

Miriam: Painting & Story Sermon on Exodus 15



Sisters and brothers,
maybe you remember the huge beautiful picture standing here up front at the all-age worship three weeks ago? It is now back in the prayer room across the hall. A small version of it is here at the altar; and one of the paintings of it makes the front cover of your bulletin today.

The picture is a so-called famine hanging from India. As a whole it contains seven colourful paintings: all about Biblical women and their stories showing us the Kingdom of God.

At the all-age worship we went through all seven paintings & stories briefly... And I told you that in the Women's Bible study on Tuesday morning we would be having a closer look at these paintings and the powerful stories behind them. By now we have worked on three of them. And the second one about Miriam & the people of Israel crossing the Red Sea and rejoicing over their astonishing rescue is what you see on your bulletin today – unfortunately only in black and white.

What we did, when we met on Tuesday a week ago, is - first of all - take sufficient time to ponder over the picture and discover what the Indian painter Lucy D'Souza is offering here to us.

We saw four women standing, and one kneeling. One of them plays an instrument, a tambourine. The women are standing on sandy ground almost touched by water & waves. The movement of the waves corresponds with the movement of the ears in the centre picture. The women who are standing hold each other round their waists, and again the movement of their bodies has some similarity with the movement of the waters of the sea and of the clouds in the sky.

Two of the women lift their eyes up to the sky, where they can see a white dove – symbol of the Spirit of God, and also a sign for freedom and peace.

Two of the women dancing – an Indian round actually – are lifting their arms up in a gesture of openness and adoration...

Miriam kneeling in the front plays the music to their dance.

Her whole body and mind seem to be devoted to what she sees above or ahead: divine guidance, protection, promises... the peace of God probably, a vision to carry on, strength through faith... Whatever it is, Miriam is all one with it.

And she leads the others: a mixed group of women – expressed through the different colours of their dresses.

Thanks to Nathalie we could find out what the various colours of the saris mean. The woman in red stands for power, strength and the fullness of life. Green saris are worn by merchant classes – kind of rich middle and upper class people. Blue saris are associated with the working class: farmers, weavers and artisans wear this colour. Yellow is regarded as the colour of religion. In Indian tradition new mothers would wear yellow...

So what we have here are women of all ages and backgrounds. A very diverse group of people, regardless of their differences, all walking, dancing into the same direction, all following the same leader and the same spirit... almost unnecessary to say: the same God.

There may be more in this painting. But this is all I could see, and all the Bible study group could discover.

What we did next in the study group was to share the different memories we had of the Biblical figure of Miriam.

And we came up with:

Miriam is the sister of Moses and Aaron.

When she was a child, she helped her mother save her baby brother.

She is the sister of the “baby in the basket”.

She was brave & courageous & she loved her family.

She, the slave girl, had the wits to dare to speak with the Egyptian princess.

Miriam is one of the many women who supported Moses to fulfil his call.

She, Aaron and Moses were the team who lead the people of Israel into freedom.

And here in our picture she becomes a spiritual leader to the Israelites. If you like, she is the first female worship leader mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

Miriam, the prophet singing and dancing – expressing with her body what words cannot say. Prayer and praise have many faces...

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 well 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,
and tell your sons and your daughters on every day...
that the Lord not only saved our fathers and mothers,
he is saving us, too - every single day...

In the Women's Bible study we closed our session with this last question: Where do the picture of Miriam and her story touch you personally on the background of your very own life?

With this question I would like to leave you, too.
Amen.

Some moments of silence...

Prayer

Loving God,
it is amazing grace in our lives
that we experience with you over and over again.
We thank you for courage and confidence.
We thank you for light in dark places,
we thank you for moments of relief on hard journeys.

We thank you God,
for our lives,
and for your presence in our lives.
Fill us with your love
and use us to further the work of your kingdom
now and forever.
Amen.