

## "Ain't I a Woman?"

Exodus 3:1-9 Psalm 115:1-2 Galatians 5:1

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Slavery has existed for millennia. It has affected all races, genders, and age groups. The Code of Hammurabi, dating about 1758 BC codified the institution of slavery. A number of countries in the Middle East adopted parts of that Code.

It would have been about 1500 BC when Moses led the Hebrews in their escape from slavery in Egypt. The first slaves to arrive in America was a group of 20 people who arrived at Port Comfort, Virginia, near Jamestown, in August 1619. They were brought by British privateers who had seized them from a captured Portuguese slave ship.

It's a long journey from being a slave to being an abolitionist. The Hebrews would know that. The Jewish people continue to know that. Each year as they celebrate Passover, they recall their liberation as though it were them personally who had been brought out of Egypt by the mighty hand of God. The Jewish people will be celebrating Passover this year at the same time we are celebrating Easter.

One can hardly imagine the hardship of those Hebrews as they were forced to labor under the guards of Pharaoh:

- laboring in the hot sun of Egypt
- thirsting for water
- hungry for food
- whipped when they worked too slowly
- working merciless hours of labor
- forced to gather their straw to make bricks as punishment for being "lazy."

Fearing that baby boys might grow up to be men who would rebel against the Pharaoh, the Pharaoh issued an edict that when an infant boy was born he was to be thrown into the Nile River and become food for the crocodiles.

God steps in and says, "NO MORE!"

God needs human hands to bring about liberation. God needs a person to lead God's people out of slavery. God rained down one plague after another on the people of Egypt, but liberation did not come until the Pharaoh lost his own son.

It was Moses who had proclaimed God's message to the Pharaoh, but sometimes it takes drastic circumstances to bring about change. And it was Moses who was ready to step up as the leader of the Hebrew slaves when Pharaoh finally let them go. Moses became the agent of God. His task was more difficult than we can envision. People who have been in bondage have to learn how to live free.

Like Moses, Sojourner Truth, whose birth name was Isabella Baumfree, became a leader for the freedom of the slaves in America. Unlike Moses, she had experienced slavery and all of its savagery.

We often think of all of slavery being in the South, but that is false thinking. Isabella was born in 1797 in Swartekill, New York, about 105 miles north of New York City. She was one of 12 children born to Elizabeth and James. Elizabeth had been captured in Guinea and James had been captured in what is modern-day Ghana. Because the family was owned by Dutch settlers, the language that she spoke as a child was Dutch.

At the age of 9 Isabella was sold with a flock of sheep for \$100. Her treatment by the new owner included a beating each day with a cane and sometimes a handful of canes.

The state of New York emancipated all of its slaves on July 4, 1827, but before that she escaped with her infant daughter, having to leave to the rest of her family behind. She was taken in by Maria and Isaac Van Wagenen, who bought her freedom for \$20 and that of her infant daughter for \$5.

When she learned that her son had been illegally sold to a man in Alabama, she took the issue to court and secured his return to be with her. The case was the first in which a black woman successfully challenged a white man in a United States court.

Her first years of freedom were filled with hardships, and she lived with her children in Massachusetts for a time, but then moved to New York City. She became a devout Christian and a member of the Methodist church. It was a turning point in her life. At the age of 46 she gave herself the name of Sojourner Truth after she became convinced that God had called her to leave the city and go into the countryside "testifying the hope that was in her." She told her friends, "The Holy Spirit calls me and I must go."

Sojourner Truth traveled through several states speaking as an abolitionist and in favor of women's rights, including the right to vote. She worked at odd jobs to support herself. Along with the writer Olive Gilbert, Truth published her life story entitled *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. From the sale of the book she was able to buy a house in Battle Creek, Michigan. She often told her listeners that she owned property and had to pay taxes but could not vote. In addition to being an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights, Truth became an advocate for prison reform.

During the Civil War she met with President Lincoln and Frederick Douglass in the White House to advocate for civil rights and to help enlist black men in the Union Army. Following her meeting at the White House, Truth decided to remain in Washington and work at a hospital and counsel freed slaves. She continued to work with freed slaves after the war.

When she spoke to groups she was often heckled by men. At one time they tried to convince her listeners that she was a man in women's clothing, whereupon she unbuttoned her blouse and proved that she was indeed a woman.

At one convention event, having just returned from a long and tiring trip, she rose to speak and said, "Children, I have come here like the rest of you, to hear what I have to say."

Perhaps her most remembered speech was at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention when she delivered her extemporaneous speech, saying several times, "Ain't I a Woman?" She never let her listeners forget that a woman was a person of equal worth to a man.

Truth died at her Battle Creek, Michigan home on November 26, 1883. She was buried from the Congregational-Presbyterian Church.

The calendar of saints of the Episcopal Church remembers Sojourner Truth, along with others, including Harriet Tubman annually. The calendar of saints of the Lutheran Church also remembers her and Harriet Tubman.

In 2014, Truth was included in *Smithsonian* magazine's list of the "100 Most Significant Americans of All Time."

On September 19, 2018, the U.S. Secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, announced the name of the last ship of a six-unit construction contract as the USNS Sojourner Truth (T-AO 210). The ship is part of the late John Lewis-class of Fleet Replenishment Oilers that are named to honor civil and human rights heroes.

The U.S. Treasury Department announced in 2016 that an image of Sojourner Truth would appear on a newly designed \$10 bill, along with others who had led the women's rights movement. These bills were to be unveiled in 2020. Our former President announced that although the work of preparation had been done, it would probably not be released for another ten years. He preferred Andrew Jackson's picture on the bill.

On April 28, 2009, history was made when The National Congress of Black Women, Inc. unveiled the Sojourner Truth bust at the U.S. Visitors Center Emancipation Hall. She became the first African American woman to have a memorial in the United States Capitol.

Moses was a leader called by God to liberate a group of people who would become a nation chosen to be the light of God to the world. What could have been a two week journey across the desert to the Promised Land took 40 years because of their lack of faith in the direction of God. Moses died before the Hebrews entered the Land that God had promised to them.

Sojourner Truth was a slave who became an abolitionist and an advocate for women's rights, and prison reform. She inspired generations of women to demand equality and the right to vote. She lived to see the emancipation of slaves. The right for women to vote would not happen until almost 40 years after her death.

Both people were called by God to be God's agents of liberation in the day in which they lived.

Physical slavery continues in some forms but has largely morphed into white nationalism. This again sets one group of people as more privileged than another. The task for us, as followers of Jesus, is not finished.

Amen.