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*You Might Be Surprised to Discover Who Belongs
in a Community Like This*

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Exodus 15:19-21; Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30

Even though she was Moses's sister, Miriam was a bit of an outsider. She is one of only three women whose names we know who is called a prophet in the Old Testament.

She was a prophet, though. You can tell because she decided it would be a good idea to bring a tambourine with her when she and the other Hebrews were fleeing their enslavement in Egypt. Prophets don't view reality the same way as regular people do, and they don't pack their luggage the same way either. They have a different way of conducting feasibility studies.

You may know that the Hebrews had to rush when the opportunity arose to get away from their oppressors. Take the clothes on your back, maybe some snacks, cooking utensils, something to use as a weapon, nothing too bulky or heavy.

But in those rushed hours of crisis, terror, and excitement, Miriam thought: “I am totally going to bring my tambourine!”

I imagine she whispered to her friends: “Make sure you bring your tambourines.”

“Uh... I don't think we're supposed to bring nonessentials.”

“Just do it.”

Just imagine the jingle with every step. “Who brought a tambourine, for crying out loud?”

Now look at what this prophet has to say when she pulls out the tambourine, once the Hebrews make it safely across the sea and the ferocious Egyptian army floats away. Her song isn't “That was amazing!” or “It sure feels great to be free!” The song is simply: God is here. God delivered us. God is committed to our wholeness and flourishing.

Her song doesn't worry about detail. It doesn't concern itself with how this great escape happened. No one explains anything. How did they make it? Was it like in the movies? Was it an earthquake? Very thick weeds on top of the water?

Those are our concerns, not Miriam's. All she knows is: whatever happened here, God did it. A few days ago, she was a slave, owned by other people. Now she is free, and her first act is to credit God for a new future and a lifeline in the midst of trauma.

Miriam's song is some of the oldest poetry in the Bible. It speaks of a new existence becoming possible because of a God who refuses to leave things the way that they presumably had to be.

Prophets don't consider the present circumstances as the end of the story.

Prophets see opportunities where others see dead ends.

Prophets insist that God is among us.

Miriam's song resonated with those who heard it. Her experience, her idea, her insight, her dance, the ritual she created – those things resonated, among her contemporaries and among the generations who read about her centuries later. Her prophetic claim became a way of giving hope to people – and issuing a warning to others.

What she said was theology.

Similar things happen here at Westminster when we wonder together about how we all got here, when we talk about how we experience God, when we consider how our lives might respond to God.

We're doing theology even by gathering here. Sometimes the theology resonates. And sticks. And we bank our lives on it.

That's what can happen when God raises up prophets.

Reading the Bible has a way of provoking the question: What if God is really like that?

What if God is as generous and free with God's own spirit as Moses, Joshua, and others discover in the eleventh chapter of Numbers, the second text we heard earlier?

It's an amusing story but it's situated in a moment of grave threat. The Hebrew people were wandering. They were sick of living in crisis and transition and uncertainty. Their leaders were exhausted. Their supply chain appeared broken and everyone was hungry.

So God gives a gift of prophecy.

You have to imagine the setting: God tells Moses to assemble seventy recognized leaders around the Tent of Meeting, which was the place where God's presence was

believed to reside among the people. That tent, the holy space, was located in the middle of the encampment.

The seventy leaders indeed receive a share of God's spirit, and they prophesy – more on what that means in a minute.

But God's not done. There are two other people – Eldad and Medad – who aren't part of the select group. In fact, they aren't even present at the tent in the center of the camp; they are out within the camp where the people dwell. God's spirit comes upon them, and they prophesy.

This story includes a number of common biblical themes: of God using outsiders to jolt the insiders, of people coming to new perspectives and new hope during times of crisis, of the Spirit of God tugging on the tension between orderliness and chaos, pulling on that tension just enough to retune it so a new melody will emerge. This is a God who occasionally enjoys pouring out inspiration in unexpected ways and places.

What if God is really like that?

Well, the first thing we should note is that this story is one of many biblical reminders of the radical freedom of God's Spirit. We dare not put limitations on where and how God might act or become manifest. We dare not restrict our expectations of where and how God might become

graspable and knowable, whether we are talking about different kinds of people, different kinds of places, different art forms, and perhaps even religions.

That is what worries Joshua. Maybe he fears that the surplus of God's spirit will erode Moses's authority. Maybe he knows that more prophets can mean more trouble for running an organization. So he urges Moses to end Eldad and Medad's unsanctioned prophesying in the camp among the people. But Moses gets it and even delights in it: "Would that all the LORD'S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put the divine spirit on them!"

Moses would have seen his wish come true if he had been present at Pentecost, at the moment when the Holy Spirit first came to everybody in the church. Moses would have loved the story of the magi who follow the stars to meet and worship the Christ child. Moses would have smiled at the stories of Ruth and Rahab, outsiders who play vital roles in the ongoing story of God's commitment to expand and protect the people of God. Moses would have been delighted to witness one of our baptisms where we speak of the Holy Spirit sealing a person in the community of God's people – calling each of us to belong to one another.

