

Miriam, by Rev. Mark J.T. Caggiano, 5/3/26

Exodus 15:20–21; John 14:1-14

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. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.'

This passage is known as the Song of Miriam. It is rather short for a song, merely a single line. It could have been longer and the rest was lost to time. Or it could have been an extended chant, repeated over and over, for which the musical form has been lost to time. No one knows.

The passage is unusual in two respects. This song or poem is thought to be the oldest verse in the Bible. The oldest verse of them all, meaning that this verse has been traced back to the oldest Biblical text available.

Now you might think, would not the Book of Genesis be the oldest text? Actually, the Book of Genesis is considered the *youngest* section of the Torah, set down after the other four major books. That should not be surprising if you consider what it implies. You might have a book on your shelf about the American Revolution published last year and another book about the Second World War published in the 1990s. Which *story* is older?

The other unusual aspect of this selection is the reference to Miriam as a prophet. Occasionally women in the Bible are called prophets, or prophetesses, if they are married to prophet like Isaiah. They are prophet adjacent.

But Miriam is considered a prophet in her own right, someone sent as a representative of God. Notably, her two more famous siblings are Moses and Aaron, two other prophets from whom much of the priesthood of Israel would claim their lineage. That honor was not given to Miriam as women were not considered as candidates for the priesthood. Which view has changed in certain corners of Judaism and Christianity.

There is even a miracle attributed to Miriam. In the land of Kadesh on the way to the Promised Land, Miriam died. At that same Biblical moment, it was announced that there is no water for the people. It is said that while Miriam lived, the people could always find water and that she was the source of that ongoing blessing. Some Reformed Jews honor the role of the prophet Miriam by setting out a glass of water during Passover alongside a glass of wine set out for the prophet Elijah.

We are in the Easter season which lasts from Easter Sunday through to Pentecost a few weeks from now. Traditionally, we would be reading from the Book of Acts which presents the lives of the Apostles after the death of Jesus. Sometimes we read from the Book of Revelation which presents mysterious lessons often seen as evidence of a coming apocalypse.

I generally do not select from those sources. The Book of Revelation is grossly misunderstood in our culture and frequently misused in religious settings. And the Book of Acts is honestly pretty boring. I read though it recently and I did not come away with renewed interest. Feel free to browse it on your own.

Instead, during this particular season, I generally choose stories about figures in the Hebrew scriptures, those that do not come up so often in our rotation. The stories of Joseph and his multicolored coat. The Book of Esther from which the holiday Purim is drawn. This year I chose readings about women in the Bible. They do not often get mentioned and their roles are frequently underplayed or diminished.

Miriam is named a prophet, meaning she was sent from God to help guide the Hebrew people to the land that would become Israel. She was a prophet like her two brothers, but unlike her brothers, she was not honored in the genealogy of the priesthood. Women could not be priests, at least as that story unfolded in the stories of the Bible.

Why did I decide to lift up the women in the Bible during this liturgical season? I wanted to have their stories spoken of and considered especially in this time of shifting cultural concerns. What do I mean? Women are in many respects losing ground in our societal conversations. That might be limited to certain people in certain places, but it is often enough and loud enough that I thought it was worth a bit of our Sunday morning time together.

It was not so many years ago when women were speaking up in ways unexpected in response to longstanding traditions. Traditions of unfair treatment, traditions of exclusion, traditions of being silenced. Traditions of violence.

This moment became known as the “Me Too” movement, an effort to publicize the wide-ranging effects of sexual discrimination and harassment. “Me Too” meaning someone was yet again discriminated against at work. Someone was propositioned by a supervisor or authority figure. Someone was treated as an object rather than a subject. Yet another person with a shared set of experiences that no one should have had to experience.

I come to this conversation from an unusual perspective, one that in one sense is positive and in another negative. I will explain. I grew up fairly middle class and very Roman Catholic family in a small New England town. It was in the 1970s. Lots of guitars in church. Lots of interesting haircuts.

My mother stayed with us at home. There were four children born within four years – let’s agree that was a stressful set of circumstances. My mother had trained and worked as a nurse, but at that time she was at home. At home with us. At home all day, every day. And it did not take a childhood genius to figure out that she was not happy about it.

