

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal, Exodus 14:19-31, Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This morning's readings from Exodus (we have two, one replacing our usual psalm) show us one of the most significant events in the entire Old Testament: the parting of the Red Sea, securing the escape of the enslaved Israelites from their long-term oppressors, the Egyptian army.

Whenever I hear this story, I remember being an adolescent visiting Universal Studios with my grandparents, learning that in the 1956 version of *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston, Jell-O was used to create the parting of the Red Sea. I googled that while writing this sermon, and it sounds like it is true, sort of. Complicated to explain, and I need to keep this sermon short because it's the third Sunday of the month, when we have healing prayers and so the service runs a little long.

Familiarity might inure us to the story's violence and disturbing imagery, which is why I chose to include the songs of Moses and Miriam in place of a psalm. As Episcopal Christians, I want us to find Holy Scripture familiar, but never to the point that we miss the details in these stories.

I also chose to use the second reading from Exodus in place of a psalm because it mentions "the prophet Miriam." Miriam is the first named female prophet in the Bible. Prophets in this context are not so much seers of the future as they are committed to social justice and truth-telling. Miriam is one of only four named female prophets in the Old Testament. Her story is somewhat scant, so we might not be as familiar with her as we are with God parting the Red Sea. The Bible tells us a lot more about her brothers Aaron and Moses, but Miriam was also a leader. We first heard about her (though she wasn't named) when their mother put Moses in a basket in the Nile. Miriam watched over Moses and approached Pharaoh's daughter when she drew him out of the water, offering their mother as a nurse. Later, although this story doesn't make it into our Sunday lectionary, the biblical book of Numbers shares a story in which Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses' leadership during the years of wandering in the wilderness. God punished Miriam in that story, and she was shut out of the camp for seven days. The Israelites did not resume their journey until Miriam was restored to them, which indicates how significant she was to the community.

And then we have today's mention, when she sings a triumphant song following their great escape. This song as well as the one that precedes it are considered to be two of the oldest compositions in the Bible. Significantly, Miriam attributes their success not to their own efforts but to God. They have been part of a miracle, going from despair at the prospect of certain death to freedom, and Miriam the prophet turns this into art.

What can we take away from someone we know so little about, especially compared to her far more famous brothers?

I believe today's mention of Miriam encourages us to dive deeply into Scripture, not tuning out or skimming when reading or hearing a story we think we know well. We have such gifted lectors here at St. David's who can help us hear the story differently than when we read it to ourselves. And on the other hand, please don't let the only time you hear the Bible be here in church: read the same stories on your own, before and after church. When I sit and listen to the

readings on Sunday mornings, I often hear some little detail that I missed even though I studied the same stories days earlier. Slow, reflective reading of scripture is a wonderful way to pray, and listening to the stories on Sunday morning is an essential part of our liturgy.

In addition, today's mention of Miriam as a *prophet* can encourage us to ruminate on what a prophet means. Even though Miriam may not be as well known to us today as Aaron and Moses, she clearly had a highly visible role in her community in her day, given her liturgical leadership in today's second Exodus reading. Do you think of prophets as slightly crazy old men with long gray beards? If so, how does the idea of a dancing female prophet with a tambourine strike you?

Today's mention of Miriam invites us to examine how we respond to God's acts in our lives. Miriam doesn't sing to entertain, but rather as an act of worship. Miriam reminds the people who have just crossed through a sea with walls of water held back by God that they are alive not through their own efforts or merits but through the grace of God. How do you see God acting in your life? When things go well, do you offer thanks to God? And what about when they go badly? Are you here this morning to offer thanks and praise to God?