

Sojourner Truth was ready to stand through the fire



Highland Views

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Columnist

Late on a warm summer evening I switched off the screens and heard water. Was there water running in the house? Was it rain? I walked around the house, head cocked to the side, listening. That had to be water, but it sounded like a waterfall.

Opening the front door I knew immediately it wasn't water but a field and forest full of crickets in full chorus. I've heard crickets, but nothing like this.

We never know what we'll hear when we listen more closely, when we investigate, to possibly hear what we've never heard before. An ancient instinct seems to switch on, and this time the instinct of insects streamed straight into my senses.

There are voices in many fields.

In 1850 a short but significant book appeared, "written" by an illiterate former slave. It was titled "Narrative of Sojourner Truth" and contained stories from the life of Isabella Baumfree, who later changed her "slave name" to Truth. When she set out on a pilgrimage in 1843 — to preach her own brand of the gospel — she chose "Sojourner" to show her commitment to being a traveler for truth.

As the "Narrative" (actually written by Olive Gilbert) states, she "[took] her freedom into her own hands," walking away from her upstate New York owner in 1827. With her infant child in her arms, she made her way to the home of a kindly Dutch couple, who promptly bought her from the pursuing slave owner and then said her master was the same as theirs (God, that is). She was essentially a free woman.

Sojourner had an amazing, often tragic, life, yet she was known as a profound speaker and singer with a "naturally powerful mind." Her confident, fearless presence could calm crowds, even hecklers.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass said that her speeches were "a strange compound of wit and wisdom, of wild enthusiasm, and flint-like common sense."

There is no question Sojourner Truth was a person of deep, abiding faith. She felt that she could speak with God directly. Because of that independent mind, she challenged the revival preachers and biblical "au-



Rutgers has named an apartment complex in the heart of the New Brunswick campus for abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth. NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

thorities" wherever she went.

Since she could not read or write, she never read the Bible, but she knew the Bible well, listening intently since childhood. She interpreted spiritual matters "by the light of her own experience."

Olive Gilbert relates Sojourner's reasonable approach to learning:

"When she was examining the scriptures, she wished to hear them without comment." Since adults always bothered her with their own explanations and interpretations, Sojourner "ceased to ask adult persons to read the Bible to her," preferring to have children read it aloud because they wouldn't offer comments. "In that way she was enabled to see what her own mind could make out of [the words]."

I imagine there are a few lessons here for religion teachers.

In one rousing story, Sojourner met a group of people all stirred up about the End Times. Preachers were agitating their flock about Christ returning to earth any day. Sojourner stepped up on a stump with a loud "Hear! Hear!" and calmed the crowd. She was particularly concerned by the message of divine punishment for unbelievers. Her words are forceful and timely:

"You seem to be expecting to go to some parlor away up somewhere, and when the wicked have been burnt, you are coming back to walk in triumph over their ashes." She scolds these preachers with sharp words: "I can't see any thing so very nice in that."

She's not through.

If the Lord is coming with angry judgment, Sojourner's ready: "I am not going away; I am going to stay here and stand the fire."

A stunning statement.

This courageous woman who endured slavery, the selling off of her children and dangers on the road had the gumption to stand up to the "godly professionals," the crowds and even to face an angry God, because she knew she stood for the right and the good.

People said they learned great "lessons of wisdom and faith" from Sojourner, that she had a "remarkable gift in prayer, and still more remarkable talent for singing."

Once she was walking with a friend and said "she had often thought what a beautiful world this would be, when we should see every thing right side up." As she saw it, "we see everything topsy-turvy, and all is confusion."

She encountered many more incidents of confusion — at one camp meeting settling the fearful commotion with her singing while her deep, soulful voice "ran through the multitude like an electric shock."

This great woman left a legacy of liberation in mind and body.

Sojourner Truth was unafraid to stay and stand the fire.

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