Eventually, when I entered high school, as the youngest child, there was suddenly no reason for her to be home. So, she went back to work. More accurately, we kicked her out of the house because she was unhappy which made the rest of us unhappy by proximity. She went back into the working world that she deeply missed and that she wanted to be a part of.

And it changed everything. She had rediscovered a sense of meaning and a wider circle of friends. She did not enjoy every minute of her working life, but these were annoyances arising out her newfound purpose, not the heaped up regrets of stunted ambition. My mother had begun a new life, or returned to an old and cherished one. And that was, I assure you, better for the rest of us. And this made sense to me. This all made perfect sense.

I went off to college. I arrived with my biases and immaturities. Many gaps in my personal knowledge and certain behaviors in need of moderating. But because of my experiences with my mother, I understood what it meant to be stuck doing what you did not want to do. I had seen what a life of frustrated purpose looked like and, more importantly, how much happier someone could become when that frustration is alleviated. For all my many imperfections and immaturities, it had never occurred to me that women needed to be anything different from what *they* wanted to be.

There is nevertheless a certain problem with that way of thinking. It is like saying to someone when it comes to issues of race that one is colorblind. That has an appealing sound in a way, but being blind to race can also mean being blind about racism. Blind to what I do not believe should exist, but there it is, glaringly obvious in our society. The same can be true for gender inequality. It exists regardless of a desire for it not to exist and regardless of a desire not to see uncomfortable truths.

After I was married, my ex-wife and I entered graduate school, medical school and law school respectively. During that time, she became pregnant with my son. She went to the medical school administration to figure out how this was going to work.

There was no program or policy in place, but to their credit, the administration helped us navigate having a child during medical school. My son attended his first Genetics class at the age of 5 days. They had given his mom a key to the audio-visual booth, which was soundproof, so she could be in lecture while he exercised his lungs.

During that next year after my son had attended this early version of medical school, five couples became pregnant. It was not like they did not know where babies came from before our situation (at least I hope that was the case given their area of study). No, what had changed was that we had worked hard to make our situation possible, if not always easy. And I dearly remember it being hard work as a parent during graduate school. We did not spell out to those other students the work involved. But they took the plunge anyway. Why? Because seeing something newly come into being is the first step toward meaningful change.

Miriam was a prophet, but she has not historically been embraced as a key Biblical figure. A prophet is sent to instruct the people, to declare to them the word of God, and to remind them of the laws of God. She has been mostly left out of the extended narrative of Jewish and Christian life. Your experience may vary.

Yet Miriam exists. She exists as an example of what can be: a woman as a religious leader and as a moral voice. But for something like that to be possible, an example needs to be brought to mind, it needs to be lifted up and examined. It needs to be pointed to as being both possible and meaningful. Someone needs to share it and others need to listen.

These days, the rights of women are under fire. Maybe you heard. *Roe v. Wade* was overturned four years ago. Many states have passed or revived laws restricting the right to an abortion. Some contain significant penalties and jail time, for women and medical providers. There are myriad social, cultural, and political forces involved with this shift and for the concerned responses of citizens from across American society.

What should I say about all that? What can I say? Can I, should I, as a man offer up an opinion? An opinion about a burden I would never have to bear? An opinion that often receives outsized consideration in both political and religious conversations regardless of my bystander status?

Women have over the decades of my life moved into the workplace in significant numbers. Currently, women make up half of the US workforce. That shift has been greatly influenced by the ability of women to control whether they get pregnant. Birth control has made it possible for women to have careers, to manage the phases of life in which they are pregnant. And to have fewer children.

In the 1850s, households with six to nine children were common. Children were an insurance policy: someone would work the family farm, and someone would be around to take care of mom and dad. Because childhood and maternal deaths were quite common.

Steadily over the 20th century, household sizes fell. Two child families have now become the norm. This coincides with improvements in health care and increases in the number of women in the workforce and those receiving higher education. In case you were wondering, a recent study out of John Hopkins University found a *nine percent* increase in pregnancy related mortality. Nine percent in the four years since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.