Everyone belongs. Every individual can help the larger whole perceive God's presence and power like Miriam and Moses do. For we in the church understand the

beloved community as, among other things, a community in which God's Spirit overflows. God welcomes all into this community. It's a community in which each person's individuality and distinctive identity aren't dissolved or diluted. Rather, each aspect of who we are infuses the beloved community with new life and new possibilities.

We dare not reduce our commitment to belonging as though it were simply about being friendlier or more statistically diverse. You can do those things and still get stuck in assimilationism, tolerance, or a one-directional notion of hospitality that treats members of the community as perpetual guests.

We belong to a community held together by a God who loves surprises and who is delighted to be glimpsed by people you didn't expect.

Again, what if God is really like that?

A second thing to note about this story is this: if God is really like that, then prophets belong to this community. Or, more accurately, if you're here you can be a prophet, or a vital part of a prophetic community. Think of the church's Pentecost story alongside this one, for in both episodes the Spirit of God refuses to stay confined to a set number of predetermined leaders in preassigned places. You have been called to belong in a community infused by God's power and presence.

That's what makes us a prophetic community.

There is a mistaken assumption that "prophecy" is about seeing into the future. For the most part, though, the Bible speaks of prophets as people who forthtell, instead of people who foretell. They speak into the current moment, calling forth meaning, significance, and inspiration. When the rest of us lose track of who we are and where we are, we need a prophet to direct our attention back to an unseen and perhaps ignored God. Prophets are more preachers than predictors. They tell it like it is. They give expression to what is and what could be, to borrow from the title of a sermon Meghan preached back in mid-July.

Forth-telling is to express God's intentions and faithfulness into the moment. Remember Miriam and her tambourine band and their message that God is here! Forth-telling is about unmasking lies, speaking hope, and reminding us of how we might participate in God's promises right here and right now.

A prophetic community is one that commits itself to discern the hidden ways of God, to keep everyone oriented to our religious commitments and to help us find satisfaction for our spiritual longings.

A prophetic community refuses to forget that there might also be an Eldad or a Medad out there with something to say in contrast to the people closer to the center, in case a

congregation becomes too enamored with its own ideas or too unaware of the limitations of some of its beliefs.

This past summer I led an adult-education program here at Westminster focusing on the Holy Spirit in the New Testament book the Acts of the Apostles. One thing that fascinates me about studying Acts with groups is the fact that it's very difficult to talk about the Holy Spirit in the abstract for long before people start sharing their own stories about how they experience a sense of their spirituality and God's presence. It's not easy to do, to share our convictions about how God accompanies or challenges us in life, because that can be a remarkably intimate and personal topic. But engaging in those conversations, even if you are only listening, is an essential part of building community.

Even during this awful pandemic, God's spirit has been among us – certainly not just here in the building but in all the places where we have been, in all the places we have camped out.

Probably all of us have taken a shot at prophecy in one way or another: Maybe it was in asking basic questions like, "Oh, God, what is going on?" Many of you have been attentive to your spirituality in new ways, seeking to encounter God when your ordinary routines have been disrupted. You've sought out new ways to discover God's

presence in different forms of gathering in community, in study with others, and in different spiritual practices.

As this congregation continues to inch its way further through the pandemic, hopefully arriving at a new kind of normal soon, one thing we will have to do is re-gather. So we can share what we've learned. To listen to what our Eldads and Medads have to say. Don't wait. Even now, seek out conversations with others about what we've learned, what we've experienced, what we've gained, and what we've lost.

You might have experienced a deliverance of your own, like Miriam.

You might have seen broken relationships become repaired.

You might have sensed God calling you to get involved in new things and to contribute to other people in new ways.

You might have seen an addiction named and managed.

You might have seen someone's life transformed through forgiveness.

Or maybe you've simply suffered and been disappointed yet experienced God's presence and care despite all of the grief. Some of us might still be waiting for that experience.

Whatever your specific experiences, here we have a community that refuses to regard them as random or as disconnected from our spiritual lives. This place is full of Miriams who have something to say. And we have a lot of Eldads and Medads in our wider community, too, who are asking us to listen and to live out God's love in more authentic ways.

During this stewardship season we are exploring what it means to belong to the beloved community, to share in God's transformative and unifying work. The notion of the church as a prophetic community should remind us that we express our belonging in myriad ways. Prophecy and theology don't happen only through speech. It isn't entirely about the person in the pulpit or about the Eldads and Medads who bring a message from the margins. You participate in the work of this prophetic community in your actions, too. In your advocacy on behalf of others. In your service to aid others. In your relationships. In compassion. In willingness to learn and to listen and to share. In your support of this congregation and its ministries.

Reading the Bible has a way of provoking the question: What if God is really like that?

So too does attending worship, praying prayers, and singing hymns. What if God is really like that — like what we say here?

How can we ever go about answering a question like that as a community unless we talk it through? Unless we open ourselves up to one another, to hear each other's stories, and to listen for the rumblings of God's spirit in the community around us?

We've got plenty of tambourines here at Westminster, and room for more, ready to accompany the new songs we'll compose together.