Miriam: How to Play a Good Second Fiddle

Exodus 2:1-10, 15:19-21; Numbers 20:1; Micah 6:4

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith
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I've always had a soft spot in my heart for people who play second violin. There they are down at the Kennedy Center, hidden behind the first violins. They rarely get to play a solo. They don't often get their name in lights. Yet second fiddles lend color and richness to the composition. They produce a harmony without which the first violins could never reach the heights of virtuosity.

And let's face it: most of us will never be first violins or great soloists. But by the grace of God we can play a good second fiddle, and for my money, Miriam is a master teacher. When we open the book of Exodus, Pharaoh has launched a pogrom against the Hebrews. He's afraid that if they grow too populous they will rise in rebellion against their Egyptian masters. So he has given orders to kill every newborn male Hebrew baby. But Moses' mother is determined to save her child. For a time she hides him in her home, and when that becomes impossible she puts him in a boat-like basket and sets him adrift near the spot where Pharaoh's childless daughter habitually bathes. She then moves out of sight and leaves Miriam on the scene to monitor developments. And when pharaoh's daughter discovers and claims the little boy, Miriam is there to suggest that she hire a wet nurse. And guess whom she recommends? Thanks to Miriam, the mother gets to nurse her own child and is even paid for it. And all because Miriam played second fiddle and did it very well.

We don't meet Miriam again for another eighty years. In Exodus 15:20 she is called the "prophet" Miriam which means that she has become a spokesperson for God, a preacher of God's word and a teacher of God's will. That's a high distinction for a woman in Old Testament times. Yet even here she plays second fiddle to Moses. For it was Moses who led the Israelis out of Egypt. It was Moses who stretched out his hand over the sea so the people could walk across on dry land. It was Moses who then stretched out his hand once more to bring the huge walls of water crashing down on the Egyptian cavalry. And it was Moses who led the people in a stirring song of victory.

"Then," says our text, "the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: CE sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

"It turns out that Miriam's song is a carbon copy of what Moses sang earlier in this chapter. What she and her friends sing, Moses had already sung. So once again she is playing second fiddle; she simply picks up and echoes the theme from Moses the concertmaster.

But if there is nothing original about Miriam's song, why include it in the story? I believe this is God's way of honoring Miriam for her silent but solid support for Moses over all those years. And it is God's way of encouraging us as well. You and I are not Moses material. On the other hand, one Moses at a time is probably enough. Think of the chaos if there were no Miriams around to pick up the pieces and manage the details.

So what does it take to play a good second fiddle? First, A HEALTHY SELF-AWARENESS. Miriam knew herself to be a prophet, but not on a par with Moses. And that was OK. I hasten to add that this was not a gender thing. I'm not implying that Miriam, as a woman, was necessarily subservient to Moses, a man. There are ample examples in the Scriptures where a woman was in charge. Look at the Old Testament team of Deborah and Barak, who teamed up to defeat the invading army led by General Sisera. Deborah was very much the leader of that campaign. Look at the New Testament team of Prisca and Aquila, cohorts of the Apostle Paul. They are always mentioned together, and most of the time Prisca is mentioned first, suggesting that she was the dominant party. Miriam, on the other hand, was content to walk and work in her brother's shadow.
It has taken me a long time to gain anything like Miriam’s self-awareness. During my college days I wanted to be as fine a preacher as my college president, Cornelius Paul Haggard. During the early years of my ministry I wanted to be as well known as Billy Graham. In later years I hoped I could gain the stature of a Lloyd Ogilvie, the now-retired chaplain of the United States Senate. Finally, in these last years of my ministry, I’m more and more content to be who I am, and to work with what I’ve got. How about you? Do you have unrealistic expectations of yourself, goals that are unreachable? Take a leaf out of Miriam’s book; adopt a healthy self-awareness. Because it’s okay to be just who you are.

Second, Miriam possessed A HARMONIOUS TEAM SPIRIT. In this celebration by the seaside, Miriam doesn’t compete with Moses; she harmonizes with her brother’s song of triumph. Miriam was a team player, and it’s team players who most often win the great victories. Many of you remember the homerun battles between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa just a few years ago. It made for great headlines, especially when McGwire hit a record seventy homeruns in a single season and Sosa was right behind him with 66. Yet both their teams finished way down in the standings during those years while my team, the Arizona Diamondbacks, won the world series in 2000 without a home run leader or a player with the highest batting average or the most runs batted in. How could that be? Teamwork. Yes, we also had a couple of great pitchers, but pitchers generally don’t score the runs that win the Series. To do that Sand to accomplish anything of worth in the world, requires a harmonious team spirit.

Third, Miriam was happy to LET OTHERS TAKE THE CREDIT. What mattered most to her was that God was leading the Hebrew people out of bondage to the Promised Land, and if she could make some contribution to that effort while Moses got the headlines, that would be satisfaction enough. The Apostle Paul gets most the credit for the rapid expansion of Christianity in the first century. But I scanned Paul’s correspondence a couple of days ago, and came up with the names of sixty-six persons who assisted him in his ministry. Barnabas, Silas, and Timothy may be familiar to you, but do you remember Mary, Julia, and Claudia? Or Justus, Nympha, and Zenas? Evidently all sixty-six were happy to let Paul take the credit so long as Jesus Christ got the glory. What is your motivation for teaching a Sunday school class, or sorting clothes for the Women’s Association bazaar for missions, or serving breakfast at Third Street Church of God? Are you willing to serve even if others get the credit?

You’ve heard of Henry James, the nineteenth century novelist, and of his brother William James, the psychologist. Not many have heard of Alice James, their sister, who had to fight just to be noticed in that household of budding prodigies. Henry later wrote, "In our family group girls seem scarcely to have had a chance." So instead of striking out on her own Alice James cared for her father after her mother’s death. And when her father died she kept house for Henry until he moved to England. Early in herforties she contracted cancer and was given little time to live. One day she heard that her brother William had referred to her life as a tragedy so she wrote him a letter. "When I am gone, pray don’t think of me simply as a creature who might have been something else. Notwithstanding the poverty of my outside experience, I have always had a significance for myself, and every chance to stumble along my straight and narrow little path, and to worship at the feet of my Deity, and what more can a human soul ask for?" Well, perhaps we can ask for a great deal more, but if, in the end, we have significance for ourselves, and every chance to walk our given pathway, and to worship at the feet of our Savior, that may indeed be enough.

The Bible gives us one more glimpse of Miriam, and I find it immensely gratifying. Speaking through the prophet Micah, God reminds his people, "I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam."(6:4) Now, at last, Miriam is treated as a full partner. She shares equal billing with her two brothers, and it’s not just a human biographer who gives her that honor but the Judge of all the earth. It’s as if God views Moses, Aaron and Miriam “from above.” When I fly over the Rocky Mountains it’s hard to distinguish one peak from another when you look at them “from above.” From directly overhead they all look the same, though one is 14,000 feet high and its neighbor only 10,000. I get that same perspective when I read Micah 6:4. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam stand equally tall in God’s eyes.

So, in a sense, my sermon title, "How to Play a Good Second Fiddle," is misleading. Because to God, there are no first and second fiddles, only people, each of us playing our part with the gifts we’ve been given. And my guess is that when all the redeemed gather in the courts of heaven to join in a great symphony of
praise to God, Mother Teresa may be sitting on one side of you and Billy Graham on the other, but God will smile on you as if you were the only player in the orchestra.