My mother had four children. My sister was born nine months to the day after my parents were married. I am the fourth child, and I was born two days before their fourth wedding anniversary. Four years pregnant. And then no more children. We often joked that my mom broke after me, but I actually think something else happened.

My mother was a nurse, an operating room nurse. She knew the surgeons rather well. And she suddenly stopped having a child every year. Not a subject that my very Catholic family would have discussed. But I saw how hard it was on my mother to raise four small children. And how much happier she was to return to the working world.

As a point of reference, my father's parents together had twenty siblings – *twenty*. He had 75 first cousins. When someone asks me if someone with the last name Caggiano is related to me, I simply say yes, because odds are it is the case.

Why mention any of this? I will note in passing that there are not many families of 10 children in Chestnut Hill. We are of course in Massachusetts. Liberal bastion of the Northeast. Well educated, well cultured, well balanced.

So, you might say, we are fine. What could possibly change here? Aren't we basically all on the same page? And what does birth control have to do with abortion anyway? Apples and oranges as the saying goes. Why talk about an uncomfortable subject?

Because we live in uncertain times. Healthcare is less protected and far more expensive. Employers are less generous with benefits, such as health insurance, and many workers are self-employed without any benefits.

The federal government is trying to allow healthcare workers to opt out of providing care to people they find religiously objectionable, such as gays and lesbians or transgender folk. To refuse to offer treatments that conflict with their religious identities. To refuse to prescribe birth

control medications at a pharmacy – so back to apples to apples. Even those with health insurance could be denied care by these restrictions.

A person of means can avoid these problems. Travel to another state, fly to another country. Take time away from life and work. But the average person would struggle to do so. A poor person might find it impossible.

We are fortunate to live in a state with so many options, so many protections. We might take a moment to give thanks for what we have, bearing in mind that it has been generations in the making. Building good schools and universities. Supporting hospitals and research. Enacting laws that protect the rights of women and their reproductive freedom.

I recently read that America is going through a severe bout of nostalgia. That if only we could somehow go back to the 1950s, everything would be great again. Back to a time before reliable birth control and *Roe v. Wade*. Back before women's liberation. Back before gays and lesbians escaped from the shadows and transgender folks came into existence. Back before the Civil Rights Movement and integration. Obviously, that feeling of nostalgia depends a lot upon where you would get placed socially and economically during the Eisenhower Administration.

See where I am going with this. Having a picture in our mind of a Golden Age often obscures how tarnished that age was. When racism was the norm. When sexism was a given. When LGBTQ concerns were *unimaginable*.

Now, imagine this: in 1950, six percent of US doctors were women. Boston had a higher percentage of female physicians in 1890, during the literal Gilded Age. Currently, more than 60% of doctors under the age of 35 are female.

And yet, I must confess to you that I am not comfortable with the idea of abortion. It is little wonder that I have rarely preached on the topic. But the other thing I have to confess is that my discomfort is entirely irrelevant. No one likes abortion any more than they like leukemia. And, I must add, that my measure of discomfort does not give me any say in the matter of a women's right to choose. Because it is not, and will never be, my choice to make. Because it is not *my* burden to bear.

God sent out prophets to the people when something needed to be said. When something needed to be done. When something was just not right in the world. Miriam along with her brothers guided the Hebrew slaves to freedom. She comforted them through many years of wandering and, if the stories are to be believed, carried with her a miracle of water so the people would not perish.

Who are the prophets now? I think they vary. There are many problems to be considered so there are likely many voices to be heard and sorted through. How do we discern which voices make sense? That is extremely challenging, but I suppose that is up to our individual faculties and.

I frequently offer my thoughts about ethics and morals, so you have my take on many subjects. But this morning's discussion is one that I would steer you away from merely taking my word for it. I know I am up here to preach, but the rights of women should not be determined under the purview of men.

Indeed, having some old guy hold forth on what a woman should or should not do with her body is a great signal for changing the proverbial channel. Instead, it is the responsibility of men to listen to women, not *just* on this subject but *really, really* when it comes to reproductive freedom. When it comes to this subject, only women should stand as prophets to the people. And men, even big mouths like me, need to stop talking and to start paying attention.

Amen.