



SOJOURNER TRUTH

May 29, 1851, Akron, Ohio

The crowd outside the church grew louder and more heated in their declarations, making the warm Ohio air seem a few degrees higher. Thousands milled about, their passions rising as they waited on the next speaker. Sojourner Truth, her graying hair worn in a plait behind her head, approached the stage from the side. Making her way through the mass of females young and old, her hands, toughened by her years of spinning wool on the estates in New York, she slid amongst the bodies before her, trying to part them like Moses divided the Red Sea with God's almighty help.

Sojourner sensed their emotions. At best, many of these women were indifferent to her presence. At worst, they were downright hostile. And it wasn't just the women, most of the men of this area were absolutely indignant to a days-long meeting about women's liberties. The resistance was so stiff she felt as if she was pushing against the brick houses of her masters from years ago.

She slipped as she reached the church steps, knocking herself sideways into a young woman wearing a bright green hat and possessing equally piercing green eyes. The young lady's burning glare could have started a forest fire.

"Where do you think you're going, ma'am?" the girl sneered. "Aren't you to be at the back?" She pointed to the rear of the crowd.

"Nothing new in what you're saying, miss," Sojourner retorted, drawing her petite self to as full a height as she

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could muster, “though sad to hear it all the same. It just so happens I’m speaking to this crowd of which you are a part.”

“I don’t believe a word you’re saying, madam,” came the shrill reply of another woman, tall and thin as a rail. “It’s bad enough we have a deluge of the local clergy out to denounce our meeting, but you are certainly not helping.”

“You don’t even know who I am, by sight or name,” replied Sojourner as she waved her darkened hands before her and then pointed back at herself for emphasis. “All you see is the color of my skin and off you go pronouncing judgment worse than the men carping at all of us.”

“The fact we don’t know who you are is one such problem,” quipped the first woman.

“It’s not that you look at me and see me looking like a charcoal bit in a bowl of milk and you squirm away?” Sojourner replied hotly. “Then I’ll give proof!” She pointed to the stage in front of the Old Stone Church. “Missus Gage! Have you room up there as promised?”

A curly-haired female, clad in a dark blue dress, turned her head and, above the tumult of the crowd, saw her petitioner. “Mrs. Truth! Mrs. Truth! As promised, indeed! I have room here for you!”

“You know Frances Gage?” said the incredulous women in unison.

“Missus Gage knows me,” replied Sojourner Truth in a gracious but firm tone. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” And she moved past them to ascend the stage.

Frances Gage brooked no protests. One look from her would freeze the haughtiest protestor, although there were still men standing well away from the expansive crowd who snipped and chortled at whomever spoke from the makeshift stage. Punctuating the air with her index finger, Gage reminded the gathered assembly they were there for

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a unified purpose before introducing the woman next to her.

“We have gathered to address the rights of women everywhere, but this nation must see the clear link between those rights and the freedom of the Black race. To pretend that the smile of God passes over and ignores our Black sisters and brothers is to ignore the way that God has created us, His very children! And so today, I call each of you to come with clean hearts and curious minds to hear the words of this woman, one without peer in her difficulties, her desire for freedom, and her willingness to see the hope and justice of God meld together on behalf of women everywhere! I give you, my sisters of the present struggle, Sojourner Truth!”

The jeers had disappeared, but the applause was not overwhelming. *No matter*, thought Sojourner. *The Lord is my audience, and He shall receive the glory this day. Lord Jesus, be my strength!* She looked out at the crowd of women. *No matter their initial coldness*, she told herself, they were her sisters this day. She would win them over. Oh, with the help of Jesus, she would win them over!

“My sisters of the struggle, of many struggles become one, I greet you this day in the power of God!” she began. “Had you known me but a decade ago, you would know me as Isabella Baumfree, daughter of James and Elizabeth, slaves in New York state! You would have been surprised at the crisp elocution of this girl who knew Dutch as her first language. You would have seen before you a woman once sold for one hundred dollars to the harshest of men in Kingston. And even that is not the whole story, for I was sold away from my dear parents that day with a flock of sheep thrown into the bargain. Me and the lambs for money! And sold again, and sold again. In the clutches of a man who beat me with rods. Even today, O sisters, my back tells the story of hundreds of beatings, and those

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were not even the most unspeakable, the darkest things my master did to me!”

Sojourner swayed, tears coming to her eyes as she relived the memories and the horror. “Spinning wool was my craft of force, even after my master promised to free me and went back on his word. A man holding power over a woman, white holding power over black. This is my story, and it only grows and grows. Where I go, it follows as I follow my Lord Jesus! They took my son from me, daring me to take him back as was my right! And I took my former master to court, and I—a Black woman who sued a white master—I won. Never before in this land had anyone seen the like, but my Lord works miracles, because He is the God of the impossible!”

