

**Living With Courage and Resilience**  
**Part 6: Miriam's Song (Hope)**

by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

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Scripture: Exodus 15:1-21; Revelation 15:2-4

Additional Reading: "Prevent the Next War" by Thich Nhat Hanh (from *How to Fight*)

Given that it's Baccalaureate Sunday, our passage from Exodus 15, commonly called the "Song of Moses," is especially appropriate. It points to a resilience characteristic that many of us need, but no one needs more than those who are just starting out their adult life in a chaotic world: Hope.

This also being Mother's Day, mothers may take particular interest in this passage because, for a number of reasons we can't get into this morning, many scholars believe that the "Song of Moses" was originally the "Song of Miriam," Moses' sister, and that her song was later misattributed to Moses.<sup>1</sup> I know it's hard to believe that a man would receive credit for a woman's work .... But it happens.

One other peculiarity of this passage makes it especially interesting to everyone who reads the Bible: Due to certain characteristics of the Hebrew language in Exodus 15, which were common in Israel's earliest times but fell out of use later, scholars date this passage to somewhere between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE – a full two to four centuries before most of the other early writings in the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, the "Song of Moses" (let's just call it the "Song of Miriam" from here on) – is the oldest, or one of the oldest, writings in the entire Bible.

The "Song of Miriam" was apparently so highly revered by the Hebrews that it was preserved for generation after generation even before any of the other early writings appear on the scene. So you can bet your bottom dollar that the Hebrew people had a very, very strong, heart-felt connection to this song. It was like the "Star Spangled Banner" for ancient Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> It is thought by some to be original to Miriam because (a) immediately after Moses concludes singing "his" song, Miriam is said to take up the tambourine and sing it. This immediate repetition seems strange. (Note only the first line of the song is given in the "Miriam" version, but this line acts like many hymn titles do in our own day – where the whole hymn is sung but only the first line is listed.); (b) there is evidence to suggest that vv. 20-21, i.e., the "Miriam" version, was written by a different author than vv. 1-20, indicating that two versions of the same story seem to have existed at one time that were later combined; (c) there is a strong tendency for a more famous person to stick in historical memory than a less famous one, especially when the more famous one is part of a dominant group. (Who would more likely receive the credit for a certain act between the Lone Ranger and Tonto?)

Like the "Star Spangled Banner," the "Song of Miriam" deals with war and a surprising victory for the underdog. Though unlike the "Star Spangled Banner," however, which makes no mention of the means by which victory was won, the "Song of Miriam" makes no bones about who defeated the Egyptians: God did. "Yahweh is a warrior," sings the singer, and Yahweh fought for Israel.

I don't know about you, but I must confess that depictions of my God as a Divine Warrior, inflicting death and destruction on some people while fighting on behalf of others – even oppressed others – makes me uncomfortable. It always has. It makes me even more uncomfortable in our day, where sabers are being rattled all over the globe, from the United States, to the Middle East, to North Korea, and all sides are convinced that God, or the Universe, or the Power of Justice, is on their side.

Part of my discomfort arises from a certain skepticism I hold regarding anyone's ability to know whose side God is on, or even if God takes sides. I am also uncomfortable with the idea that, even if one could know such things, a God who loves all of us "beyond our wildest imagination" would actually approve the use of violence against certain people while acting to protect others. I think the question, "Who would Jesus bomb" captures the essence of my angst. I can't picture Jesus or his God approving the bombing of anyone. Not if Jesus commands us to love our enemies and do good to those who hate and persecute us.

Yet, as uncomfortable as I am with the idea that God could be a fighter, not just a lover, I am also uncomfortable with my discomfort.

I believe, for instance, that God opposes slavery – not just the slavery of the ancient Israelites, but *all* forms of slavery. Further, I believe that God's will in the world tends to be worked out through imperfect human beings (people) more than supernatural acts. And I believe that God is not naïve or an imbecile. And yet, if God is not naïve, then God knows far better than we do that significant social progress is rarely made without the use of force or sometimes even violence. Do you think the slaveholders in Georgia or Tennessee would have willingly given up their slaves if the abolitionists had simply asked a little more nicely? Would the Nazis have turned off their ovens if the world had simply been more accommodating of German aspirations?

We use the phrase, "Love wins" around here with some regularity. Yet unless we mean "Love wins" in the ultimate sense, far beyond the context of this lifetime or this world, then the Hebrews would remind us that if love is to "win," love must "fight." This is why I describe myself as 99% pacifist rather than 100%. While you have to set an extremely

high bar when it comes to justifying violence as an act of *love*, it is also clear to me that if a system is creating far more pain than the pain it would take to destroy it – as in Nazi Germany – the system needs to come down. Systems rarely come down without a fight. For the victims who are trapped within that evil system, the notion of God being a warrior is one that inspires hope, not revulsion.

Happy Mother's Day everyone!

