

Misfits, Leaders, Disciples, and Prophets: 12 Amazing Women of the Bible
Part 4 (Prophets): Miriam, Deborah, and Anna
May 19, 2019
Baccalaureate Sunday

Scriptures: Exodus 15:1-21; Judges 5:1-15a, 19-22; Joel 2:28; Luke 2:36-40

I. Meet Miriam

Good morning! My name is Miriam. “Miriam” means “bitter” in Hebrew. I’ll bet you graduating Seniors are mighty glad your parents didn’t name you “bitter”! Am I right? It may seem a little unfair, especially since I’m best known for leading Israel in dancing and singing after we crossed the Red Sea and God gave the Egyptians a good soaking. You could say I’m a little bit “bitter” based on what happened later. But I’m getting ahead of myself ...

The Jewish tradition counts me as one of its prophets. Now, before you start asking me to predict the future or pick Lotto numbers for you, bear in mind that Israel’s prophets were known more for their *forthtelling*, not their *foretelling*. That is, we did less predicting of the future than we did observing the current situation and offering a “word from the Lord” about it. *Forthtelling*.

Nevertheless, I can predict one thing about the future with confidence: that you Seniors are going to go far in life – especially if you become good at speaking a “word from the Lord” to people in your day. *Forthtelling*.

Now, back to me. I enjoy unusually high prominence in the Bible for a woman. I am mentioned no less than 14 times in a wide variety of books! For instance, the prophet Micah identifies me as being one of the three most important people responsible for leading Israel out of bondage in Egypt. (Micah 6:4) But likely you only remember my bother Moses. You *might* remember that Aaron played some vague role. If you think of me at all, you may just remember me as the sister of Moses.

Now, why do you suppose that I, one of the three most important leaders in the Exodus, would be so overlooked by history? I’m not going to play the “sexism” card ... right away. After all, who can compare to Moses? If my brother had a middle name it would be *Chutzpah!* Only Jesus himself was a more extraordinary leader. Nevertheless, you can bet your life that if Moses were *Maureen*, she would certainly slip down a few notches in Israel’s Top 10 leaders list. Just sayin’ ...

But I digress. What I really want you to understand – and especially you graduating Seniors – is that even if you don’t get all the credit you may deserve in life, you can still kick up some serious dust. Sometimes you’ve just got to be content with simply *doing* cool stuff rather than being *remembered* for it.

So, what did I do that was so cool? Besides being a key leader of my people, I wrote one of the most famous songs in all of history. It’s called “Imagine.” Have you heard of it? You think John Lennon wrote that, but he stole it from me!

Just kidding. His song is small potatoes compared to the song I wrote. “Imagine” has only been loved and sung by people since 1971. I realize that’s “ancient times” for you Seniors, but my song – known as the “Song of the Sea” (or the “Song of Miriam” by some) has been loved and quoted by people around the world since 1250 BCE!

Now, I can tell that those of you who weren’t sleeping during the Bible reading are thinking to yourselves, “Chris read that *Moses* first sang this song, not Miriam. Miriam only took up the song after Moses had already sung it.

This is true. Only, does it not strike you as odd that I would sing the *exact* same song as soon as it left my brother’s precious lips? It has certainly struck a number of your biblical scholars as odd. For one thing, singing victory songs after battle victories was considered “women’s work” in my day. Why would Moses be doing “women’s work” after battle?

Scholars also point to grammatical oddities that suggest that I was the original singer. Moses starts the song by saying, “**I** will sing unto the Lord ...” but I start the song by saying, “Let **us** sing to the Lord ...” Jewish liturgy is full of songs that begin with the singer inviting the crowd to sing (“Let us sing unto the Lord ...”) and the crowd responding by saying something to the effect of, “**I** will sing unto the Lord ...” In this story it is reversed. Moses says, “**I** will sing,” followed by me saying, “Let **us** sing ...”

