When we hear the story of the Exodus, it is usually all about Moses. He is the one who is hidden in the basket. He is the one who is plucked from the river to live in the house of the Pharaoh. He’s the one who flees to Midian. He’s the one who hears the voice speaking from the burning bush. He’s the one who returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and insist that he “let my people go.” And he is the one who leads them out across the Sea, through the wilderness and up to the brink of their entry into the promised land. But, listen again and pay attention to the cast of other characters and you will soon be impressed with the importance of the women in Moses’ life. Miriam is his older sister. She is there when Moses is born. She helps to hide the baby. She watches from nearby as he floats in the waters of the Nile. She works out a deal with the Egyptian princess who finds him to provide someone, the baby’s mother, to help her care for the child. But, take one step back further in the story. The reason that Moses must be hidden in the first place is that Pharaoh has issued an order that all the male children of the Hebrews are to be killed at the time of their birth. Credit Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives named in chapter one, who openly defy the Pharaoh’s order by refusing to carry it out with the excuse that the Hebrew women are so strong, and they give birth so easily, that the babies are born and gone long before the midwives ever arrive to offer their services. And recognize Moses’ own mother with the fact that she is willing to compromise her role for the sake of her child. She will give him up, let him go to live in the house of the Pharaoh, if only she can play a small part in caring for him at the beginning of his life. And the Egyptian princess herself, who rescues Moses from the river and takes him home to raise him as her own. These women are all crucial to the story. Without them and their clever resistance to the Pharaoh’s diabolical scheme against to Hebrews, there would be no Moses.

Central to the story is Miriam. She can be no more than a young girl herself,
when Moses is born; yet, she is responsible enough to stand guard and watch over him amidst the crocodiles and the snakes, the bugs and the birds, on the banks of the Nile River, to see what will happen to him. It’s too dangerous for her mother to be caught trying to hide a male baby. But an innocent girl like Miriam can get away with it. No one would ever suspect that something greater is going on here. When the baby is discovered floating in his basket by the Egyptian princess when she comes down to the river to bathe, what kind of good luck is that? And, of course, she will need help to care for him, so Miriam demonstrates her cleverness by stepping up to wisely offer the services of the baby’s own mother, so that she can continue to care for him. God is clearly at work in this story on so many levels – to save Moses’ life, to keep him united with his own mother, and to move him into the palace of the Pharaoh. What better training could there be for someone who will someday be asked to confront Egyptian ruler, but to have been raised in the very same household. Credit the women; but, know also that this is God’s doing. Nothing works out that perfectly without a little divine intervention.

Moses grows up in the house of Pharaoh and one day, when he is out and about he witnesses an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew. He comes to his defense, but goes too far, killing the Egyptian. Now, a wanted murder, he flees to the land of Midian, where he finds himself at a well. While there, the daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, come to water their father’s sheep. Other shepherds want to intrude, shoving their sheep aside and watering their flocks first. Moses proves his goodness by defending the girls against this encroachment on their rights and watering their sheep for them. This demonstrates his worthiness to Jethro, who offers the hand of his daughter, Zipporah, in marriage. Important to remember is that Jethro and his daughters are Kushites, dark skinned people from northeast Africa, perhaps the ancestors of the Ethiopians or the Somalis. They marry, and she has a son, Gershom. Then one day, Moses is confronted by God in the burning bush and he is called back to Egypt. Along the way, in a very little read incident, God comes to kill Moses; and, this time, it is Zipporah who intercedes on Moses’ behalf to save him from death. No explanation is offered for why God would want to do this, only that Zipporah is the hero of the day. Once again, no Zipporah, then no Moses.

You know the rest of the story. Moses confronts Pharaoh. Pharaoh agrees to let the people go, then changes his mind, refuses and brings on the plagues, which eventually (after the tenth) convince Pharaoh to actually let the Hebrews go. They flee from Egypt before he can again change his mind. His armies chase them all the way to the Red (or Reed) Sea, where God is able to help the Hebrews cross over to the
other side, but the waters come back upon the Egyptians and the horses and their riders are “thrown into the sea.” It is then, that Miriam is named a prophet. She leads the women in a song and dance of victory as they celebrate the power of God in the lives of the Hebrew people. They have been saved from their suffering, saved from their slavery, saved from their certain death at the hands of the Egyptians, so that they can make their way through the wilderness and eventually return to the promised land. It’s a story about Moses, but the women make it happen. Without them, without their courage, without their defiance, without their care and perseverance there is no Moses, there is no Exodus. God works through these courageous women to make sure it all happens. So, we can give thanks for Miriam and Zipporah, prophet and priest.

Amen.