

SLD08.29.10 22th 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.

Sojourner 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. Since Sojourner only spoke Dutch, and since 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/Sojourner was sold to Martinus Schryver, who ran a tavern of questionable repute, yet offered a safer haven for Isabella.¹ A year and a half later, though, she was sold again, this time to John Dumont of New Paltz, New York, in whose home she would likewise suffer many hardships.

¹ For this and the following narrative of Truth's life, see www.womeninhistory.sojournertruth.

Sometime around 1815, for example, Sojourner fell in love with a slave named Robert, who was owned by someone else. Robert's owner forbade the relationship because he didn't want his slave having children with a slave he didn't own because he wouldn't own the children. One night when Robert visited Sojourner, his owner and son followed him, beat him savagely, bound him, and dragged him away, never to return. In 1817, Dumont forced Sojourner to marry an older slave by the name of Thomas, with whom she ultimately had four children.

Back in 1799, the state of New York had already begun the abolition of slaves, a gradual process to be completed by July 4, 1827. Dumont promised Isabella he'd free her a year earlier than state emancipation, though he reneged on his promise. Infuriated, Isabella continued working until she felt she had satisfied any sense of obligation to Dumont, which, in her mind, amounted to spinning 100 pounds of wool. This accomplished, she escaped before dawn with her infant daughter, Sophia.

She is quoted as saying later that...

"I did not run off, for I thought that wicked, but I walked off, believing that to be all right."

*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.*

After wandering for a bit while praying for direction, Isabella eventually arrives at the home of Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen, who offer her sanctuary and pay off her services to Dumont off. The Van Wagenens 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 has a life-changing religious experience during which she becomes "overwhelmed with the greatness of the Divine presence," and inspired to preach the gospel. She quickly becomes known as an effective preacher whose influence is "miraculous." On June 1, 1843, Isabella Baumfree changes her name to Sojourner Truth and begins to make her way as a traveling preacher.

"It's what her name means," remarks Nell Irvin Painter, author of a recent book about her.² "'Sojourner Truth' means 'itinerant preacher.'"³ Wandering through Brooklyn, Long Island and then up the Connecticut River Valley, Truth traveled and preached in relative obscurity for a time, joining with a variety of Christian communities, where she met and worked with other abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass.

Shortly thereafter, she began dictating her memoirs to a friend. In 1850, William Lloyd Garrison privately published her book called *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, a book which produced enough income for her to travel and increase her speaking engagements. In her speeches, Truth primarily spoke about anti-slavery and women's rights, giving testimony to her personal experiences as a slave.

It was in 1851, at the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, that Sojourner Truth gave one of her most famous speeches. One biographer, Frances Gage, later describes the moment in this way:

"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

² Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*. W. W. Norton & Co., 1996.

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.*

Not everybody remembers Truth's Akron speech quite the same way Gage does – and she had more on the order of five children than thirteen – yet the confidence and clarity and tone with which she delivers it is typical of Truth's presentation.

Remarks Harriet Beecher Stowe in an *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863,

"I do not recollect ever to have been conversant with anyone who had more of that silent and subtle power which we call personal presence than (Sojourner Truth). In the modern Spiritualistic phraseology, she would be described as having a strong sphere. Her tall form, as she rose up before me, is still vivid to my mind. She was dressed in some stout, grayish stuff, neat and clean, though dusty from travel. On her head, she wore a bright Madras handkerchief, arranged as a turban.... She seemed perfectly self-possessed and at her ease, -- in fact, there was almost an unconscious superiority, not unmixed with a solemn twinkle of humor, in the odd, composed manner in which she looked down on me."⁴

Over the next decade, Truth spoke before dozens, perhaps hundreds, of audiences in New York City, Northampton, Mass, Battle Creek, Michigan. To help raise money for her feminist abolitionist campaign, Truth distributed cartes de visite, a sort of calling card the size of baseball cards on which was replicated her photograph and the caption, "I sell the shadow to support the substance." (The shadow being the

⁴ <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=StoSojo.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1>

photograph and the substance being her physical self.) In 1858, when someone interrupted a speech and accused her of being a man, Truth opened her blouse and revealed her physical self, lest there be any doubt regarding her gender.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Sojourner Truth began to speak on the Union's behalf, as well as for enlisting black troops for the cause of freeing slaves. Her own grandson, James Caldwell, enlisted in the 54th Regiment, Massachusetts. Both during and after the war, Truth worked among freed slaves at a government refugee camp on an island in Virginia as an employee of the National Freedman's Relief Association. And in 1867, she was invited to give an address to the second annual meeting of 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 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.

Truth continued to travel and speak – about abolition, about women's rights, about prison reform, even preaching to the Michigan Legislature against capital punishment. Not everyone welcomed her preaching and lectures, of course, but among her many friends and staunch supporters were Frederick Douglass, Amy Post, Parker Pillsbury, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott and Susan B. Anthony.

By 1879, many freed slaves were beginning to make their way west and north on their own, many settling in Kansas. So Truth spent a year in Kansas speaking in black and white black churches trying to gain support for the "Exodusters," what she called the refugees, 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 she 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;”** her last words purportedly the directive, **“Be a follower of the Lord Jesus.”**⁵

*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 have you and I have in common with a towering six-foot 19th century slave-born woman who somehow rose above her life’s destitution powerfully to address the worst systems of oppression of her day? A woman big in strength, in stature, in spirit? What do we in this semi-urban, mostly Euro American, mostly privileged, little Presbyterian church share one of America's most quoted, most outspoken black women, who never had a web site, never appeared on "Nightline," never posed for a magazine cover, never held a conference call or hired a public relations firm?⁶

What do we have in common with Sojourner Truth? Well, frankly, on the face of it, not much.

But the other day as I was limping along walking Coco, a man jogged by, a young, strong, muscular man whose dark skin glistened with power, discipline, and focused effort. And there I was, a slightly hobbling, middle aged white woman walking her oversized, sadly ungroomed poodle. But as he passed, something shifted around

⁵www.wikipedia.com. “Sojourner Truth, p. 6.

⁶ <http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Archive/LifeLedByFaith.htm>

me, and suddenly he did not seem so “other.” For a moment, something in me opened took in a bit, just a hair, of this man’s power and strength and determination. And what do you know but that I found myself standing a little straighter, feeling a little more powerful, maybe occupying a little more space, with just a tad more confidence.

Today, with a nod, a song, and a self-possessed presence, a story, a wisdom, and a solemn twinkle of humor, it is Sojourner Truth who has passed by us. Today, for a little while, we have been included in the strength of Truth’s “sphere.”

May those of us who are able take her in, even just a touch of the silent and subtle power of this “Libyan Sibyl.” It’s all she ever wanted of her audiences – that they, too, might stand a little straighter, feel a little prouder, occupy a little more space, and follow, with a touch more confidence and determination, the command Sojourner herself took so seriously – to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.

To the glory of God. Amen.