a tiny ark and set him afloat in the Nile. She let him go.

Now the story continues:

Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe at the Nile, and her maidservants were walking along the Nile. She saw the little-ark among the reeds and sent her maid, and she

fetched it. She opened it and saw him, the child. Here, a boy weeping. She pitied him and said: "One of the Hebrews' children is this."

His sister said to Pharaoh's daughter: "Shall I go and call a nursing woman from the Hebrews for you that she may nurse the child for you?"

Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Go." The maiden went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Have this child go with you and nurse him for me, and I myself will give you wages." So the woman took the child and she nursed him. The child grew, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She called his name: Moshe/He-who-pulls-out. She said: "For out of the water, I-pulled-him."

I think Moses' sister, Miriam, unnamed in this story, showed the same clever, deceitful courage of the two midwives. Apparently a mere child, she was brave enough to approach the daughter of the tyrannical ruler, not knowing at all how she would be received. But she wanted to protect her brother.

She offered to find a Hebrew woman who could nurse the child, neglecting to mention it would be the child's mother. So thanks to Miriam's daring and cleverness, Yochebed not only saved her child's life, but remained in his life to nurture him for a while.

In her book about biblical women and social justice, *Clothed with the Sun*, Joyce Hollyday said, "It is likely that while her mother tended her brother in the luxury of Pharaoh's palace, Miriam grew up apart from them in the slave quarters reserved for Israelites." So in a sense, Miriam's was a self-giving creative courage.

Now the narratives don't mention Miriam again until she is an adult. In the stories of the Hebrew slaves' liberation from bondage she appears again. After Moses, assisted by his brother Aaron, challenged Egypt's ruler to let the Hebrew slaves go, Moses led them in a dramatic escape. On foot, Hebrew men, women and children crossed the Sea of Reeds to reach the land of Canaan while the chariots of their Egyptian pursuers were mired in marshy swamps.

When they reached freedom, we hear of Miriam again. Listen to the storyteller:

Pharaoh's horses came with their chariots and riders into the sea, but YHWH turned back the sea's waters upon them, and the Children of Israel went upon the dry land through the midst of the sea.

Now Miryam the prophet, Aharon's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her, with timbrels and with dancing.

Miryam chanted to them: "Sing to YHWH for YHWH has triumphed, yes, triumphed, the horse and its charioteer YHWH flung into the sea!" [That last verse may be the oldest fragment of biblical literature that we have.]

Vanessa Ochs, Director of Jewish Studies at the University of Virginia, tried to imagine Miriam's experience: "She had crossed the sea. Reaching the shore, she was drenched and breathless. 'God took me out of Egypt,' Miriam said aloud, knowing she needed to form words in her mouth and hear them to affirm what she had experienced was not just a dream. 'We were slaves and now we are free.' Before stopping to rest, Miriam put down the pack she had strapped onto her shoulders and took out the timbrel, a small hand drum or tambourine, and she began to dance. Other women, recognizing her leadership, calling her a prophet, joined in.

Miriam, not only the incarnation of self-sacrificing creative courage, but also a liberation leader. If there is any question about that, listen to these words from Micah centuries later. He has God saying, "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam." With her brothers, Miriam is listed as a liberation leader.

During my three recent trips to Israel and Occupied Palestine, I met so many women showing Miriam's creative courage in the quest for liberation, for freedom in occupied Palestine. There were Israelis like Ruth Hiller who has lived on an Israeli Kibbutz for 37 years. Her son refused to serve in the Israeli army and Ruth stood by him, facing incredible hostility to this day from friends and neighbors. But she persevered, and helped start *New Profile*, an Israeli organization which supports military resisters and opposes the occupation of Palestine.

Nomika Zion, another Israeli, lives in Sderot where Quassam missiles from Gaza have hit. She helped form *Other Voice*, an Israeli organization that refuses to see the people of Gaza as enemies. *Other Voice* seeks dialogue and reconciliation.

