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April 16th: Numbers 12 & Mark 10:32-52

April 15, 2020



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Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses. Not to be served but to serve.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Numbers 12. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also? And the Lord heard it.

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting. And the three of them came out.

And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both came forward. And he said, Hear my words.

If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. And he departed. When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow.

And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said to Moses, O my Lord, do not punish us, because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.

And Moses cried to the Lord, O God, please heal her, please. But the Lord said to Moses, If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again. So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again.

After that the people set out from Hazaroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran. Numbers chapter 12 is a short but a strange passage relating an odd incident in the cycle of rebellions that Numbers describes. It's an event of sibling rivalry.

We should consider that in Exodus chapter 15 Miriam is described as Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron. Notably she isn't mentioned as the sister of Moses. The bonds of the family of Moses, Aaron and Miriam are fragile at the moment.

Moses hasn't been with his family for many, many years. He grew up outside of his family and he's not really someone who's connected with his family fully yet. While Aaron is connected with Moses more now, Moses still stands apart from him in many ways.

And Miriam probably still hasn't truly connected with him. She was present at his deliverance as an infant, but she probably didn't see a great deal of him after he was weaned. Now he's come back into her life almost 80 years later and you can imagine that Aaron and Miriam would struggle to know how to relate to this brother of theirs who's now leading their people, while still feeling like something was strange to them.

There are a number of questions that this passage raises. What is it about Moses' cush-eyed wife? Who is she for starters? Is this someone different from Zipporah? And also, why does this lead to the second complaint? The question, has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? What is this event doing here in the first place? Why is it recalled later on in Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 8-9? It seems to be Miriam in particular who speaks against Moses. The verb used to describe the speaking in verse 1 is third person feminine singular.

Aaron may be party to the speech, primarily in willingly hearing it. But the Lord heard it. There's no indication that Moses heard it, but God heard it and he acted in the situation.

There are some similarities between this situation and the situation in Numbers chapter 11 verse 1, where there's a general grumbling among the people and God hears it and acts. Who is Moses' wife then in this situation, the Cushite woman? Is it Zipporah? Has Moses taken a second wife? Now, one of the questions here is the location of Cush. Many people have identified Cush with Ethiopia, but in Habakkuk chapter 3 verse 7 there's a suggestion that it might be something else as well.

I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. So in the parallelism here, Cushan and Midian seem to be associated.

Cush and Midian. And if she's a Cushite in that sense, a Midianite, it would explain what is going on here. She is in fact Zipporah.

This isn't another woman that we've not been told about. Now why would they complain about someone that Moses had married almost 40 years earlier? Well, because they had only just met her for the first time. Perhaps only a month or so previously.

In Exodus chapter 18 verses 2 to 7 we read, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land, and the name of the other, Eleazar. For he said, The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God.

And when he sent word to Moses, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her. Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.

As I've argued elsewhere, Exodus 18 is probably not in its chronological place but has moved forward for reasons of the thematic unity of the text. It most likely happened later on during their period at Sinai. Now what was the objection to the Cushite woman? Presumably that she was a Gentile and a foreigner.

She was not an Israelite. She was an outsider from a nation that is quite distant from Egypt or from Israel. Miriam is not too keen on having this outsider as her sister-in-law and there seems to be some sort of rivalry or opposition there perhaps.

The opposition to Moses' wife Seppura seems to move into something of a more general opposition to Moses himself and his leadership. Now this is quite striking a development. There's no need to presume that it happened immediately.

Rather there might have been quite a lot of intervening conversation between this initial

complaining against Seppura and then the complaining against Moses' leadership. However what the text does is it shows the connection between the two things. That the later complaint against Moses' leadership grew out of this very petty opposition to Seppura, the sister-in-law.

If we just had that second statement by itself it may seem that there was some grand theological impulse there, some challenge to the implicit theology of leadership that led to the prophetic primacy of Moses. But the first claim deflates the second revealing it to be based upon nothing but petty personal squabbles and rivalries and prejudice against this outsider. How many of our grand theological debates would be deflated in a similar manner if the petty impulses that provoked them were revealed? At this point we encounter another question which is why the humility of Moses is mentioned.

It seems to be a strange detail, maybe something extraneous to the narrative at this point. It seems to intrude upon the movement of the text. Miriam and Aaron's objections to Moses seem to insinuate that Moses' leadership is somehow ego-driven.

