

## “Sister Act”

April 30, 2017

Faith of Our Mothers series – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Easter

**SING v. 2-3** of *Sing Praise for Hebrew Midwives* by Edith Sinclair Downing:

*Praise, too, the loving mother  
Who saved her son from death.  
She placed him in the water,  
With trembling fearful breath.  
Then entered Pharaoh's daughter,  
Who found the hidden one.  
Defying her own father,  
She took him for her son.*

*Sing praise for this son, Moses,  
Who, by the midwives' act,  
Was saved to lead God's people,  
And given faith he lacked.  
Revere defiant women  
Who seek to bring to birth  
New life from wombs of promise  
To live God's will on earth.*

Did you hear Miriam's name in those words? No! The writer recognizes Moses' mother and Pharaoh's daughter, but Moses' sister, is never named. We don't actually get her name until later in Exodus and in the Book of Numbers. Miriam is the name of Moses' older sister.

Have you ever been known by your connection to others - how sometimes you're known by your relationship to someone else? You call me Pastor Mary, but when I'm in my hometown or home church, I'm still Joe and Chris' youngest daughter or Anne and Jean's little sister. When I go to school, I'm Ana's mom or Luka's mom. Still sometimes around Muskegon, I'm Ivan's spouse.

Our connections are important, and Miriam took her connection to family seriously. We don't really know the details of how it all worked out that day at the bank of the Nile, but we know that Moses' life might have been very different had it not been for his sister, his mother, and Pharaoh's daughter.

It's an amazing rescue story. Yes, it's about Moses, but this is one of those incredible - almost unbelievable - tales. It's one of those where we can't believe how it all came together. We can't believe that it all worked out okay because the cards are stacked against Moses and his family. Just like the midwives, they're facing a terrible threat and imminent danger. They're facing genocide and all that comes with it.

But they don't cower in fear in the face of it. Just like Shiphrah and Puah, our clever and brave midwives, these three women are just as quick to act, smart, and faithful. We don't get their names right away, but we're told about their skill and action. Friends, this is no small feat - to undermine the power and command of the king, to go against authority, to take a huge risk for the sake of this child.

First, Moses' mother sees him and calls him "good." It takes us back to God's declaration of creation as "good." Even in the midst of great danger, Moses' mother sees God's hand in this new creation, this "good" creation. His mother believes in him and values him, and Miriam does, too. And yet fear and desperation of the moment move them to a difficult decision.

Some scholars say that the preparation of the papyrus basket is a reference to the ark that Noah constructed as a way to save his family. This time, though, the handmade ark is only big enough for one person, but he's the one who will lead the Israelites to freedom and new life! He is the one who will liberate God's people.

But how could Moses' mother and Miriam know what would happen? How much did they have to trust in God's care? How much did Miriam have to care to help her baby brother, to show him love, to protect him, and risk her life for him? I wonder if she was scared and worried.

Maybe we've been in a place like this - maybe not exactly like this - but a moment when we were up against the wall, facing great odds, and feeling like the cards were stacked against us. Maybe we were worried. Maybe we are worried. Maybe it's all we think about - the "what ifs" rather than "what is" and what we can do, what we can control, what we can change.

I'll confess that I'm a worrier. I'm better about not letting worry get the best of me now, but I'm still pretty good at it. Even as a kid, I had worries. Some of those worries seem pretty minute now, but they were big then. My parents still laugh at the fact that I practiced walking to the end of our driveway before the first time I rode the bus to school (and our driveway wasn't that long). I wanted to be sure I was ready. I was a list maker, too.

I wonder how Miriam felt. We don't know if her mother filled her in on any plan. We don't know if mom had a plan to put Moses at the Nile just at the time when someone would find him. We don't know if she coached Miriam on what to do and what to say. What we do know is that Miriam took action. She seized an opportunity, and it paid off – big time!