What many scholars think happened is this: The original story reported that I led the crowd in singing my soon-to-be-hit song, “Song of the Sea,” and Moses joined in the singing. But because Moses is so much more famous than me, people gradually forgot that I wrote and led it, and just gave Moses the credit. But some memory of me leading the singing survived. That’s why I’m tacked on to the end of the story, leading the crowd in singing after Moses has already sung the song.

In other words, what happened to me is like Yoko Ono writing the song “Imagine” and John Lennon getting the credit. Sure, it’s unfair! But it’s a man’s world ... at least for now. And it’s a *famous person’s* world, too, which makes life unfair sometimes for *both* women and men who are not famous.

You see, Seniors, my parents weren’t so wrong about calling me “Bitter.” I *am* a little bitter for not receiving more credit. But most of the time I’m simply happy to know that I wrote the most famous song in human history, whether people give me credit for it or not. If you Seniors will bear my story in mind, then perhaps the next time you feel bitter for not receiving the credit *you* are due, you’ll remember me and say to yourself, “That’s *their* problem, not mine.”

II. Meet Deborah

Hi, my name is Deborah. The Bible says that I arose as “a mother” of the tribes of Israel. But I was no ordinary mother! The name “Deborah” means “bee” in Hebrew. That’s a pretty accurate name. You could say that, “I may float like a butterfly, but I sting like a bee.”

Oh, you think that’s Mohammed Ali’s line? Did you just hear Miriam’s story about a man getting credit for the work of a woman? I’m joking. It’s Ali’s line. But I will say that, when it comes to being a prize fighter, “*I’m* the greatest!”

Long before there were kings in Israel, there were certain charismatic leaders who rose up to lead Israel during times of crisis. They were called Judges. In our day, a judge wasn't someone who merely heard court cases. I did hold court – under a palm tree – and the fact that I judged legal cases before there was ever a court system in Israel meant that people trusted me far and wide. But I was also a major political leader and, like Miriam, I am remembered as being a prophet, too.

I also wrote a very famous song that commemorates an amazing battle victory, like Miriam did. Only, unlike Miriam, I didn't just sing about the battle. I *fought* in it! In fact, I was the chief commander of the Israelite army.

Happily, for me, my heroism and leadership weren't forgotten by Israel. They never credited a famous man like Moses for my work. That's why the tribes of Israel called me their "Mother."

The fact that I was remembered and adored by Israel as a prophet, political and military leader, and judge may surprise you. This is probably because you assume Israel was totally patriarchal in my day. But if this were the case, someone like me could never have existed. I like to think that people like Miriam broke the ground that my Israelite sisters and I would later blossom in. We really did blossom, too! At least until kings came along.... Then it was back to the old male domination story.

Curiously, in the Bible, God didn't originally want Israel to be led by a king. God was perfectly happy to have women like me leading Israel during times of crisis. But God finally buckled when the people started complaining that everyone else had a king so they wanted one, too. You see, even God has to pay attention to the polls sometimes....

As you graduating seniors leave here this morning, I hope the women among you will remember one thing based on my story: if you feel God calling you to do work that isn't considered "women's work" don't let other people's opinion hold you back. You can lead an army if God calls you to do it. You can be a judge. You can be a prophet. Or, like me, you can be all of these and more.

To you young men, I hope you'll remember that, just as women need not be restricted to so-called "women's work" as a vocation, you need not restrict yourself only to "men's work." Look at all the male nurses these days, and the stay-at-home dads. If you feel God calling you in a direction your peers don't entirely understand, trust what God whispers in your heart of hearts and go for it!

I did. And the Bible remembers me not only as a "mother" but a hero because of it.

III. Meet Anna

Good morning. I'm Anna. Anna means "Grace" in Hebrew. My friends call me "Gracie." So you can call me Gracie, too.

I have the distinction of being the first person in the New Testament to be called a prophet. I'm considered a prophet because when Jesus was presented as an eight-day-old child in the Temple, I could tell the moment I set eyes on him that God had chosen him to do great things.

My heart told me that Israel's Messiah was laying in his mother's arms – right there in front of me sucking on his thumb!

You may wonder how I could know so much about Jesus with so little to go by. If you ever figure it out, do tell me because I would like to know, too!

