

Sermon Title: "A New Song"
Scripture: Exodus 15:20-21
Date/Location: August 16, 2020 Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church
Preacher: Grace Boyer

Exodus 15:20-21 *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."*

When I was in seminary, I was taught that these verses were some of the oldest, if not the oldest in the Bible. Miriam, who is the sister of both Aaron and Moses. Miriam, who had watched closely as her baby brother Moses was perilously put into a papyrus basket on the banks of the Nile. Miriam, who negotiated with Pharaoh's daughter and convinced her to hire Moses' mother (their mother) to care for and nurse Moses. Miriam, who would later serve alongside her two brothers, and was called a prophet in her own right.

In verse 20, Miriam looks around at the people of Israel, who were in a daze after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea and the roller coaster ride of emotions they had gone through from slavery to freedom. She took up her tambourine and sang, leading the women.

This snippet of a song was then passed down from parent to child, to grandchild, down through the generations. Sung around family campfires as the stories of this pivotal event were told. Preserving the memories in the way that songs can. And over time, the songs and stories were then written down to form scripture. The melody now lost to us, but the words remain. "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

But, I've gotten ahead of myself again. A lot has happened since last Sunday when we heard of Moses and the burning bush and God telling Moses to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to "let my people go." Moses gave every objection he could think of to God for why he should not be the one God was calling. Objections such as: Who am I to go? No one will believe me. I have a speech impediment. And God kept saying, I will provide, I will be with you.

So finally, Moses and his brother Aaron team up and go to Pharaoh. Pharaoh is not impressed and refuses to let his slave labor go free. So begins a battle of wills between Pharaoh and God of who was supreme. It involves a round of 10 plagues that struck the Egyptian people while sparing the Israelites. These included water into blood, frogs, gnats, flies, diseased livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of firstborns. Those of you who know these stories know I am glossing over a lot here. A lot! But the general pattern was Pharaoh would say "no" to Moses, then be pestered by a plague, then say "yes" to Moses in order to stop the plague, only to say "no" again when the plague ended. Finally, in what the Israelites would celebrate as Passover, an angel of death passes over. While the Israelites are safe, every firstborn animal and Egyptian dies. The horror of that caused Pharaoh to send the Israelites off with an attitude of good riddance.

But after the Israelites leave Egypt and reach the Red Sea, Pharaoh again changes his mind. Pharaoh's heart becomes bitter and hard in his anger. He gathers up his officers and army, 600 chariots fitted with brutal picks, and horses to chase after the Israelites and pin them against the sea. The Israelites are understandably terrified. They are on a roller coaster from the brutality of slavery to a liberation moment, only to find themselves staring down the power and violence of the Egyptian army unleashed against them.

At this point we come to what has been depicted in many movies from Cecil B. DeMille to Disney and Dreamworks: the crossing of the Red Sea, or the parting of the Red Sea. God puts a pillar of cloud

between the Israelites and the Egyptian army to separate them. God's orders Moses to raise his hand and staff and, with a strong wind, God's very breath blows back the waters and the Israelites pass through on dry land, water piling up beside them like a wall. God orders Moses to stretch out his hand again for the water to return to normal, and the Egyptian chariots get mired in the mud and muck, as the water pours over them.

In the end, all the Egyptians who have chased them are gone, drowned or strewn on the side of the sea. Their power, their force, their violence, their officers, army, chariots, and their horses. All gone.

This story has a dark, violent, side. Whether it is in considering the innocents hurt by the 10 plagues, or all those whose lives are lost in the Red Sea: people and horses. It is not for the faint of heart. Warfare never is. However, Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann writes, "God's use of force against the power of oppression is not experienced as violent by those who are, in fact, oppressed." Meaning, that while we see violence and death, what the Israelites saw in this warlike imagery, was that finally someone, some God had finally defended them, come to their rescue, stood up and fought for them against slavery, brutally, and death. The power of the mighty Egyptians was destroyed, dead, laid out, never to harm them again. They were safe.

In this moment, dazed by what they have experience, what they have seen, what they do see around them on the battle field of that sea bank. Miriam takes her tambourine, and sings her song, wrapping up the grief, the horror, the relief, the freedom, the roller coaster ride of emotions. Women were often the ones who would sing in times of grief, mourning, or celebration. Miriam sings a new song.

Moses too sings a song, a much longer one, Exodus 15:1-18, that I suggest you read with its vivid imagery of wind, water, battle (and according to biblical scholars, it's quoting of Miriam's short song). Moses sings, "The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him." These poems and songs, like the Appalachian ballads, kept the stories alive as the Israelites tried to process what had happened to them, going from slavery to freedom, danger to safety, fear to relief. This pivotal moment in Israel's life at the Red Sea. Just as Moses had been drawn out of the water, the Israelites are drawn out and baptized into a new freed identity by the power of God.

Miriam's song, Moses' song. I have been pondering the power of music this week. To teach, to soothe, to inspire, to empower.

What songs do you remember from your childhood? Which ones did you memorize, even without trying to? What songs do you sing today? What are you singing, hearing, filling yourself with now—sacred or secular—to get you through in this time when we can't sing in church? Which tunes or words carry you through hard times? Which ones make your eyes well up with tears because of a friend, a memory, a funeral, wedding, special event? Which ones make you laugh?

Music can teach a child to read, "Abcdefg....." Music can lull a child to sleep. Music can empower a movement, "We shall overcome...." Music is one of the last things to go. People in advanced cognitive decline can sing a familiar song, play the piano. Those on their death bed can respond to a beloved hymn. A snippet of a song can stir a deep memory.

One of the things I enjoy about my husband and my relationship is that we know a lot of the same old songs and hymns, and new ones. He will start humming one, and I will sing the next line. Line after line we alternate as we cook a meal or clean up. It is a sound track to our lives. Some of mine are Our God, our help in ages past..., A mighty fortress is our God..., Jesus love me this I know..., God of the sparrow God of the whale..., Here I am Lord..., Silent night holy night..., Jesus Christ is risen today.... What are your songs?

This congregation has not gone through the Red Sea, or been chased by the Egyptian army, but we have had our journeys and struggles these past few months, with the passing of several beloved members, pillars. Most recently Pat Laursen, who was beloved by generations of students at Warren Wilson College and by generations of members of the church. Her very life was a song. Each of our lives are a song, with their own pitch, melody, tempo. Pat sang hers in her loving interactions with others. Her song lives on in her family and friends who loved her. Pat's song, my song, your song. Our lives. The old hymn, "My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation. No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing? Though all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?"

The prophet Miriam took up her tambourine and the Israelites sang a new song, a new identity. Not as defenseless and oppressed slaves, but as a defended, protected, beloved people of God. Life had new possibilities. "I will sing unto the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider thrown into the sea." What new song will we sing when Covid-19 is past, in the wreckage and remains of that battle? What song can we sing even now, in the midst of it all, trusting that God is with us. Even now. Even here. Amen.