

**SLD07.08.08 10<sup>th</sup> Ordinary**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Micah 6:6-8**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Sojourner Truth – ‘Ain’t I A Woman?’”**

*Let us sing a song that will cheer us by the way,  
In a little while we're going home;  
For the night will end in the everlasting day,  
In a little while we're going home.*

**Refrain**

*In a little while, In a little while,  
We shall cross the billow's foam;  
We shall meet at last, When the stormy winds are past,  
In a little while we're going home.*

Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree, was born into slavery in 1797 in the state of New York. “In a Little While We’re Going Home” was her favorite hymn.

Isabella lived with her parents and was relatively well treated by their Dutch owner until, at the age of nine, she was sold to one John Neely, along with a herd of sheep, for \$100. Isabella only spoke Dutch, and as Neely's wife and family only spoke English, she was fiercely beaten for the frequent miscommunications. It was during this time she began to find refuge in religion, beginning the habit of praying aloud when scared or hurt.

Shortly thereafter, at the age of 11, Isabella was sold to Martinus Schryver, whose tavern was crude and morally questionable, but a safer haven for Isabella.<sup>1</sup> Only a year and a half later, Isabella was sold again, this time to John Dumont of New Paltz, New York, in whose home she likewise suffered many hardships.

For example, sometime around 1815, Isabella fell in love with a slave named Robert, who was owned by someone else. Robert's owner forbade the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> For this and the following narrative of Truth's life, see [www.womeninhistory.sojournertruth](http://www.womeninhistory.sojournertruth).

because he didn't want his slave having children with a slave he didn't own because he would not own the children. One night when Robert visited Isabella, he was followed by his owner and son, who beat him savagely, bound him and dragged him away, never to return. In 1817, Dumont forced Isabella to marry an older slave named Thomas, with whom she had four children.

Now, in 1799, the state of New York had begun the gradual abolition of slaves, which was to be completed by July 4, 1827. Though Dumont had promised Isabella freedom a year earlier than the state emancipation, he reneged on his promise. Isabella was infuriated but continued working until she felt she had done enough to satisfy her sense of obligation to Dumont, which, in her mind, was spinning 100 pounds of wool. When this was done, she escaped before dawn with her infant daughter, Sophia. Later she said: "I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right."

Isabella wandered then, not sure where she was going, and praying for direction.

*We will do the work that our hands may find to do,  
In a little while we're going home;  
And the grace of God will our daily strength renew,  
In a little while we're going home.*

Eventually Isabella arrived at the home of Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen, who offer her sanctuary and paid Dumont off for her services. Isaac and Maria insisted that Isabella not call them "master" and "mistress," and helped her through court proceedings to retrieve her son, Peter.

During her time with the Van Wagenens, Isabella had a life-changing religious experience, becoming "overwhelmed with the greatness of the Divine presence" and inspired to preach. She quickly became known as a remarkable preacher whose

influence was "miraculous." On June 1, 1843, Isabella Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth and began to make her way as a traveling preacher.

She wandered in relative obscurity for a time, joining with a variety of Christian communities, where she met and worked with abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and David Ruggles. Shortly thereafter, she began dictating her memoirs to Olive Gilbert. In 1850, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* was published privately by William Lloyd Garrison. This gave Sojourner an income and increased her speaking engagements, where she spoke about anti-slavery and women's rights, often giving personal testimony about her experiences as a slave.

In 1851, at the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth gave one of her most famous speeches. Her biographer, Frances Cage, describes the moment:

*"There were very few women in those days who dared to "speak in meeting"; and the august teachers of the people were seemingly getting the better of us, while the boys in the galleries, and the sneerers among the pews, were hugely enjoying the discomfiture, as they supposed, of the "strong-minded." Some of the tender-skinned friends were on the point of losing dignity, and the atmosphere betokened a storm. When, slowly from her seat in the corner rose Sojourner Truth, who, till now, had scarcely lifted her head.*

*"Don't let her speak!" gasped half a dozen in my ear. She moved slowly and solemnly to the front, laid her old bonnet at her feet, and turned her great speaking eyes to me. There was a hissing sound of disapprobation above and below. I rose and announced "Sojourner Truth," and begged the audience to keep silence for a few moments."*

*"The tumult subsided at once, and every eye was fixed on this almost Amazon form, which stood nearly six feet high, head erect, and eyes piercing the upper air like one in a dream. At her first word there was a profound hush. She spoke in deep tones, which, though not loud, reached every ear in the house, and away through the throng at the doors and windows."*

***“Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the Negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?***

***That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere.***

***Nobody ever helps ME into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives ME any best place! And ain't I a woman?***

***Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman?***

***I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?***

***I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery. And when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?***

***Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or Negroes' rights?***

***If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?***

***Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from?***

***Where did Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him!***

***If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they're asking to do it. The men better let them.***

***Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.*** [revised from the 19th century dialect in which Truth spoke.]

