

## ***The Big Sister***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 24, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship

Text: Exodus 2:5-10 & 15:20-21

I always wanted a sister. I have two brothers, much older brothers, and perhaps this is why I've always wondered about what having a sister would be like. I have female cousins to which I was close when I was younger but not close enough to think of them as anything more than cousins I spent a few days with once or twice a year. Ironically, I should have had a big sister but my mother's first pregnancy ended in the stillbirth of a full term baby. Back in those days in the early 1940's, there was not a lot of understanding or compassion for women whose pregnancies ended tragically through stillbirth or miscarriage. The baby was just whisked away, never to be seen or held or, in my sister's case at least, named or blessed or buried. My mother never knew what happened to her. Maybe my father knew, but my mother definitely did not. That this stillbirth of my sister profoundly impacted her is revealed in the simple fact that I have known of her existence since I was very young. I'm not sure if my brothers knew. If they did, it was not ever something we discussed.

As my mother was coming to the end of her life, this baby girl loomed large in her mind and in her heart. In fact, in the last week or so of her life, she told me she kept dreaming about her baby. She would say she was lost in the big house (her name for the house she grew up in) and she heard the baby crying but she couldn't find her. It was always her, by the way. Mom was becoming very upset as she described this vivid dream to me. When I asked her what baby, she said, "The baby! My baby! She needs me. She's waiting for me. I have to go to her." I should explain here that it is not unusual for women in end stage

Alzheimers to become focused on baby dolls, carrying them around cradling them as a mother cradles a newborn. I knew of a couple of women on my mom's floor in the nursing home who did that so I thought maybe this was what she was talking about in her now highly agitated state. So, I asked her again, in my calmest, gentlest voice, "what baby, mom?" She answered me quite directly: "My baby. Your sister. But I don't know her name? Why don't I know her name? I should know her name!"

In that moment, I felt like someone had punched me in the gut because I knew she was dreaming about her baby. The baby whose death passed almost unnoticed, or so it seemed. The baby that she never saw. The baby who died in her womb at full term for which she had to endure hours of labor to deliver, all the while knowing that baby was dead. As was the practice at that time she was heavily sedated as the baby was born and quickly whisked away. I don't know if she ever asked to see her. All she could remember was that she didn't see her. She was just gone. No name needed because there would be no birth certificate. Better just to take her home to recover and forget, the doctors told her and my dad. She's young. Plenty of time for more babies. This part she did tell me. And there were more babies – three to be precise. Two boys and then me, several years later. Our parents were good parents, loving and kind although at times a little strict and even distant. Still, we all knew we were loved. But none of us ever knew the impact of our sister's death until that day, shortly before my mother died, when she looked me in the eyes and told me my sister needed her and she had to find her. But she couldn't. She had been told 70 years earlier just to forget her. But she couldn't, of course. She loved that baby girl. Her first child! How could she not? Such cruelty masquerading as compassion was revealed in its entirety when all her filters, all her coping abilities, all her ability

to push down, down, down all those years of the pain of that baby's death exploding out of her frail body. I will never forget that moment. Nor will I ever forget the unnamed big sister I never knew.

Perhaps this is why the story of Moses' big sister – Miriam – resonates so strongly with me. She is a towering presence in the story of the Exodus yet she is seldom connected to that story as she should be. As we learn in Exodus, it was Moses' big sister who dared to follow the basket carrying her baby brother down the Nile after her mother did the only thing she could to save her tiny son from Pharaoh's cruel death sentence for male Hebrew babies. She made a basket from the reeds, placed the baby in it and floated him on the river. In that moment, Moses' mother – we learn later her name was Jochebed – was intent on only one thing – saving her son. She literally gave him to God, and, in doing so, the stage was set for the freedom of her own people from the bondage they were enduring in Egypt. Miriam, still unnamed at this point in the text, followed along the shore to watch what happened to her baby brother. We should note that the text appears to indicate she did this of her own accord. No mention is made of her mother asking her to do this, and indeed it would have been dangerous. But she needed to be sure her baby brother was safe, so she watched. And she saw when Pharaoh's daughter ordered her maid to go and get the basket and bring it to her. When the Egyptian princess unfolded the blanket swaddling him, she immediately knew it had to be a Hebrew baby, because of that blanket. Before the princess had time to think, Miriam approached and asked if they would like a nurse from the Hebrew woman to care for him. Pharaoh's daughter quickly agreed and Miriam brought her mother back to her to care for her son, now named Moses by his adoptive mother, a princess of Egypt. Thus,

Miriam literally gave her mother a second chance to mother this baby she had lost forever. What a gift this was.