The crowd’s murmurs, barely audible at first, had swelled into a rumble. Even some “amens” began to be heard from the rear of the assembly. “And this God and King uses me to proclaim to you today that the impossible ends here! It ends in Akron! It ends in America! He uses me as He first called me eight years ago on that holy day known as Pentecost. It was in that blessed Methodist chapel that the Spirit of the Lord drew me forth. It was then that I heard that still, small voice, sure as Elijah the prophet did on Mount Sinai many years ago. Proclaim the truth, my God moved me! Proclaim the truth for as long as you will sojourn on the earth, was His word to me. I told my friends that day, ‘The Holy Spirit calls me, and I must go. I must sojourn on and proclaim His truth, and hence, I changed my name to that what you have heard Missus Gage say already!’”

“I go on to say,” she continued, waving her hands like a Midwestern wheat field in a prairie breeze as the women began to clap and chant her name, “that what Almighty God has made clear through His Word and His Spirit, I tell you today: The subjugation of any man or woman to

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slavery on account of the color of skin, whether in the cotton fields of the South or the wool looms of the North, is as poison in the mouth of our Savior God!” The word *poison* lit a fire within the hearts of her hearers, and roars peppered the crowd even as the searing heat of the late May sun beat down upon their heads. “And the freedom that is pressed upon us by virtue of being in the image of God leads to more. I have proclaimed the truth of abolition of the yoke of slavery. Now I pray we take on another yoke.”

Palms down, she signaled for quiet, even though absolute silence was out of the question. Nor did the remaining noise bother her. Indeed, it only served to stoke her intensity even more. “We come to the steps of God’s church today as among those who are treasured by the Lord God Himself. Remember that Adam did all that he was commanded in Eden, naming every beast of God’s creation, and yet as the Word of God has said, for Adam there was not a helper fit for him. And we have those precious and resounding words from the mouth of the Lord Himself: ‘It is *not good* that the man should be alone!’

“My fellow women, my fellow helpers, of whom God Himself has declared that our absence would be a detriment to the goodness of His world: I tell you this day that breaking our yoke of no suffrage, of eliminating the gulf between us and men and giving us equal rights, is the goal set before us!”

The women raised their voices in a unified chorus, urging Truth on. She did not disappoint.

“I must say,” Truth continued, “if there is noise about this matter, then there must be something worth repairing. We have the Black women of the South and the women here in the North all talking about their God-given rights, everyone will want to know what the matter is. I’ll tell you straightaway what it is.” She pointed at the clergymen

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across the street that guffawed at her every sentence. “You men, I tell you now: I personify a woman’s rights! I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? You show me your labor? I ask you to come beside me and see my arms, and feel the sinews within them! I have heard much about the sexes being equal, and that’s more than just words. I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now!”

Now all the ladies were yelling for more, their voices like a storm on the Great Lakes, and Truth continued. “As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint, and a man a quart — why can’t she have her little pint full? You men don’t need to be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much. We can’t take more than our pints will hold. Why men, if you can give a woman rights, give it to her and you will feel better. You will have your own rights, and they won’t be so much trouble.

Pacing the stage, Truth balled her hands into fists, feeling the sweat ooze from her palms. Never before had she felt as joyous as she did at that moment. “Listen to me! I can’t read...not a word. But most certainly, I can hear a word and not forget it. I have heard the Bible and I have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if a woman upset the world, do give us women a chance to set it right side up again. Remember if you will the Lord Jesus! He never spurned women at any time. Recall the words of the apostle when Lazarus died. No man came to Jesus asking for a resurrection. It was Mary and Martha who came to Him with faith and love and begged him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And when you think of Jesus, how did the King come into the world as a baby? Through God who begat Him and the woman Mary who gave birth to Him!”

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At those words, the entire throng of women burst forth in cheers and chants, invoking Sojourner Truth's name in rhythmic fashion, their words rising in the air like steam. The young lady who had resisted Mrs. Truth drew near to the stage and touched Frances Gage on the arm.

"My good lady," she said, "I must pass along my deepest regrets that I did not have faith in the person of Sojourner Truth before. God has surely exposed my prejudice and shown me what is good and right!"

"If that is the case," said Mrs. Gage above the din of voices, "then today has been a victory in more ways than one." She smiled and looked around at the adoring crowd. "We've built a movement today, sure as Mrs. Truth shall have a monument to her good work in the future."

Born Isabella Baumfree, **SOJOURNER TRUTH** escaped from slavery with her infant daughter Sophia in 1826, eventually living in New York City as a housekeeper for a Christian minister. A dynamic spiritual experience in 1843 led her to change her name to Sojourner Truth and dedicate her life to traveling and speaking out against the American slavery system. Her memoirs, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, were published in 1850. She then joined a speaking tour the next year. Invited to speak at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in 1851, Truth's speech captivated the audience as she blended the biblical doctrine of the image of God with equal rights for Blacks and women. During the American Civil War, she helped recruit Black soldiers for the Union army. In 2009, one-hundred-twenty-six years after her death, Sojourner Truth was honored with a memorial bust of her likeness in the U.S. Capitol, making her the first African-American woman to have a statue in that historic building.