*We will smooth the path for some weary, way-worn feet,  
In a little while we're going home;  
And may loving hearts spread around an influence sweet!  
In a little while we're going home.*

Over the next decade, Truth spoke before dozens, perhaps hundreds, of audiences. In 1853, she spoke at a **suffragist** convention at the **Broadway Tabernacle** in New York City. 1856, she traveled to **Battle Creek, Michigan**, to speak to a group called the Friends of Human Progress. In 1858, when someone interrupted a speech and accused her of being a man, Truth opened her blouse and revealed her breasts.

During the Civil War, Sojourner Truth spoke on the Union's behalf, as well as for enlisting black troops for the cause and freeing slaves. Her grandson James Caldwell enlisted in the 54th Regiment, Massachusetts. In 1864, she worked among freed slaves at a government refugee camp on an island in Virginia and was employed by the National Freedman's Relief Association in *Atlantic Monthly*.

After the Civil War ended, Sojourner continued working to help the newly freed slaves through the Freedman's Relief Association. In 1867, she was invited to give an address to the first annual meeting the American Equal Rights Association, where she was warmly received. Here is what she said:

***“My friends, I am rejoiced that you are glad, but I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field - the country of the slave. They have got their liberty - so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed.***

***... There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again, ...chil'n.***

***I call you chil'n; you are somebody's chil'n, and I am old enough to be mother of all that is here. I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no right, no voice; nobody speaks for them. I wish woman to have her voice there among the pettifoggers. If it is not a fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there.***

***I am above eighty years old; it is about time for me to be going. I have been forty years a slave and forty years free, and would be here forty years more to have equal rights for all. I suppose I am kept here because something remains for me to do; I suppose I am yet to help to break the chain. I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay.***

***We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much. I suppose I am about the only colored woman that goes about to speak for the rights of the colored women. I want to keep the thing stirring, now that the ice is cracked.***

***...I know that it is hard for one who has held the reins for so long to give up; it cuts like a knife. It will feel all the better when it closes up again. I have been in Washington about three years, seeing about these colored people. Now colored men have the right to vote. There ought to be equal rights now more than ever, since colored people have got their freedom. I am going to talk several times while I am here; so now I will do a little singing. I have not heard any singing since I came here.***

*There's a rest beyond, there's relief from every care,  
In a little while we're going home;  
And no tears shall fall in that city bright and fair,  
In a little while we're going home.*

In 1870, Sojourner began campaigning for the federal government to provide former slaves with land in the "new West," a project she pursued idea for seven years with little success. While in Washington D.C., she met with President Ulysses S. Grant in the White House. In 1872, she returned to Battle Creek and tried to vote in the presidential election, but was turned away at the polling place.

She continued to travel and speak, about abolition, women's rights, and prison reform. She also preached to the Michigan Legislature against capital punishment. Not everyone welcomed her preaching and lectures, but she had many friends and staunch supporters, including Amy Post, Parker Pillsbury, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony.

In 1879, Sojourner was delighted to see many freed slaves beginning to migrate west and north on their own, many settling in Kansas. She spent a year there helping

refugees and speaking in white and black churches trying to gain support for the "Exodusters" as they tried to build new lives for themselves. This was to be Sojourner's last mission.

In July of 1883, due to ulcers on her legs, Sojourner sought treatment through Dr. John Harvey Kellogg at his famous Battle Creek Sanitarium. It is said that he grafted some of his own skin onto her legs. Shortly thereafter Sojourner returned home with her daughters, where she died on November 26, 1883, at 86 years old.

Before her passing, she was heard to say, "I am not going to die; I'm going home like a shooting star." And her last words were purportedly, "Be a follower of the Lord Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

*In a little while, In a little while,  
We shall cross the billow's foam;  
We shall meet at last, When the stormy winds are past,  
In a little while we're going home.*

So what do you and I have in common with a six-foot 19<sup>th</sup> century former slave woman who somehow rose above her life's destitution powerfully to address the worst systems of oppression of her day?

Well, on the face of it, not much. It was hard for me even to presume to speak Sojourner's speeches.

But you and I, we're followers of Jesus Christ, too. And what God requires of us is no different than what God required of Sojourner – to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.

It's amazing, isn't it, what one faithful person can do?

To the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sojourner\\_Truth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sojourner_Truth). "Sojourner Truth, p. 6.