

**A TIME TO DANCE**  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Exodus 15 and Psalm 30: From Mourning to Dancing*

Her name is Miriam.

Which means “Rebellious.”

And she dances and sings and plays the tambourine, as she leads her people to celebrate victory and new life, in praise of the God who has led them out of despair and toward a land of promise and plenty.

Her mother has most likely taught her how to dance. And her mother before her. Because this is just what women do in the ancient tribal cultures of the Hebrew Scriptures. Their job is to survey the life of the community and put the stories to dance. Composing the perfect lyric, and the perfect dance movement, and the perfect swish of the tambourine, to celebrate in their singing and dancing that life has been restored in the face of sure death and victory has triumphed in the face of sure defeat.

We see this throughout the Scriptures if we read them carefully. Both women and men come together *in dance*. To celebrate a military victory. Or to keen their way through a funeral. Or to rejoice their way through a wedding. Or simply to retell the classic stories of their people and the God who has led their people to new life. Their dance becomes a ritual to pass on the teaching from one generation to the next. In praise of the God who created them good. And celebrates with them, as life in beloved community continues ...

It all begins with the dance of Miriam, in this particular passage from Exodus 15. Biblical scholars tell us that the Hebrew language used in this story—with the tambourine and the singing of “God’s glorious triumph”—is the oldest version of the Hebrew language that exists in the entire Bible. It is like carbon dating for the language of biblical texts. They can excavate how language has evolved over time and have determined that this song and dance of Miriam really is among the oldest surviving remnants of written story that exist in Scripture.

Which gives us some evidence that—as much as we tend to imagine the stories of the Bible were passed down orally before they were written—it is in fact more likely that at least this oldest story of our tradition was shared over time through a ritual reenactment of dancing. With intricate steps to demonstrate the escape from Egypt. And a violent crescendo of tambourine crashing to mark the moment the chariot riders of Pharaoh crash into the sea.

It is not unlike the tribal dances of contemporary indigenous cultures that tell their stories with elaborate ritual and dance and clothing and singing. With each movement and each thread and each undulation of the voice, the dance expresses symbolically the relationship of a people and a land and a divine mystery that leads them ever onward. And gives them hope in the face of despair.

In the case of the Bible the true liturgical dance movements of the stories of our ancestors—and the musical scores that go with them—have been lost to history, much to our dismay. But the lyrics remain, proclaiming the goodness of the God of the dance, who will not ever let our foes rejoice over our destruction.

In Exodus 15 it is called the "Song of the Sea," this dancing, singing, tambourine-shaking triumph led by the prophet Miriam in praise of her liberating God. And it becomes the prototype for all of the song and dance that follows throughout the Bible. Including the dance of the Psalmist in our other Scripture lesson for today.

By the time the Psalmist composes this ensemble, generations have passed in the land of promise and plenty. The fruits of God's liberation are blooming everywhere. Miriam's Red Sea Re-enactment has danced on for decades. And the people are gathering to dedicate a new Temple to this old God of the Exodus.

And the God of the dance is at it again!

The Psalmist, whose job it is to employ the arts in service to this moment, wants to choreograph a movement that will call the congregation to ever greater trust in the same victorious God who led their ancestors to triumph in the Song of the Sea. That same God, the Psalmist says, the one who swooped in to rescue the community of Miriam and Moses and Aaron, has rescued *me* as well. And will rescue you, too, in the call and response of the dance.

Like Miriam and the ancient Hebrews fleeing persecution from the armies of Pharaoh that have chased them into the desert, the Psalmist says, I too have faced certain death in a dire illness that crept up in a moment's notice at the very moment of my overconfidence. I had been so sure of myself, the Psalmist says, that I thought a mountain would move before I could be swayed by disaster.

But oh, how the mighty have fallen, the Psalmist admits. And my dance of hubris has turned into a cry for help. And the face of God has seemed hidden from me. And I could so easily give in to my misery ...

But I will not give up on the God of the Dance! the Psalmist insists.

And then he goes where we in our Protestant piety often dare not: arguing with God, pleading with God, bargaining with God, in a direct appeal to the divine ego. "I cannot sing and dance and praise you, O God," the Psalmist declares, "if my bones prematurely return to dust." "What good am I to you?" the Psalmist laments, "if I am left to languish in despair?" It is a challenge for God to be faithful to the promise they have danced together for generations.

This challenge rings true for us today, with fires raging in California and Oregon. With COVID raging from North Dakota to Peru. With armed vigilantes and anarchists wreaking havoc on us all. Pharaoh's chariots seem small potatoes in light of *our* pit of despair.

We cannot praise you, God, if we are decimated, we are bold enough to pray today. We cannot serve you, God, if we are desperate. Help us, God, please! Deliver us! We beg you ...

And somehow it seems in the very act of crying out, in the very movement from hubris to humility, in the very righteous wrestling with the One who created the dance to begin with, in the very authenticity of the Psalmist's faith, of *our* faith in dancing *through the* weeping night, in dancing *through* the mourning, the God of the dance lifts up the soul of the Psalmist from the Pit of despair.

And joy has come!

We can call it endorphins. Or we can call it the Spirit of God. Whatever we call it, it is time to join in the dance! With our beloved children. And our tambourines. And our drum sets. With our maracas and our dancing

shoes. Clothed with gladness. Marching and dancing and singing in the light of God (which is our next hymn).  
Whether we are weeping through the night or shouting with joy in the morning.

Because we, too, belong to the toe-tapping, hand-clapping, tambourine-smacking God of the Dance!

Amen.