Wow, what is not to love in this story! A mother saves her tiny son in an unexpected, even miraculous fashion and then – thanks to the efforts of her own daughter, and the baby’s sister – she is invited into the household who found him to continue caring for him. I’ve always wondered if Pharoah’s daughter didn’t suspect who she was. If she did, she never said anything. Nor did Pharoah himself ever ask about why his daughter suddenly had a three month old baby she was introducing at court as her son. That’s what gives this story such a fairy tale ring. And to some extent, it is. It’s a story that explains who Moses, the Great Deliverer, was and how he came to be who he was. His miraculous rescue from certain death—being floated down the river—adds weight to this story within the Hebrew tradition, much like the birth of a leader-son to a formerly barren woman, such as Sarah, at an impossibly old age. But in this story, even Moses’ name comes from a woman – a foreign woman at that. Moses is, in fact, an Egyptian name and it means, “he who draws out.”<sup>1</sup> It is often part of Egyptian names connected to the name of a god as a leader would have – like Thutmoses, Ahmoses, Ramases, etc. The destiny of this tiny baby is thus evident in his name, ironically given him by the sister of the empire keeping his people enslaved.

But, back to Miriam, the big sister who made sure her little brother was okay and well cared for. After this story, she disappears from the text, and presumably from Moses’ life in the palace as well. We meet her again much later on, after Moses has done time in the desert, encountered the burning bush and been ordered by God to return to Egypt (he had been banished as a

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary notes on Exodus 2, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 85.

young man for killing a cruel slave overseer) and lead his people to freedom. When we meet Miriam again, it's in Exodus 15, immediately after Moses has led the Hebrews through the Red Sea which then caught Pharaoh's army as the waters rushed back into place and they all drowned. According to the text, immediately after this happened, Moses led the people in a song. Miriam also leads the women in a song and a dance, using the same words as in Moses' song. Even more thought-provoking here is that the text specifically refers to Miriam as a prophet at this point. Not Moses nor her other brother Aaron. Miriam is the prophet and as she gathers the other women in a song of praise to the God who liberated them by defeating Pharaoh's army, she is acting autonomously. She did not get Moses' permission to sing nor to gather the other women with her. She just did it. Just like she didn't get her father's permission to follow the basket with the infant Moses in it nor to refer her mother – his wife – to Pharaoh's daughter as a nurse. Indeed, Miriam here in Exodus is a heroic leader, acting on her own initiative as God inspired her to. Given that in this time period women were seen as having value only as bearing children and caring for families, Miriam's story is all the more incredible. She did what she needed to do to save her brother and to ease her own mother's heartache. Then she did what she needed to do to remind all the people that it was God who had done this for them. Not her brother. God. <sup>2</sup>

Miriam, an extraordinary big sister by any standard. She broke protocols and customs to protect her baby brother, making sure he survived. In doing so, she made the Exodus possible. Without her none of it happens. Not the exile into the desert. Not the encounter with Jethro that led to Moses' marriage to his

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<sup>2</sup> Newsom & Ringe, Eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, ©1998, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 33.

daughter and life as a shepherd. Not the burning bush and the journey back to Egypt. Not the plagues. Not the Red Sea crossing. Not the ultimate defeat of Pharaoh and long and arduous journey to the Promised Land. None of it happens without Miriam. A young girl with maturity, wisdom, courage, compassion and faith beyond her age. Miriam was, quite clearly, anointed by God to fulfill her part of God's plans for God's people. Did she understand how vital her role was as she was doing these things? Unlikely. She just saw something needing doing and she did it. And, for her efforts, she usually is buried under the layers and layers of history which barely acknowledges how vital she was to all that came after her. Such is the fate of women all too often. And yet, they keep going on. That, dear ones, is amazing and worthy of our attention and our respect.

The thing is, we are, each one of us, surrounded by women like Miriam every day. Women who are doing ordinary things and making a huge and extraordinary difference in the lives of so many. I invite you, in the week ahead, to watch for these other "Miriams" who are already populating your life. They are there, I promise. When you recognize them, go ahead and say something. Not "thank you for your service" or anything trite like that. Heavens no! Instead, just give them a big smile and tell them how great they look or what a good job they are doing or how well behaved their children are even if they're not. If you meet them as a long day is ending for them, smile and wish them a pleasant evening, or tell them to get some rest. In other words, dear ones, let them know you SEE them ... and that they matter too. You'll be surprised at what something so simple can mean to all the women, all the Miriams, in your life. Amen.