

Silence
Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
November 17, 2013
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Texts: Exodus 2:1-10
Exodus 15:19-21
Numbers 12

[I chose “Sibling Rivalry” as the sermon title earlier in the week but I ended up going in a different direction. So a better title would be “Silence.” I invite you to listen for what is *not* said in these stories.

Context of Ex. 2: Israelites were slaves in Egypt. The king or Pharaoh feared their growth and power and told the midwives to kill the boy babies. They refused. Then the king ordered that every boy baby be thrown into the Nile River.

Context of Ex. 15: Israelites escaped from Egypt and miraculously crossed the Red Sea on dry ground, but when the Egyptians soldiers tried to get through, they all drowned. Moses sang a song of celebration which we will hear from the choir. Then Miriam sang a very short version. Some commentators think that Miriam actually sang the song first but it was attributed to Moses.

Context of Numbers 12: In the previous chapter, Moses was so exhausted and so angry with the people that he told God he would rather die than be their leader. So more

leaders were chosen. Moses seemed happy to enough to share the power and said that he wished that all of the Lord's people were prophets who received some of God's spirit.]

Gordon will be back from his sabbatical next Sunday, so I'd like to take a minute today to thank you for once again being such a thoughtful and receptive congregation. I know that I have chosen to preach on some strange stories and approached the texts in some unusual ways. As always, you have been very gracious and patient and you have asked some great questions in conversation. It is a gift to be able to be your occasional preacher and I am very grateful to Gordon and Jill for sharing the pulpit with me.

I chose to preach on Miriam today before I did all the research on her. She seemed like a strong, independent woman. She was not identified as anybody's wife or mother, which is relatively rare. I assumed there would be stories about her leadership role among the Israelites.

But the texts we just read tell us all we know about Miriam. These stories raise a lot of questions, and provide very few answers. There is a lot of silence.

The first story we read is the most positive and powerful. These are strong women who defy the king of Egypt in order to save lives. If it wasn't for the midwives in the previous chapter, and the mother and sister of Moses and the daughter of the king in this chapter, Moses would not have lived past infancy! We don't know for sure that the sister mentioned here was Miriam. The text does not give her name. Silence! But here is a

strong, courageous young woman who thinks on her feet. She keeps watch while her baby brother is floating in the river, and when the king's daughter finds him, she quickly offers to get a nurse for the baby. So Moses' mother gets paid to care for her own baby! Smart girl, that sister!

Miriam does not appear again until after the Israelites have been freed from slavery in Egypt. She leads the women in singing and dancing a short version of the song Moses and the Israelites had just finished. Commentators spend a lot of time sorting this out. Did Miriam and the women just repeat the same song but could only sing after the men were finished? Or did Miriam and the women join in on the chorus? Were they the backup singers? Maybe Moses like Gladys Knight, and Miriam and the women were the Pips? A number of commentators think it was far more likely that Miriam was the one who first sang the song.

This debate may sound rather academic and irrelevant, but it raises an important question of who gets to speak and sing in the Bible. But again, there's silence.

It's the passage from Numbers that is the most troubling. Miriam and Aaron had some questions about Moses' leadership. First, they criticized him for marrying a Cushite woman. It's likely she was Ethiopian, but racial prejudice was not so much an issue in this period. The problem was not her skin color but her ethnicity. She was not an Israelite. She was not one of them. And that may sound petty and narrow-minded, but marrying outside of the Israelite people had been strongly discouraged. Foreign wives

brought foreign ideas. So Miriam and Aaron probably thought they were raising a legitimate concern. But the text is silent about the details.

Miriam and Aaron then raised a question about authority. “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has the Lord not spoken through us also?” This is a complicated question! We just don’t know what the relationship was like between the three of them. To what degree did they share leadership of the Israelites? Maybe they thought they were trying to help! After all, in the previous chapter, Moses was having a nervous breakdown from the stress of leadership! He was exhausted and angry! Maybe they were volunteering to pick up some extra responsibilities!

But God is very angry with them and launches into a lengthy speech about how great Moses is and what a special relationship they have. And when God leaves, Miriam has leprosy! Aaron begs Moses to pray for her healing, and Moses does. But God still made her stay outside the camp for seven days.

Again ... so many questions! If they *both* complained about Moses, why is Miriam punished but not Aaron? Why such a harsh punishment? I’d like an explanation for that! But there are no clear answers. Only silence.

And when the text raises difficult questions without answering them, commentators feel compelled to offer some explanations and justifications! So, one theory is Miriam really instigated the complaints against Moses and made Aaron support her, but he didn’t agree

so he wasn't punished. Or, Aaron could not be punished because he was a priest and getting leprosy would make him unclean and compromise his position.

But the most common answer to why Miriam was punished is that she was a bad woman! She was jealous of Moses' wife and envious of Moses' leadership. She was arrogant and thought she could do a better job. She may have been a good choir director but she wrongly tried to exercise spiritual leadership. She was wrong to challenge authority and raise questions. If Miriam got punished, there has to be a reason. She has to be a bad woman.

I found it more helpful to look at the larger context in the book of Numbers. There are several stories in this book where people complain about Moses. In Numbers 16 three men challenge his authority, and they and their entire families get swallowed up by an earthquake! Others get killed by a plague! Compared to these folks, Miriam's punishment was relatively minor!

One thing we do know about Miriam was that the people of Israel seemed to respect her. She got them singing together, which as any church musician knows, is no easy task! And when she had to spend seven days outside of the camp, because of the leprosy, the people waited for her to return. They did not leave without her.

We don't know what Miriam's motives were and why she questioned Moses. Some commentators suggest that Miriam was a powerful woman, and therefore she was a

threat. Women were not supposed to be so powerful or so popular, and so perhaps there was an attempt to take her down a peg, as it were. Maybe you can't imagine the Bible doing such a thing. But it still happens now.

There is a man named Justin Lookadoo who gave a speech at a high school in Dallas on how young adults could be dateable. Young men should take risks, be adventurous, live a bold life. Young women should be quiet and mysterious. Don't talk too much. He is silencing young women!

Maybe when we all grow up that is not such an issue? This week I've been reading a book by Sheryl Sandberg, entitled Lean In. She is the Chief Operating Officer at Facebook. She writes about why there are so few women CEO's in businesses. One of her points is that women's voices are often not welcomed or encouraged. A successful woman may not be liked as much. Some people think women should not be in power. So women are often afraid to speak because they might be "punished."

I wonder how we could create a climate where everyone has a chance to speak, and knows their voices are welcomed, if they challenge authority or aren't always "nice." This is important in the church, at work, and in our families.

What I have been trying to do with these sermons and with this book I am writing, is to break the silence about these women. I want to tell their stories. But the deeper I go into the texts, the more I hear the silence. The texts don't give us enough information.

As I worked on this story about Miriam, I found myself feeling sort of angry about the story. But I was also a little angry at Miriam. I wanted her to be a good role model. I didn't want her to be petty. But the women aren't perfect. They are human. They are flawed. Like the men in the Bible. Like all of us.

Miriam, Aaron, Moses ... and the rest of us ... we are flawed and complex people. Sometimes we sing joyfully, and then we get snarky with each other. Sometimes we are courageous. Sometimes we don't want to be leaders anymore. Sometimes we are confident, and then we are terrified. Sometimes we demonstrate great spiritual maturity and insight ... and then we don't.

But the amazing thing is that God uses Miriam and Aaron and Moses with all their gifts, and all their flaws. And God uses us, with all our gifts and all our flaws, for the good of the kingdom. Amen.