And this is such a drama - a real episode of "Survivor." We have these Israelite women who have no power, no position, no promise of any help - taking the initiative to bring life and nurture life amid Pharaoh's reign of terror! We have Pharaoh's daughter, certainly well aware of her father's command concerning the death of Hebrew children, who goes against her own father to save a life!

We can add these three women along with Shiphrah and Puah to the list of people who helped Moses survive. Moses' mother and father come from the line of Levi, one of the twelve tribes of Israel that made up the priestly class. Certainly they are

devout. Certainly Miriam, too, has a sense of the gravity of the situation. Scholars assume she's a young teen - probably 12 years old - as she becomes part of the story of Moses' survival.

Whether or not she knew the plan, whether or not she was coached, Miriam acts in a way that doesn't make Pharaoh's daughter too suspicious. And in the end, it's "let's make a deal" like no one could have imagined! Her act puts in motion a life of Moses' leadership that will save the Israelites. He goes from certain death to become the grandson of the king!

Miriam's offer of someone to nurse the baby is the only spoken word we hear, but her actions and the outcome speak more loudly. Miriam watches and prays, and it matters. She shows radical commitment to God's way even when it means going against authority. Pharaoh's daughter actually pays Moses' mother to care for him until the time she can adopt him and bring him into the palace.

If we consider the cards Miriam had, it's a mixed hand. Yes, she's loyal to her family, courageous, and smart, but she's also a part of an oppressed minority. She's young and a woman in a time when that meant little power or status. Yet she acts on her instincts and helps to save Moses who will be God's servant and bring freedom for the Israelites.

Miriam reminds us that young people show us deep faith, trust, care, compassion, and concern. Age is not a factor in our ability to serve God. It's not just something that happens later on in life, but early on. God is working in us and through us early with faith that isn't afraid to reach out and help others.

I saw that this week when I served with our Ross Park Readers program. There's a group of folks from Lake Harbor who serve in different classrooms reading and helping with other needs. This week, my small group was working on spelling. How many of you like spelling tests? How many of you dread them?

One young girl was having trouble and feeling down as we were checking their practice test. She had missed a letter here and there. She was frustrated. She put her head on her desk and started to cry, and one young boy in my group went to get Kleenex for her. He didn't ask if she needed it; he just went and got it.

All of us can help. But, there's something else here. All of us have needed help. We've been the one with no power to speak of. We've been vulnerable, feeling hopeless and helpless. We've been the one who has needed someone to help us.

So take a moment to think about the Miriams in your life. Who has been there for you? Who has watched and prayed for you? Who has acted on your behalf? Who has shown you God's grace at just the right time?

It's good to remember and celebrate those people. But we're also called to **be** those people. And all of us are called to help. All of us need to help. And we need to help those who are vulnerable. All of us go between plea and praise, need and hope. That's who we are.

How many of you have heard the phrase "*God helps those who help themselves*" before? How many think it's somewhere in the Bible? It's not. It's usually attributed to Ben Franklin, but we've made it Gospel truth, even though it's not Holy Scripture. And it's not anything that we learn from Scripture. All along, we're dependent on each other and dependent on God.

We're called to trust in God and lean on God and pray to God. That doesn't mean we don't have personal responsibility, but we're called to care because God cares for us. It's not optional. It's not weakness. It's a part of living a faithful life.

This isn't the end of Miriam's story. After the exodus, when the Israelites go through the Red Sea on dry land and the Egyptians are drowned, Miriam sings. Women served as song leaders, which was an important leadership role.

In Exodus 15, we have one of the earliest songs in Scripture:

***19** When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. **20** Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. **21** Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."*

Miriam praises God for God's action and for deliverance. I wonder if she thought back to that day at the bank of the Nile when the future was uncertain for Moses, but now could see how God had brought them through. Its reason for praise, and a reminder of the power of trusting the One who leads, guides, cares, and never wavers in love for us.

May we receive God's care and respond to it by caring for each other.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.