Some say prophets are born with an “inner eye” that can see things that others can't. I don't see any differently than you do, but I definitely *sense* things that others don't. I “see” with my heart. It's a wonderful gift. Sometimes I just “know” things I shouldn't be able to know but I do.

I wasn't born with this gift. I hope you graduating Seniors will remember this. I'm guessing you don't feel like you could be prophets yourselves because you've never experienced this form of knowing, or don't experience it regularly. But you *can* be a prophet. You can *become* one, at least if both you and God want you to become one.

While some people may be born with the gift of seeing with the heart, for me it was something that came gradually – after years of prayer, meditation, and being highly intentional about my spiritual path. If you set your mind and heart on it, many years from now you can have the same gift I have.

Oh, I know. You don't want to have to wait for years for this kind of spiritual gift. Most people these days practice what I like to call a McFaith. That is, they think that you should be able to be spiritually gifted in about as much time as it takes to go through the drive-through window at McDonald's. They want to download the Holy Spirit like an iPhone app, press a button, and – voilà – *instant* divine revelation.

Well, revelation often happens in an instant, but it works kind of like fly-fishing. If you cast a fly in the water without any knowledge of fly-fishing, you may get lucky occasionally and hook a fish. But if you want to catch fish *regularly*, you need to apprentice yourself to the art of tying flies, understanding the river, casting your line, and hitting the right spot.

Of course, great fly-fishers make the art look easy, just as people with years of spiritual practice under their belt make it look easy to be a person of Spirit. But don't fool yourself. Neither are easy. Both fly-fishing and spiritual awareness take time to develop and get better with constant practice.

The Bible may make it seem like all I had to do was look at the baby Jesus to know that he was the Messiah, but there was far more to it than that. As the Bible also recognizes, I'd been engaged in serious spiritual practices for 84 years! This level of training doesn't mean that God sent me information that wasn't accessible to anyone else. What it means is that it developed a level of spiritual sensitivity in me that could recognize and interpret signals that the Holy Spirit is constantly sending *everyone*.

I was able to hear the whispers of Spirit within all the static around me. I knew how certain intuitions feel in the body, and how they flash in the mind. I knew how to interpret the most subtle ripples made by the Spirit in the deep waters of the human soul. In other words, I knew how to read my gut. Not only did I know how to read it, I knew when I could trust it.

You see, a prophet isn't someone who uniquely receives revelations from God. A prophet is someone who actually notices and is able to interpret the revelations that God is constantly sending all of us, but that few people notice. I hope you'll remember this about me.

I hope you'll remember one other thing about me, too. If you were paying close attention to what Luke wrote about me, you might wonder if there's a little more to my story than he's letting on.

Luke says I had been widowed for 84 years. That's a very long time to be without an income, especially in the days before Social Security. How much money do you suppose I had? Why, I was poorer than a temple mouse!

Luke also says I could be found at the temple every day for those 84 years. Why would a person like me, as spiritual as I am, spend so much time at the temple – unless I had nowhere else to go? Between you and me, I was not only poor, but homeless!

Luke also says that I “fasted” a lot. I did fast as a spiritual discipline now and then, but mostly Luke is just saying (in a kind and gentle way) that I was hungry a lot. I hung out at the temple to not only pray, and not just because I had nowhere else to go, but also because people would occasionally drop a coin in my apron to help me break my “fast”!

Let me tell it to you straight because Luke was too much of a gentleman to do it. People basically knew me as “Gracie the Bag Lady.” A highly spiritual bag lady, to be sure, but these qualities need not be mutually exclusive.

What I hope you graduating Seniors will remember from my story, besides the encouragement to keep developing the eye of your heart, is that even a bag lady can make history. Even a bag lady can be a prophet of God. That's because God loves bag ladies as much as God loves anyone else.

Remember this the next time you worry about whether you'll be rich or poor, “successful” or “unsuccessful.” And remember this the next time you come across a person walking down the street with their life's possessions in a shopping cart. Why not put a couple dollars in their hat? Tell them “Gracie” sent you.