You cringe when you hear me wish you a happy Mother's Day in this context, but if you are the mother of children who are, or may someday be, victimized by a pain-creating system, the idea that God may act, at times, as a warrior is a far happier message than can be contained on a sentimental Hallmark card on Mother's Day.

Yet just because God may, as a warrior, condone the use of violence on rare occasions, this does not mean that God loves violence any more than we do. In fact, I have it on high authority that we human beings love violence far more than God does!

Let me suggest another way that God acts as Warrior that has nothing to do with the use of violence, but does very much have to do with defeating evil. The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, captures the essence of what I have in mind far better than many Christians do. In his book, *How to Fight*,<sup>2</sup> he writes the following:

*Only if you suffer will you make other people suffer. If you are peaceful and happy, you won't inflict suffering on other people. Looking deeply we can see how we have helped create the suffering in those who inflict violence, through our forgetfulness and through the way we live our daily lives. We have to learn to produce right thinking, speech, and action that is free of violence, anger, hate, and fear. We know very well that violence only creates more violence. Yet violence has become the substance of our lives. Many of us live in places where there is fighting in the streets and in our homes. Is it any wonder, then, that we fight and see violence as a way to solve problems? If we want to protect life, we have to look deeply as individuals and as a nation into the true nature of violence and war. We have to do everything in our power to prevent war from happening again. If we only protest, we will not be ready when the next war comes in five or ten years. To prevent the next war, we have to practice peace today. If we establish peace in our hearts, in our way of looking at things, and in our way of being with each other and with the world, then we are doing our best to make sure the next war will not come. If we wait until another war is imminent to begin to practice peace, it will be too late. Peace begins here, now.*

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<sup>2</sup> Parallax Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (2017), pp. 91-92.

In other words, if you want to end violence and experience peace, start by ending the violence within you. Then, you will experience peace regardless of what the rest of the world does. Like Israel of old, we may from time to time find ourselves in conflict with the modern-day equivalent of Egyptians on chariots. Yet we will always be faced with the internal "Egyptians" no matter how peaceful the outside may be. You know the internal "Egyptians," don't you?

You call them by other names, but they are there inside you all the same. They are those forces, impulses, voices, and addictions that seek to manipulate you, degrade you, and enslave you. They want you to bow down and call them Lord. They are also the forces that seek to enslave you through trying to persuade you to manipulate, degrade, hurt, and condemn others. And they are the voices that seek to persuade you to find "peace" through giving in to despair and giving up on actively seeking to change your situation or that of the world.

If you have any doubt that God the Warrior cannot defeat these kinds of "Egyptians," then do what the ancient Israelites did and see what happens. Put your life in God's hands, swear allegiance to God alone – and really mean it – and be willing to follow where God guides you, even if God is "pushing you into places you would not necessarily go yourself." Do all this, and you will not have to wait for the world to find peace before you do.

If you think this is wishful thinking, consider the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous' 12-Step program:

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. *Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

A.A.'s Twelve Steps could have come right out of the Book of Exodus. (The authors of the Twelve Steps, known as "Bill W." and "Dr. Bob" said outright, in fact, that their program was based on biblical principles.) Anyone who has ever struggled with alcohol or drug addiction can tell you that no true addiction goes away without a fight. In this fight you need to depend on a power greater than yourself to help you overcome it. It is not through violence but through this kind of fight that we primarily know God as Warrior.

Curiously, in the very last book of the Bible – which was written later than any other piece of Scripture – we find a vision that is based on the earliest piece of writing, in Exodus 15. Only now, we find the people of God standing on top of a glassy sea rather than running through a parted one – which is a metaphor for people who have found such deep peace they no longer are running from anything. And in case we missed the reference to Exodus 15, the author of the vision specifically says that those standing upon the sea are singing the “Song of Moses.” (Sorry, Moses still “wins” over Miriam, even in the New Testament!) Only, the author says that the “Song of Moses” is also the “Song of the Lamb.”

The “lamb” is Jesus, the new Divine Warrior. The writer is telling us that the God of Jesus is also the God of Moses, and that the message of Jesus and the message of Exodus 15 are ultimately in harmony with one another. Exodus 15 tells us *that* God is a warrior. Jesus shows us *how* God is a warrior – or how God acts most often as a warrior. Not primarily by killing enemies, but by defeating enemies in a more effective way than killing them: by converting them to friends. As a warrior, God wages peace far more than war. And if God is a warrior like Jesus was one, then God wages peace in ways that may or may not bring peace to the nations but unfailingly brings peace to any human soul who will receive God.

Graduating seniors, mothers, and everyone born of a mother, I hope you will remember this small piece of advice:

If your hope for living a rich and fulfilling life is based on the hope of God or anyone else conquering the modern-day equivalents of the ancient Egyptians bringing peace to the world, then your hope is based more on “wishful thinking” than true hope. But if your hope is based on God helping you deal with your inner “Egyptians” in a way that brings peace *to you*, then your hope is well-founded. Perhaps your inner peace will bring a bit more peace to others as well. The key to remember is that you don’t have to wait for everyone else to find peace before you do.