It's about him vaunting his authority over others, putting himself over others. And this statement about Moses' humility clearly declares that that impression is quite mistaken. God brings them all together and speaks to them and there's a challenge here that is a premonition of the later rebellion of Korah.

They are rebelling against the divinely appointed leadership, suggesting that a wider body of people should enjoy this authority, a democratised or at least more widely shared spiritual authority and leadership. God gives a poetic response and this poetic response describes the different ways that God reveals himself to different persons. And Moses, however, is the one to whom God reveals himself most fully.

He speaks mouth to mouth with Moses. Moses sees the form of the Lord. Moses is the faithful servant, the most trusted servant.

He's the one who's faithful in all of God's house. Here I think we see another reason why the humility of Moses is highlighted. Moses' humility may be related to the intensity of the revelation that God gave to him and the intimacy that he enjoys with the Lord.

Extensive revelation, power or authority are all huge liabilities and can easily corrupt people. Moses' extreme humility is that which fits him to be the recipient of a unique level of revelation. If for a moment Moses thought that the exceptional degree of revelation and authority that he received was about him, he would be in extreme peril of pride.

It's not about him, it's about the Lord and he is the humble servant of the Lord who must be faithful and recognise that he's not being set apart by reason of his own personal merit. We could perhaps think of the Apostle Paul's statement in 2nd Corinthians 12

verses 7 to 9. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.

But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. That connection between humility and divine grace and revelation and power is one that's found elsewhere in scripture.

These are important connections. What is the meaning of Miriam's leprosy? Leprosy is spoken of as a sort of plague in Leviticus chapter 13 and 14, a touch by the Lord. It's considered as a punishment for violating God's holiness.

Miriam has violated God's holiness by speaking against his beloved servant. She is the chief culprit as well and we should also remember that Aaron has just been touched by the Lord in being appointed as priest and if Aaron were cut off as a result of a judgment, the whole people would suffer because they would not have a high priest. Moses has to intercede for Miriam as Abraham had to intercede for Abimelech and Job for his friends.

This underlines the Lord's claim that Moses has an intimacy with him that Miriam and Aaron and other of the prophets of Israel do not. Miriam is shamed on account of her action. If an earthly father had publicly shamed her, she would bear that shame for at least seven days and her heavenly father should not shame her for anything less.

Note that one of the things underlying this story is a conflict between two women, Miriam and Zipporah. Miriam's opposition to Zipporah leads to her being excluded for seven days. Miriam is made completely white with leprosy.

If there was some racial element to her objection to Zipporah, this would be especially fitting. That Miriam's punishment was one of shame and exclusion should make us consider what it was that she sought to do to Zipporah. Was it not that she wanted Zipporah to be excluded? Zipporah to be shamed and to be without honour? Furthermore, the sin against Moses had a similar character.

It was a grasping for honour in a way that impugned the honour of someone who was the most meek of all men on the earth. And so she is shamed as a result of that dishonourable way of treating an honourable servant of the Lord. Her exclusion from the camp doesn't seem to be the regular treatment of leprosy, which would have required at least 14 days in Leviticus 13.5. If she was healed at once, maybe it is the seven-day purification period discussed in Leviticus 14.

Another possibility is that Miriam has complete leprosy, Leviticus 13.13.17, in which case a person was white all over but clean. And so the exclusion was for the sake of

ostracisation and shame. It wasn't for the case of the leprosy itself.

Miriam may be seen as an image of the people. She's a leader of the people, she's a prophetess, she leads the people in song. And in her treatment of Moses, we're seeing something of the more general way in which the people treat Moses and his leadership.

And the defence of God against Miriam and her challenge to Moses' leadership is also a defence of Moses' leadership more generally, which has been under assault by the people and will be under assault from a number of further fronts in the chapters that follow. A question to consider, what does this passage have to teach us about the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God? Mark chapter 10 verses 32 to 52. And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them and they were amazed and those who followed were afraid.

And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, See, we are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. And he said to them, What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory. Jesus said to them, You do not know what you are asking.

Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized? And they said to him, We are able. And Jesus said to them, The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized. But to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.

And when the ten heard it they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you.

But whoever would be greater among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. And they came to Jericho.

And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.

But he cried out all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stopped and said, Call him. And they called the blind man, saying to him, Take heart, get up, he is calling you.

And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said to him, Rabbi, let me recover my sight. And Jesus said to him, Go your way, your faith has made you well.

