

Sojourner Truth

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Born a Slave in Ulster County,
State of New York in the 18th Century
Died in Battle Creek Michigan
November 26, 1883, Aged about 105
“ Is God Dead”

Reads the inscription on Sojourner Truth's gravestone. The dates are a bit awry (Sojourner was born in 1797), but the question is right to the point. The woman we know as Sojourner Truth might well have questioned the existence of a good and all-powerful God.

Until she was 30, Sojourner was a slave named Belle – sold away from her parents when she was four, passed from one indifferent owner to the next, separated from her five children. When New York State freed all slaves, July 4, 1827, by law those children remained “unpaid servants” until they were 28.

But Belle was gifted with physical strength and a formidable appearance. She was six feet tall, very dark of skin and strong of feature, with a deep and pleasantly resounding voice. Servitude and adversity had forged her indomitable spirit; her brief childhood with her mother and later contact with the gentle, determined Friends (Quakers) had formed in her a profound faith in God and Jesus.

Belle had many adventures before her 46th year, but in 1843 she became Sojourner Truth and walked onto the pages of American History. That year her God seemed to say to her, “Go out of the city. Go east. I will give you a new name.” So she left her servant's job in New York City, where she had been happy, to become Sojourner, God's Pilgrim. And the “handle to her name” came to her “in a voice as God is true – Truth shall be my abiding name until I die.”

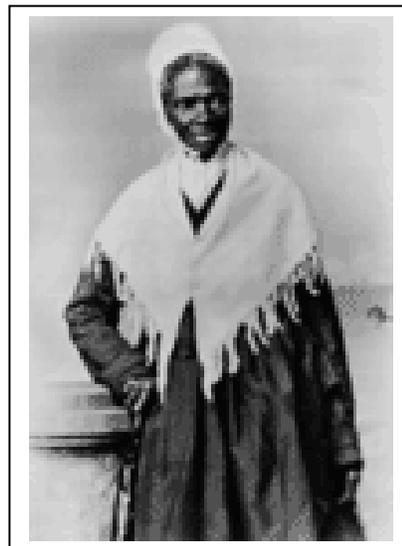
Her way east lead to Massachusetts where the movement to abolish slavery was at its height. She became friend, associate, mentor to William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglas, David Ruggles and many other abolitionists. To help the movement, she wrote her autobiography and began to share the speakers' platform with Garrison. So her gift for oratory was discovered and she took up the task of testifying against slavery.

In those years, women too were realizing their oppression and Sojourner joined that movement too. She was a delegate from Massachusetts to the first National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester.

Her move to Michigan in later years was an attempt to bring her family together; two of her daughters and their children went with her. She was also leading the way to the west and economic independence for former slaves.

The question on her tombstone sums up her life. During a time when opposition to abolition ran high and the very humanity of black people was questioned, Frederick Douglas spoke with despair of the possibility of freedom – “There is no longer any hope for justice other than bloody rebellion.” The large audience remained silent in agreement. Then Sojourner's deep voice sounded, “Frederick, Frederick, is God Dead?”

Blood and Rebellion there might be, but Sojourner reminds her friends that their hope for justice lies in God.



Waters, A. et al. Editorial Board: March 1983. Vol. II No. 1