

Sermon—August 1, 2021 Numbers 12:1-15

There is this interesting thing on the social media site Reddit called Am I The ... we'll say Jerk. It's one of those strange places on the internet where people share some fairly personal information in hopes that strangers will agree that they are not in fact the jerk of the situation. Usually things are fairly straightforward. Your spouse throws away your beloved stuffed animal from childhood during a fight? Yeah--they're the jerk. But there was this story I read a couple of years ago that surprised me. The poster was a woman who was planning her wedding. Her fiance's sister was one of her bridesmaids, and the bride-to-be asked this bridesmaid to have her tattoos covered up for the wedding and the photos. Well that sounds like the bride is the jerk, doesn't it? If you invite someone who has tattoos to be a bridesmaid, you know they're going to have those tattoos on the wedding day. Tattoos are a form of self-expression, so by asking the bridesmaid to cover tattoos up with a special kind of makeup the bride was taking away that self-expression. So after commenters ripped this bride apart, she posted an update. The bride said that the tattoos in question were swastikas and other white pride symbols. The bride said that she didn't want those racist symbols in her wedding photos which she hoped to look at for decades to come. Well that changes things. A lot. Why didn't you include that little detail up front?

When I'm studying the Bible I often wonder "why didn't they put that detail right up front?" after I find a great little nugget of information. The answer usually is that the text was written in a different time with different expectations and different points of reference. Another interesting layer of biblical interpretation is that we don't just have Christian thinkers we can read or listen to. We have Jewish thinkers, too. It's not exactly fair to lump all Christian and all Jewish interpreters into the same camps because there are variations of understanding. But for

simplicity's sake because you don't necessarily want to sit here and listen to me list all my references, we're going to talk about the Christian and Jewish interpreters.

Often the Jewish thinkers have radically different interpretations of biblical texts than the Christian ones, and often there's a detail in the basic situation that makes a huge difference. Our text today is no different. There's a difference in assumptions about the situation that makes a huge difference in interpretation. In this case the different assumption is: why are Aaron and Miriam mad at Moses? It's the awkward way that "because" can be translated into English. "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married."

In the Christian interpretation Miriam and Aaron come across as complaining about Moses' wife Zipporah (or probably Zipporah) because she's not an Israelite. They identify her as a "Cushite" which could be a part of the area where Zipporah is from or may be a different area entirely. Christian interpreters seem to think Miriam and Aaron were upset that Moses had married a woman with dark skin. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of his wife meaning they were complaining about Moses' wife. Then they use this thin complaint to launch into a jealous accusation against Moses which God answers fairly seriously. We'll talk about God's answer a bit later.

The Jewish interpretation gives us one important piece of information. Calling someone a "Cushite" was a term of praise. A Cushite was an upstanding person. Jewish thinkers think that Miriam and Aaron weren't upset because Moses was married to his wife. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses for the cause of the Cushite woman whom he had married. Specifically, they were upset that Moses was abstaining from marital relations with his wife and perhaps even being around her at all. Which changes the whole tone of the story. Miriam and Aaron don't sound nearly as jealous (or racist) in this interpretation.

The ancient Israelites were obsessed with ritual cleanliness, and there was no way to cleanse yourself out in the desert. So the only way to stay ritually clean was to not participate in any activities that would take away that ritual cleanliness. Like intimacy. So when Miriam and Aaron are saying that God has also spoken through them as a prophet and a high priest, they are saying that they are not being held to the same level of ritual cleanliness. God isn't demanding that they separate from their spouses or not participate in specific other activities. The fact that Moses was humble isn't a weird aside then. It's an important note that Moses wasn't going to say that he was different from his sister and brother. It's God who stands up for Moses saying that they speak with Moses face to face. Moses has to maintain a readiness to speak directly to God.

But the punishment for Miriam and Aaron's complaint seems both under- and overwhelming. Aaron gets away without any punishment other than the general rebuke. Miriam gets struck with a disease. Now, the biblical disease of leprosy isn't what we call leprosy today. We're not actually sure what disease the term 'leprosy' refers to biblically. It probably refers to a number of different diseases. But it actually doesn't really matter what the disease was. Miriam is struck with a disease that made her ritually unclean and was sentenced to seven days of exile before being brought back into the camp. Is anyone else a little upset at that ending? Even if Miriam was jealous of Moses or his wife, this seems like too much. Knowing something about how the Bible was put together and some interpretation, We can rationalize this ending. Maybe Miriam got sick and people were trying to figure out why so they wrote up this story. Or, the Israelites were a patriarchal society like us, so women often get the metaphorical short end of the stick. Maybe God didn't want to interrupt Aaron's duties as a high priest by making him unclean. For me, though, none of that is satisfying. It just doesn't feel fair that Miriam is punished while

Aaron isn't. I know some of you are going to say "life isn't fair." I know that, but that doesn't mean that we can't call out when something is unfair.

I wonder what Miriam would write on Reddit in the Am I The "Jerk" category. It may sound something like... "I (90 year-old female) and my brother (85-year-old male) talked to our youngest brother (80 year-old male) about his marriage. We love his wife, and he's been super distant lately. Youngest brother has an important job. He never brags about it but works so hard it is affecting his marriage. Then got called out by brother's boss (immortal Nonbinary) for interfering in his work. Boss threw me out of our family camp for a week even though youngest brother asked them not to. Am I the Jerk?"

I imagine all the interpreters as the commenters on the post. "Yeah, you're the jerk. Leave your brother alone. You got what you deserved." "No, honey, that was a total overreaction on the boss' part." "Why didn't the boss throw the other brother out of camp too?" "Did the wife say anything to her husband first?" And on and on and on.

I started out planning this sermon to be all about Miriam, lifting her up as a prophet and musician. That's not what my study of the scripture brought me to. I don't have the answers to the questions we've talked about. That is one of the beautiful and frustrating things about our religious tradition: we don't have to have all the answers. The journey of discovery is just as important as the final destination. This story proves just how much context matters. Thinking about scripture stories like this is an important part of our faith. Learning about scripture, about the history of interpretation, and about what we assume because of our backgrounds can radically change our points of view about a passage in scripture. Sometimes it's that one detail that makes the biggest difference. This week I invite you to listen deeply to something--whether that's a passage of scripture or a story that someone's telling you--and think about what one

change in detail could change the story. It could lead you down a path that brings you more questions than answers, but the journey is worth it.