

Sermon June 27, 2021

“Singing in Liminal Moments”

The Rev. Brent Damrow, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Stockbridge

SCRIPTURE:

Exodus 15:19-21 Easy-to-Read Translation

19 Yes, it really happened! Pharaoh’s horses and riders, and chariots went into the sea. And the Lord brought all the water of the sea down on top of them. But the Israelites walked through that sea on dry land. 20 Then Aaron’s sister, the woman prophet Miriam, took a tambourine. She and the women began singing and dancing. 21 Miriam repeated the words, “Sing to the Lord! He has done great things. He threw horse and rider into the sea”

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Miriam is a fundamental part of the Bible, and a fundamental part of our experience as church. Miriam is a wise woman. Miriam, the Bible says, was a prophet. And Miriam, back there on the shores of the Red Sea, knew to the depth of her being a truth -- a truth that later theologians, musicians and even brain specialists would discover and cling to -- and that is that songs and singing matter.

There in Exodus, Miriam proclaimed a truth that the Jewish tradition continues to remember and practice every single week as they enter the sacred time of Sabbath. They pause. They stop. And as they get ready to observe that holy day, when they remember who they are and to whom they belong, they gather into worship that is almost entirely sung. They sing stories of the past, stories of the present, stories that will shape the future.

In this passage, Miriam brings to life the axiom that contemporary man of faith and scholar of song, Don Saliers, lives by, which is that public singing -- corporate singing, this thing we do together -- offers formation in a shared identity. And when we sing like Miriam did, of and from our faith, Saliers argues that our identity flows out of an ancient story that suddenly takes on new life. Saliers says that singing not only gives voice to an individual person -- whether in praise, lament, or need -- but it does not leave that individual ever isolated. Instead, it joins that person to a great choir, whether it’s a choir that sings on this church lawn or the choir that has sung throughout the ages. The truth is, my friends, singing fundamentally matters.

In the midst of that liminal moment our story brings us to -- that moment of liberation and freedom, and yet the memory of enslavement still clinging painfully to the people on that journey -- that moment of movement and opening, and yet fully mindful of the arduous journey that lay before them in the wilderness. That moment where their journey as a people changed, Miriam did what prophets do, what wise people do: Miriam sang, she danced, she made a joyful noise. And more importantly, she invited her people to sing in their particular moment that they might be bound together as a choir.

Saliers reminds us that when we sing, the words of the song are given greater range and greater power. Something is shared in singing that transcends. He says it brings us on a double journey.

When we sing as people of God, it brings us deeply into the mystery of God, even as it brings us into the depths of our own humanity.

For there is never in our lives any single moment. Rather, each and every moment is part of, springs from, and shapes the journey that we are on. Jesus would remind us that each moment is the only one we have. And in that moment when Miriam sang, she knew her people were carrying with her their hopes of a new beginning, and also fear of an unknown wilderness that lay before them. She knew that her people were carrying the great breath of life that their children would grow up no longer enslaved. And yet each and every one of them knew the grief of those who had spent their whole lives enslaved, those who had lost their lives in that enslavement at the hands of slave masters, and the truth that emerging from any painful time brings burdens, and loss, and wounds that sometimes never fully heal.

All of that, Miriam knew, would be enough to grind that whole exodus to a halt, to overwhelm the people, just as the Red Sea had just covered Pharaoh's last vain effort to wrench them back. But Miriam knew, and so she sang. And Miriam knew that, while it's powerful to be in the presence of singing, it is exponentially more powerful to be part of the singing.

So Miriam did what a great mentor of mine, Catherine Evans at Yale Divinity School, did. Patrick was the song leader in Marquand Chapel at Yale. If you ever want to hear a glorious song being sung, go to Marquand Chapel, 10:00 any day Monday through Friday. The singing will blow you away, I promise. But what Patrick knew was that while we had great voices in and amongst us, we all had voices. He knew the power of song and he helped us learn so that each of us, even people like me, could not just listen but could instead become part of the song. Patrick's gift was bringing great singing traditions of the world to our chapel, that our own stories might be broadened, that different rhythms and tones might join our singing vocabulary. But the truth is, how he did it mattered. Patrick didn't just show us how to do it or sing it. He had a gorgeous voice. But he took the big and complicated parts of songs and broke them down for us. He brought his body and voice to life, and simply invited us to join in. He lined things out and he taught over and over again, week after week, even songs that he'd already taught, so that those of us who might not yet have grabbed on could.

The reason I tell that story of Patrick is that I think it is exactly what Miriam is doing in this passage. For you see, Miriam isn't the first one to sing in this chapter of Exodus, not even the first one to sing since they crossed the Red Sea. Moses already had. Moses covered a great and beautiful song. It is majestic in its poetry. Go ahead and look for it there in Exodus and read it. It is a song of great heft and depth, a song of great length and complexity, a song that spans some 19 verses. It praises God in staggering breadth and depth. It would have been awe-inspiring to hear it sung. But I've got to believe Miriam in her wisdom said these people aren't going to remember all that. They need something to sing and walk with them. And so what Miriam did is she took the most important part of that song and she sang it. She lined it out for them so that they could sing it with her. She got the women around her to make a joyful noise with tambourines. She got them all to dance so that their song, kind of like our sign language *Passing of the Peace*, would become embodied. She condenses all of it to a single verse. She brings the power of all of it to bear that they might join in. A song of what God did in their moment of need. Yes, a song of memory to cling to in moments of hope or grief, in moments of longing or

despair. But more than that, like our children's choir sang today, that this truth might become part of their vocabulary, that they might remember why it is we sing in the first place.

I want to share something with you about my time at Yale Divinity School. Patrick Evans did such an amazing job of singing that at the very last chapel worship service of the year, the bulletin had no song titles, no song lyrics, no song words, nothing. Instead, what would happen – and it was amazing – was that Patrick would simply start singing a line, and there at the end of the year we all joined in for the rest of the song, because by that point we knew it by heart. And I can tell you that there is nothing more powerful than to have something from your heart bubbling up and singing it together. That's what Paul was writing about in his letter to Ephesus. Today's music leader, Barbara, spent a lot of time poring over the songs that you sent in for today's hymn sing, both that we could include them in the service, but hopefully sooner or later that next time we do this we're not going to give you a song book because you will know them by heart.

It makes us, as Don Saliers says, a people joined in all of our humanity with the fullness of God. When we sing, we do those things we started talking about in this sermon. We sing because it enlivens us and brings us together, and we realize great truths. We sing because it invites us into a deeper sharing. We sing because it makes us a people.

Is there anyone here who remembers a few years ago when we did joint worship services with Hevreh? We went there for a joint service, and they came here for a joint service. I remember the song book that Hevreh had was very thick, and was chock full of words in Hebrew and with melodies that I didn't know. What amazed me was not how well I sang. I gave up after a little while. But what I did instead was look around and watch how each and every person in that room shut their eyes. How each and every person in that room did what my friend Anne McKinstry does – held their arms open. And each of them sang these songs from the depth of their heart because they had become the story of their faith.

Singing binds us together. And so, friends, let us not just sing today, not just make noise, but read the words of these hymns, and let their truth seep in. I promise you that if I asked you something about your faith, what you would answer is far more likely to be part of a hymn text than any sermon I, or Jonathan Edwards, or anyone else, ever gave.

So sing today to make a joyful noise. Sing today to learn. And sing today to remember that we are always in a liminal space, always traveling from here to there, and that singing is the song of our journey. Amen.