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Exodus 2:1-10 & Number 12:1-16

Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Miriam

June 18, 2023 – Rocky River Presbyterian Church

Exodus 2:1-10

¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. ³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him. ⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁹Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, “because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.”

Numbers 12:1-16

¹While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); ²and they said, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it. ³Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. ⁴Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them came out. ⁵Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. ⁶And he said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. ⁷Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. ⁸With him I speak face to face— clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” ⁹And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed. ¹⁰When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. ¹¹Then Aaron said to Moses, “Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed. ¹²Do not let her be like one stillborn, whose flesh is half consumed when it comes out of its mother’s womb.” ¹³And

Moses cried to the Lord, “O God, please heal her.” ¹⁴But the Lord said to Moses, “If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.” ¹⁵So Miriam was shut out of the camp for seven days; and the people did not set out on the march until Miriam had been brought in again. ¹⁶After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Miriam

As you heard this morning, Rocky River was rocking this past week with the energy, creativity, and inquisitive thinking of 85 children involved in our Vacation Bible School. They spent the week learning how our Biblical ancestors Sparked the Change to create a better world and share the grace of God with others. Specifically, they learned that change makers ask questions, work together to solve problems, respond to the needs of others, build bridges, and create a new kind of world.

While she wasn't included in the cast of characters studied in this week's VBS, Miriam is someone who sparked change. While not named in the Exodus 2 text, it is widely accepted by biblical scholars that the unnamed older sister is Miriam. In this story, Miriam and all of the Hebrew people are dealing with the repercussions of some serious lived trauma. You see, this story takes place right after the Egyptian Pharaoh has carried genocide on the male children of the Hebrew people.

In an act of brazen disregard for Egyptian power, Moses' mother hides the newborn baby for three months...She cannot bring herself to allow the Egyptian soldiers to carry out their orders. So instead of allowing him to be killed she puts her faith in God as she does all she can and places him into the Nile. Miriam, motivated by what I think is the unstoppable protective nature of older sisters, can't just walk away. She monitors every move that little papyrus basket makes on its journey waiting to intervene where she can to ensure her brother is safe. Her opportunity arises when the basket floats into the reeds where he is discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter. I don't think this royal gets enough credit...When she opens the basket, she finds a crying baby. That must have been a heartbreaking scene. What sorrow must have led a family to place their baby into a basket in the Nile?

The person who found her was the DAUGHTER of the Pharaoh...she would have known what has happened...she would have known who was responsible for the trauma that led to this situation...she would have known what her father would have expected her to do. But she does not do what is expected. The text tells us that she took pity on the baby.

As she watched, Miriam the overprotective older sister must have sensed the opening she had been praying for. She leaps into action to ask questions, work together to solve problems and address the needs of others. She offers to find a Hebrew nurse to care for the child. In so doing, she arranges for her mother to get paid to raise her own child. Miriam is the ultimate change maker – Trusting in God to provide a way out of no way and ensuring the future of her family and what she holds dear. Throughout the uncertainty of the Nile journey, Miriam held fast, watched for her moment to get involved and trusted in the guiding grace of God to provide a way.

It's been almost a year since Rocky River found itself on the beginning of its own new journey. Jon announced he was retiring and the wheels of change began to hum. This morning some of you might be feeling like the waters are churning just a little bit more with the news that Lisa Watts, your beloved Educator extraordinaire will be retiring in just a few short months. I am sure it might feel easy to groan, wail, and nash your teeth, but now is the time to become Miriam. Now is the time to stand watch, to ask questions, to work together to solve problems, and address the needs of others, because you know what?

God is at work here. God is at work here building bridges and creating a new world where all things are possible. Participating in this work take concerted effort. In today's story, Miriam found an unlikely ally in the daughter of a Pharaoh. But God's future for the Hebrew people came to pass the way it did because Miriam didn't look away, she didn't flinch when that papyrus basket passed through the rough waters. She didn't look away when the hippos or alligators swam near. I like to imagine she was there on the shore, throwing rocks to distract the predators...doing all she could to ensure there would be a future.

The act of church, of being the beloved community takes the same effort. We, its members have to stand and do the work to protect God's promises, we have to work to make sure everyone feels included, that there is space for everyone, and when the waters feel turbulent, or we are worried we must stand together and trust in God's promises to guide us through. That is what Miriam did and eventually she found herself standing with her brothers, Moses and Aaron, on the shores of the Red Sea, jubilantly leading her nation in praise for God's Passover miracles.

But it's important in this time and place for us to be reminded of another part of Miriam's story. The chapter from Numbers 12, is one of those stories that we don't preach on very often...**if ever**. It is a very problematic text, in my opinion. I have to be honest and say that I don't know what to do with God's reaction in this text and what that says about God's character. It makes me feel slightly better that all the commentaries I have read are also left scratching their heads. In many ways, this feels like an argument among adult siblings...the

nitpicking that happens that triggers long-standing rivalries that everyone thought had been put to bed.

The presenting problem is Miriam's and Aaron's discomfort with Moses marrying a Cushite woman – this is the only reference to Moses marrying a Cushite – in other places Zipporah, his wife, is a Midianite – so no scholars have a reference for this marriage. But as with most fights among siblings, it seems the real problem is Miriam and Aaron speaking out against Moses leadership. “Who do you think you are? Why are you getting all the attention? Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has the Lord not spoken through us also?” I can hear in my mind, Miriam saying, I was the ONE who stood on the Nile and made sure that guy survived – HELLO! Give me some credit.

It's important to note that the Hebrews have been in the wilderness for a long time now. Moses has been complaining to God about the bickering among the people and their discontent. God has heard Moses' concerns and is a little annoyed with the Hebrew people, but hearing the concerns God has appointed 70 elders to help deal with the administrative work of guiding the chosen people to the promised land...

New leadership is coming on board so Miriam and Aaron might be feeling as if their place is threatened...as if they might be losing stature or their place among the people. So, they are grumbling...they are having their own version of parking lot conversations. God hears this and isn't pleased. The text tells that Miriam becomes the focus of God's ire here. Like I said, Biblical scholars and I are not sure what to do with this part of the story...I think it is problematic that Aaron's part in the narrative is glossed over and the fault lies solely with Miriam. In the end I think that ends up reflecting on the very real humans who did the work of writing this story down throughout the years and less about God. Having said that, I do think there are important parts of the story for us to consider.

When times are changing, there is a human need for us – especially those who have been committed leaders - to want to protect our place, to mark our territory. But in this story, it seems that God is trying to tell Miriam to check herself. This moment in the Hebrew people's history is not the moment for these parking lot conversations where people are trying to keep things the way they have always been. Now is the time for Miriam and Aaron to lean in to God's new way of doing things. Maybe that is our lesson this morning. Just as the children of VBS spent the week learning how to Spark the change...maybe God is speaking to us in Miriam's complicated stories to see how we can spark the change that is coming to Rocky River. We are being called to watch attentively and lean in where we can work to create God's community to create space for God's promising future to take hold in our life.

May it be so.
Amen.