There were Palestinians like Dr. Viveca Hasboom with a medical degree from UCLA and a psychiatric residency at Long Beach's Veteran's Hospital. She doesn't have to stay in Palestine, but she does so to work with traumatized refugees in two Bethlehem refugee camps.

There is Dr. Salim Anati's wife. They live with their six children in a two-bedroom apartment in a refugee camp. They don't have to stay there. He is a skilled medical doctor, greatly respected in Europe. She has a graduate degree in chemistry. But he runs the camp clinic and she teaches at the elementary school. The day John Hickox and I visited them, she had come home early because, for no reason, Israeli sol-

diers threw tear gas canisters into the school, and teachers and children, many sick and gasping, left for the day. She stays because she wants a free Palestine.

Or there are the international volunteers. Cathy, a Catholic nun from Pennsylvania, has spent several years as part of a Christian Peacemaker team. In Beit Omar, every night Israeli soldiers pick one family's home and ransack it, forcing the family into one room for the night. When Cathy discovers which house the soldiers have invaded, she marches into that house and stays with the family.

Or Joy, a young Christian Peacemaker Team member who literally puts herself between villagers in the south Hebron hills and the meanest settlers who throw stones at Palestinian children and put dead chickens in the village wells. All those women – Israeli, Palestinian and international – are courageous freedom-seekers.

But let me now move to the final woman in the stories of Moses' birth – Pharaoh's daughter. Nobody writes about her. We don't know her name. But think about what she did. She knew the child was a Hebrew child, perhaps just because of the situation – who else would put a child in an ark in the Nile? Or maybe because of the child's clothing.

But clearly she knew Moses was one of the children her father had ordered killed. Nevertheless, she took that child into the palace. I wish we knew more about her and about what happened in Moses' youth. But all the storyteller says is that when Moses finished breast feeding, Yochebed returned to the slave quarters and the Egyptian princess raised Moses as her own son.

Pharaoh's daughter looked beyond ethnic and religious differences that divided people of her time, She risked scorn and anger from her fellow Egyptians and from her own father. Another courageous woman.

Last week, Krista Tippett, host of National Public Radio's *Speaking of Faith*, interviewed Aziza Hasan, a good friend of mine, and Malka Haya Fenyvesi, co-founders of *New Ground: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change*. Malka and Aziza are both in their twenties. All participants in *New Ground* are young adults. In their NPR dialogue, Malka said: "We refuse to be enemies." Isn't that what Pharaoh's daughter did? She refused to be an enemy of Hebrew slaves. She didn't see a Jewish slave child in that little ark – she saw a crying child needing help.

Her behavior challenges our human tendency to separate and divide people into "us" versus "them." It challenges the ease with which we slip into racism, xenophobia, heterosexism and patriarchy. It calls us to look at everyone, as the Quakers do, as

people with the light of God's love aflame within them.

Let me end with a story I have told in a sermon four years ago:

During the holocaust, a Jewish doctor and his wife were sent to a death camp. Soon after arriving, the doctor walked with his beloved wife until she was herded into a chamber of death. The doctor was spared because his skills were useful.

Somehow he kept on living – making his way through bitterness, resentment and despair. He found hope through helping other inmates in that camp.

After the war, with no one in his family left, he worked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation which had taken over a former German military building as a center for Jewish children coming out of the camps while a search was made for their families. The children loved the doctor; he thrived on being in their midst.

After a year though, the children had either been reunited with their families or their care was provided in some other way. The orphanage was empty.

Then the doctor discovered another need. Prisons were full of German collaborators, Gestapo agents, hated Nazi officials. Many of their children were now orphans. So the orphanage filled again.

The press learned of this, and there was a great uproar. Why help the children of people who had been so brutal? But for the doctor, he had new children to care for, new children with whom he could play. It didn't matter that their parents might have participated in his wife's death. The poison of vengeance just wasn't in his heart – these were just children, not Nazi children, just children.

I think Pharaoh's daughter would have understood the doctor's actions.

Puah, Shiphrah, Yochebed, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter – five creative biblical women of courage and conviction from whom we today can learn much.