And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way. As we move through Mark chapter 10, Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem. They're on the road, as they have been for the last few chapters, steadily traveling the whole length of the land down to Jerusalem.

They're traveling down for the Passover, so there are presumably many others on the way with them. And here Jesus makes the third prediction of his death. He's going to Jerusalem.

He's ascending to the place where he will be condemned and crucified. And his disciples are amazed and the followers have a sense of trepidation. They know that this isn't a regular journey to Jerusalem, but that the ministry of Jesus is arriving at a critical point.

It's important that Jesus declares his death beforehand. It's important to make clear that it's not an accident or fate overtaking him unawares. And Jesus predicts in incredible detail what will happen, the participants, what exactly they will do, and what the result will be, that he will rise again on the third day.

Having just described, however, the manner of his death, Jesus is approached by James and John, asking for prominent positions in his kingdom. And Mark maybe spares a few of the brothers' blushes by telling the story in a way that hides the fact that they made the request through their mother, Jesus' aunt. They want to be on his right and left hand in his kingdom.

They want the thrones of honour or the highest places at the feast. Yet Jesus makes clear that if they want those places, they will need to drink the cup placed before them. In chapter 14 verse 24, we read about Jesus' cup, the cup that he must drink, the cup of his suffering.

They will also need to be baptised with Jesus' baptism. Jesus states that one day indeed they will share in his suffering in this sort of way. When they do, they won't just be like the people on the right hand and the left hand in the feast, they will also have to be like the people that we see on Christ's right and left in chapter 15 verse 27, the thieves on either side of him on the crosses.

They will have to share in his suffering and it will only be through that that places of honour are enjoyed at the feast. Jesus' reference to his baptism here is interesting. It

seems strange to refer to Jesus' forthcoming death and resurrection as his baptism.

What could be meant? Well, a number of things. First of all, it's a transitional event. It's a passage from one form of life to another.

Jesus' discussion of his baptism presents it as a sort of trial by ordeal and entering into the waters of the grave or like Israel passing through the waters of the Red Sea. And the Apostle Paul would later speak of Christian baptism in connection with Christ's death in Romans chapter 6 verses 1 to 8. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we have been brought to nothing. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we have been brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

It is through dying with Christ that we end up living with him. It's through entering into his death and his suffering that we end up with honour in the Kingdom of God. There will be people in these positions of honour, these places of honour at the feast, but these places aren't granted according to ambition.

The other disciples at this point are indignant, but it seems that the irritation at James and John arises more from their desire for such honours, rather than any principled opposition to what James and John were doing. In response, Jesus speaks to the whole group, pointing out that the pursuit of greatness and superiority is characteristic of the Gentiles. They lord it over others.

But this is not how the Kingdom of Christ is to be. It is not the case that there is no honour in the Kingdom of Christ, but it is not obtained through jockeying for power. Rather it's found in the way of humility and service.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. He came. He's the one who has come from heaven.

He's come on a mission, as angels would come on a mission. What is meant by the service here? Are we thinking about Christ assuming the position of a servant relative to a master, a sort of lowly manward service? It seems to me that the importance here is that of carrying out a charge. He's one with a commissioned agency or ministry, not as one to be surrounded by attendants as a typical king.

Jesus came to perform the task of the commissioned servant of Isaiah, not to get status for himself. The focus is not here upon Christ as the humble servant of men, but upon Christ as the one on a mission from his Father. A mission whereby he will give his life as a ransom for many.

In a similar way, ministers in Christ's Church are not supposed to gather attendants around them as kings of the Gentiles would, and assume status for themselves, the highest places and feasts, things like that. No, they are sent on a mission. They're acting in Christ's name.

And that mission or ministry is to be for the good of all, not to set them over others. Leaving Jericho, he's followed by a multitude of people. They're excited by this prophet, teacher and potential Messiah.

And the blind man calls out to him as the son of David. This is the first time that Jesus has been addressed in this way in the Gospel. The Messianic secret, as it were, has slipped, and the time is nearing for open revelation of Jesus' identity.

Bartimaeus is the first person outside of the disciples to speak of Jesus in this sort of way. We should also notice, once again, that Jesus is being addressed by someone socially marginal, without status, who wishes to get close to him, but is rebuked by others and prevented by others. And once again, Jesus insists that the person be allowed access to him, and explicitly calls for him.

A question to consider, how might Bartimaeus be seen as a model of the disciple of Christ more generally?