

3.8.2023 Lent Midweek, Week 2

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Psalm 145:1-13; 2 Timothy 1:1-14

“Look to Jesus”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

This year’s midweek series, “Dying and Rising with Christ,” uses the witness of the saints on the Lutheran church calendar during the season of Lent to help us deepen our Lenten journey in discipleship to Jesus.

Tonight, we remember four women commemorated this week on the church calendar: Perpetua and Felicity (March 7), who were martyred for their faith at Carthage in North Africa (c.203), and Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman (March 10), who worked to abolish slavery in this country.

The theme for today’s service is from Hebrews 12:2, in the words, “*looking to Jesus.*” These words encourage us to run the race of faith, enduring with perseverance, by looking to Jesus. The saints we remember today, are two groups of women separated by the distance of 1,700 years, oceans, continents, and language, yet are also women who were connected to Africa. Three of these women, Felicity, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were slaves, while Perpetua was a Roman citizen who gave up her freedom by making public confession of her faith, leading to her arrest and martyrdom. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were black Americans who had been slaves and who worked to abolish slavery, while also working for women’s rights in the 19th century. All of them knew what it meant to lose their freedom, and all of them looked to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of their faith.

Perpetua and Felicity are known because the story of their martyrdom was written down, allowing us to glimpse the faith of early Christians, both slave and free, who ultimately gave up their lives rather than giving up their faith. Felicity identified her own suffering with Jesus, who had endured the cross and its suffering for her. Shortly before her death in the amphitheatre at Carthage, Felicity was asked by a guard at the prison,

“What will you do when you are thrown to the beasts, which you despised when you refused to sacrifice [to Caesar]?” And she replied, “Now it is I that suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer with me, because I also am about to suffer for Him.”

Felicity’s witness to us across distant time is also very immediate because the Jesus who suffered with and in her is the same Jesus Christ who dwells in us, strengthening us as we suffer in our faith for others. The public witness of Felicity and Perpetua, remind us during Lent, that self-

denial is a necessary part of the Christian journey. Perpetua, a Roman noblewoman, understood that in baptism she was dying to herself and the world, in order that she might follow and live anew in Christ. Felicity's words, "Now it is I that suffer; but then there will be another in me, who will suffer with me, because I also am about to suffer for Him," remind us that Jesus Christ suffers in our humanity with us when we live for him.

The word "martyr" literally means "witness," and points to early Christians who stood firmly in their faith as witnesses who looked to Jesus. In doing so, "witnesses" became known as "martyrs." In other words, to be a witness is to "*run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus.*" A martyr is a witness to Christ.

The reading from Isaiah this evening should remind us of Jesus: "*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.*" In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus began his ministry by standing up in the synagogue at Nazareth, and reading these words of good news for the oppressed, words to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captive, and release to the prisoner. After reading this passage of Isaiah, Jesus said, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

Black American Christians like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman also looked to Jesus because they understood that true freedom and liberty, the content of the good news, comes in Jesus who suffers in and for us. Jesus' choice of Isaiah 61 reveals the Christ who lives for all who have and continue to suffer under the shadow of empire, imperialism and the nationalisms that continue to enslave people into systems of oppression for the color of their skin, their gender, sexual identity, or their nationality. Paul described Christ Jesus as the source of unity amidst our diversity, writing, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ*" (Gal. 3:28).

Sojourner Truth said it this way,

Children, who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black?... Does not God love colored children as well as white children? And did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other?

Our diversity as human beings is made one in the Savior who has died for us all. The courage to live one's life unreservedly for Christ in this world comes from Jesus who calls us to deny ourselves and follow him. Over and over, God comes to us asking us to serve him, asking us to do

what may seem impossible in this world – but with Christ all things become possible.

Harriet Tubman recounted how God came to her asking her to do the impossible by serving her black sisters and brothers by bringing good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captive and release to the prisoner. Tubman said,

Long ago when the Lord told me to go free my people I said, ‘No, Lord! I can’t go. Don’t ask me.’ But He came another time, and I said again, ‘Lord, go away. Get some better-educated person. Get a person with more culture than I have.’ But He came back a third time, and spoke to me as He did to Moses. He said, ‘Harriet, I want you.’ And I knew then I must do what He bid me do.

Roman Catholic theologian, Diana L. Hayes, described the courage of enslaved people to look to Jesus, walking with him into freedom: “Theirs was a defiance born of the Spirit, which moved them to disobey their masters in order to obey their God, a God they knew created them as free men and women in God’s own image and likeness” (*Forged in the Fiery Furnace*. Orbis, 2012).

In a moment, we will sing the African American spiritual, “I Want Jesus to Walk with Me,” verse two of which reads, “In my trials, Lord, walk with me; when my heart is almost is breaking, Lord, I want Jesus to walk with me.” Countless saints have looked to Jesus to walk with them in the mist of trials, receiving strength and courage to do what seemed impossible.

Felicity knew that Jesus would walk and suffer with her as she suffered for him. Jesus walked with Sojourner Truth who told others that Jesus had died for her and for people of every color and ethnicity. Jesus walked with Harriet Tubman who followed God’s call to bring good news of liberty and release to the oppressed and enslaved.

Today we remember four women of immense courage looked to Jesus because they knew all of God’s promises had been fulfilled in him. Look to Jesus who frees you to live with courage for your neighbor who lives oppressed in this world.

Jesus says, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” If you look to him, he will walk with you, freeing and anointing you to live as good news for others. Amen.