

My family uses the d365 online devotional. We try to sit down each morning for breakfast and read the selection for the day. This week's devotional mentions a woman from our Christian history that I will have to admit that I had never heard of before. Her name was Perpetua. When I looked up her story I found the story of Perpetua to be quite an amazing story. Not often in our tradition do we hear stories of Christian women going through what Perpetua experienced.

Perpetua was a woman who lived between 180 and 203 AD. She was a married woman of nobility who became a mother in her early 20s. Perpetua's story comes from a text which is one of the oldest Christian texts which we have preserved today and in many ways is her personal diary.

Perpetua lived in Carthage in Northern Africa when it was under Roman control. The Roman emperor Septimius Severus made a decree that forbade conversions to Judaism and Christianity. During this time there were numerous Christians who were being killed for their faith.

Perpetua's account of her life opens with conflict between her and her father, who wished for her to recant her Christian belief. Perpetua refused, and was soon baptized before being moved to prison. After the guards were bribed, she was allowed to move to a better portion of the prison, where she nursed her child and gave its charge to her mother and brother, and the child was able to stay in prison with her for the time being.

At the encouragement of her brother, Perpetua asked for and received a vision. She had at least 3 visions and interpreted these visions to mean that as a Christian she would suffer for her beliefs.

Perpetua's father visited her in prison and pleaded with her, but Perpetua remained steadfast in her faith. She was brought to a hearing before the governor Hilarianus where she confessed her Christian faith. Perpetua then joined other Christians who were led to the amphitheatre.

At the demand of the crowd these Christians were first scourged before a line of gladiators; then a boar, a bear, and a leopard were set on the men, and a wild cow on the women. Wounded by the wild animals, the Christian martyrs then gave each other the kiss of peace and were then put to the sword.

The text describes Perpetua's death as follows; "But Perpetua, that she might have some taste of pain, was pierced between the bones and shrieked out; and when the swordsman's hand wandered still (for he was a novice), herself set it upon her own neck. Perchance so great a woman could not else have been slain (being feared of the unclean spirit) had she not herself so willed it".

I share the story of Perpetua because this morning we have heard a similar story of people of faith who were willing to die for their beliefs. The story we read earlier was the story from the Old Testament book of Daniel of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Their story originates during the period when Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar and the Temple, the central place of worship for the Jews, was destroyed. This would be the year about 587 BC.

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are captured by the Babylonians but they are soon chosen by the king and promoted from slaves into leadership roles in the government. The king then builds a statue that looked somewhat like the king and everyone in the region was to worship the statue. That's what happens when people begin to think very highly of themselves. They want people to worship them.

But as we heard from our earlier reading, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to worship power and control. As a result these three men are brought before the king. The king gives them another chance to worship him but they again refuse. It takes quite a bit of strength to stand up to nationalism and power when everyone around you is telling you to.

As a result of their disobedience, these three men are thrown into a fiery furnace. A furnace so fiery that the guards standing near it are burned to death by the heat.

But when the guards and the king look into the furnace, they do not see ashes. Instead they see the men walking around in the fiery furnace. And not only are there three men in the furnace walking around but they are joined by a fourth. A fourth character that is representing the presence of God with these three men.

So we have heard two stories of faithfulness in the midst of danger. Now let's hear a third. We have been reading through Acts over the past few weeks to get a glimpse of what the early church was like in order to give us background on what we are to be as a church. Today we hear the story of Peter, one of the early disciples of Jesus and what he experienced as a person of faith.

Read Acts 12: 1-25 from The Message

So what does this story and the other stories from Daniel and Perpetua teach us about what we are to be about as a Christian Church? One clear point in these stories is that being a Christian does not mean that life is easy and sweet and a fairytale. Being a person of faith may mean tragedy. Being a person of faith may mean persecution. Being a person of faith may mean taking stands that are not popular.

So much of what is presented as Christianity today is what might be called Christianity light. Sing some upbeat songs in worship, give a little money in the offering plate, lead a good life, make some new friends and life is great. But as these stories reveal today, being a faithful follower of Christ may mean some real hardship and it may mean some persecution if we are faithful. Following Christ faithfully can be very challenging. Being a follower of Christ may mean some real sacrifice.

The second aspect of this story about the early church is that when its members faced persecution, the rest of the church banded together to pray for the one being persecuted. After Peter was put in prison, the Christians came together to pray for him. They prayed with the earnest belief that God would intervene somehow.

From this story we come to understand that even though someone is prayed over that does not spare everyone from death and persecution. James, one of the original 12, was also captured but he was killed at the hands of King Herod. But Peter's surprise escape was lifted up by the early church as a sign that God does intervene and that God does make miracles happen. The light, the angel, and the chains falling away give evidence that nothing can stand in the way of God's ability.

As we move forward as a congregation, we are invited to be a group of people that are willing to risk it all to follow Christ. We are invited to be people who are willing to place complete trust in God and believe that God will provide what is needed.

And as we face difficult times as a community of faith and in our own lives, we are invited to be a community that lifts one another up in prayer. The prayers of the church community in our story from Acts were answered. We are invited to see how our prayers are answered as well.

The journey of faith can be very difficult. But we have some great examples of faith like Shadrach, Meshach, Abednigo, Perpetua, Peter and others who have shown us faithful obedience. We do not walk alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. AMEN.

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[-http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetua_and_Felicity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perpetua_and_Felicity)

-Given: March 1, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)