

Last week we started a series in which we're going to look at some women from the bible and learn from their stories. There are some amazing characters in the bible but because many of the main characters are men it is easy to overlook the part women played. In history the bible has been used to justify many things that aren't actually true – usually with verses taken out of context or interpreted in a particular way to suit an argument. Even today there are still arguments over the role of women in leadership in the church, so I thought it would be good to look at some of women that appear in the bible that might not always get much of a mention.

First, I want to tell you about a young man who decided to join a monastery that had a vow of silence. The monks were not allowed to speak with the exception of their birthday. Once a year on their birthday each monk could come before the monk in charge and speak two words. They always chose their words carefully.

Well on his birthday our man arrived at the office of the Abbot in charge and took his seat. “Well Andrew, you have been a monk with us almost a year and since this is your birthday, you are allowed to speak two words, do you have anything to say?”

"Bad food!", Replied the monk Andrew.

“Well, ok”, and the Abbot wrote what Andrew said in his file.

The next year, Andrew arrived at the Abbot's office and took his seat. The second year Andrew said, “Bed hard”. The Abbot wrote his words down in his file.

During his third year when Andrew was called to office, and he didn't even bother taking his seat – he quickly blurted out, “Work boring”.

“Well that's it!” shouted the Abbot. “I have to ask to leave our monastery”.

“But why? What did I do?” asked Andrew breaking his vow of silence.

“Isn't it obvious? You've done nothing but complain since you got here.”

Sometimes when we complain, we complain about everything except what we have a problem with. We avoid talking about what we think the real problem is by complaining about something that is unrelated. This is what we find here in our passage this morning. Here in our passage we see Miriam complaining about one thing, when she is really upset about something altogether different.

Notice that God intervenes and Miriam suffers what seems to be a fairly harsh punishment for simply complaining. That is because she is not simply complaining. Miriam has been truly blessed by God. She has been given wisdom, talent, insight. She also is blessed to be one of the leaders of the people, leading alongside her brothers Moses and Aaron. What Miriam does, is to look past her blessing and become jealous and envious of what God has given her brother Moses. It is that God reacts to.

Looking in your bibles you will see right there in verse one, “*Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite.*” Now some

modern translations have difficulty translating this verse. This verse is in the third person feminine singular and it specifically refers to Miriam doing the talking and implies that Aaron does nothing, but in doing so, agrees with his sister.

What is she complaining about? The complaint, on the face of it is about Moses' wife – a woman from Cush. In Hebrew, Cush CAN mean “Ethiopian” but it can also refer to what is now Saudi Arabia, the largely desert area where Midian was located. And whether Moses' wife was a second wife, a black one, or his first wife, a Midianite named Zipporah, Aaron and Miriam were trying to suggest that she was somehow inappropriate for a leader of God's people. We don't know if it was because she was an “extra” wife as with polygamy, a “second” wife after Zipporah died or was divorced, or if it was Zipporah herself, but we can be sure that the issue wasn't really the wife.

So, Miriam is the complainer. Miriam is the one who looks past all she is blessed with. Her speech is hostile and her questions are rhetorical, she is not looking for an answer. In fact, her questions are actually accusations. Num. 12:2 *“Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?” they asked. “Hasn't he also spoken through us?”*

Miriam is piling up perceived problems to make her complaint sound stronger. But notice who intervenes: God himself, Numbers 12:5 *Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam.* God takes care of things himself. Being summoned by God cannot be a good thing in this context.

We see in verse 3 a mention of Moses humility. In context the Hebrew is attempting to get across that Moses would have let the challenge go unanswered, He would not be assertive. Moses would let God take care of things. So God does.

Miriam is not happy with God's plan in her life, she wants what Moses has. But, she has so much..... I need to point out that Moses, Aaron and Miriam are all in their 80's, Miriam, might even be in her 90's. This is no squabble among youth. These siblings should know better. Miriam, has led a tremendous life, with tremendous authority – but apparently that is not enough anymore.

We read in Micah 6:4 *I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.* Miriam isn't just another Hebrew, and she isn't just the sister, Miriam is one of the three leaders of Israel

We first see her in Exodus chapter 2 as a little girl, probably about seven or eight years older than Moses. She is sharp and full of wisdom as she watches the basket Moses is in float down the river and into the hand of Pharaoh's daughter. Remember, Ex. 1:22, *Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”* So Moses' mother places him in a basket in the Nile river in an attempt to save her son and Miriam watches the basket. When the basket winds up in the hands of the daughter of Pharaoh. Miriam has enough wits to suggest her own mother as a nursemaid for her brother Moses.

Miriam is impressive at such a young age. She is described as a prophetess, the first one in all of Israel, and this would give her great authority among the people. In Exodus 15 we see this woman in action in her role as worship leader.

Exodus 15:20-21 *20 Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. 21 Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.*

Miriam leads the woman in song and dance worshipping God for saving them all from certain death.

The real problem in our reading is that in wanting the place that had been given to Moses she was showing jealousy, but she was also minimising the role and calling God had given her. And so, God summoned Aaron and Miriam. Miriam is there as we know because she made the actual complaints against Moses.

Aaron is there because he has been silent. How much trouble could have been avoided in congregations if leaders and elders had simply spoken up against the bullying, the gossip, the slander against other leaders, or who had taken a stand for what was clearly right instead of remaining silent. It does no good to come out of a meeting and say, "They shouldn't have said that," if you haven't spoken up at the time.

Numbers 12:6-9 *he said, "Listen to my words:*

*"When there is a prophet among you,  
I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions,  
I speak to them in dreams.*

*<sup>7</sup> But this is not true of my servant Moses;  
he is faithful in all my house.*

*<sup>8</sup> With him I speak face to face,  
clearly and not in riddles;  
he sees the form of the Lord.*

*Why then were you not afraid  
to speak against my servant Moses?"*

They had to be reminded that Moses' relationship with God was in a different league to their relationship with God. It's not that God had not revealed things to them, but they received visions and dreams. God spoke more directly and regularly to Moses. This was done out in the open, where everyone could see. God speaking to Moses was not a mystery, or a secret thing...so the question is this: If the whole nation sees God speaking to Moses on a regular basis, when do they see God speaking to Miriam?

See, the Bible is very clear that this opposition to Moses wasn't about his wife at all. The issue was whether Aaron and Miriam had enough recognition and power. And, if you look closely at most church conflict, you'll discover that no matter what people tell you it's over—even if it's allegedly doctrinal issues or spiritual practices—it's probably about individual egos and selfishness.

pic

As we come as a congregation to face a future where there is a question over the future shape of ministry in Prestwick we will no doubt face this same issue. Sometimes, people tell you they're upset over something in the church and use a potential controversy to illustrate their point. I suspect we'll hear a lot of "our building", "our communion table", "our bible translation" comments as we try to move forward. What we need to remember is that we need to listen to them because I think we'll discover that their feelings are hurt, or they feel disenfranchised. We'll discover that it isn't really the red flag issue at all. It's really about them.

What we'll need is for people to be:

1. Stronger than Aaron – able to identify the real issue and call it for what it is, even at risk of upsetting others.
2. More like the younger Miriam – to have the courage she showed in protecting her baby brother; to identify where God has been, and is, at work and to lead others in recognising it.

Just as Miriam led the people in praising God for defeating the Egyptians, we now praise him for defeating sin and death for us.