

Judith 8:2-5; 7-17
Psalm 96 *R: We proclaim God's presence day after day*
2 Timothy 1:3-7
Luke 3:15-23

Judith, Judean Woman: One Who Speaks Truth to Power
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There are 11 writings in the Catholic Bible not included in the Jewish or Protestant Bibles. Among the best known are 1 & 2 Maccabees and the Wisdom of Solomon. Judith is one of these. All were written after Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire in the late 4th century and Judah was subjugated to Greek rule. All deal with issues arising from the foreign domination of Judea or the problems of "Jews", more accurately named Judeans, living in the diaspora. Some scholars have called these writings "intertestamental" because they were written between the Jewish testament and the Christian testament.

Judith was written about 150 years before Jesus' birth, but is set 500-600 years back in Israel's history. Her name helps convey to readers its symbolic character. Judith is the feminine for Judah, which literally means Judean woman. Usually understood to exhort believers to trust in the power of Israel's God to rescue the Judean people, I see the story exhorting Judeans to speak truth to power and exhorting Judean women to speak truth to power and to use their intelligence, faith and resources to rescue their people.

Judith is depicted as wealthy, capable, devout and well-respected, a widow living in an Israelite city under siege, whose leaders have decided to surrender the city to the enemy. Surrender meant rape, pillage and certain slavery of the entire population, if not death; but the anonymous author emphasizes the implications not only for Judith's city, but for Jerusalem. If Judith's city falls, Jerusalem and the Temple will also fall.

An intelligent woman with resources, Judith disagreed with the leaders' decision to surrender their city. She did not criticize them behind closed doors. She acted. She invited them to her home to discuss the situation.

When the leaders arrived, Judith spoke the truth, as she perceived it, to their power. She chastised them for poor leadership and criticized their public oath to surrender the village in 5 days if God didn't come to their rescue. She used a theological argument: Who were they to give God an ultimatum? Who were they to challenge God to save them in 5 days or else? She reminded them that their all-powerful God was a god of people who are powerless. She counseled them to continue to call upon God for deliverance - on God's timetable; but she also offered them a plan to attempt to save their city, one which put no one at risk but herself and her woman servant. For Judith, God's deliverance and human effort were necessary counterparts.

The rest of the story tells how Judith prayed at length, then bathed and dressed in her best attire to enhance her natural beauty. She left her walled, fortified city, presented herself to the enemy as a spy willing to give up the city, gained access to the enemy leader, instituted a practice to gain his trust, plied him with wine, and cut off his head. Judith and her assistant carried his head back to their city, where it was displayed for all to see. Terrified to find their leader dead, the enemy became disheartened and fled. Judith's city, and Jerusalem, were saved.

The leaders honored Judith saying: "Blessed are you...among all the women of the earth... you risked your life when your people were being oppressed, and you averted our disaster, walking uprightly before our God."

In the reading from Timothy, the anonymous writer - who writes in Paul's name - creates a brief genealogy for Timothy to exhort him to bold exercise of responsibility. The writer refers, not to male ancestors, as Judith's genealogy did, but to Lois and Eunice, Timothy's grandmother and mother, whose sincere faith has been passed down to him. Timothy is urged to a spirit of powerful action, love and self-discipline. Inherent in the comparison, is the implication that he should be like his grandmother and mother, and not live in a spirit of timidity.

The gospel for today describes Jesus' baptism by John as an event which preceded Jesus' empowerment as a teacher of Judah and one whom many came to believe was God's long-awaited Messiah. This week, as I ponder baptism as a precedent to empowerment, I remember Mary Daly, the Catholic feminist theologian, professor and author who died this past week. While teaching at Jesuit Boston College for 30 years, she arguably gave birth to the Catholic feminist movement when she published The Church and the Second Sex in 1968. In 1972, she preached on the Exodus at Harvard Chapel, then walked out, made her Exodus, in protest of patriarchy in 1972, leading women to freedom. In 1973, she published Beyond God the Father, another work that rocked the theological world. There is no one here today, even those have never heard of Mary Daly, who has not been touched by her life and her work. Some believe she went too far. Others admire her education (2 doctorates in theology and 1 in philosophy) and revere her wit and remarkable intellectual skills. Canonical RC leaders prohibit the teaching of feminist writers in seminaries and dismiss Daly as irrelevant; but the canonical church was not been able to hold back the tide of her influence. Regardless of the controversy that surrounds her, Daly laid the ground work for feminist thought among Catholic scholars, non-Catholic Christian scholars and scholars of other religions that has changed the lives of women dramatically around the world.

I think of Daly's work as a baptism of sorts. The waters of her acute insight flowed into and beyond the scholarly Catholic community into the non-scholarly, non-ordained Catholic community, empowering women and men around the world to stand up to patriarchy and speak truth to power. Although Mary would not have understood what we are about at MMACC, her influence nonetheless underlies all that we do.

As Jesus' baptism prepared him to speak truth to power, the feminist baptism of Mary Daly's thought, washed over women and men in the late 20th century and prepared us to speak truth to power and apply her insights to concrete life experience. Mary had the courage of Judith, the spiritual heritage of Timothy, and - like Jesus - brought new consciousness into the world.

May Mary Daly, like Judith, rest in peace. May her death, like Jesus', resound with new life to transform a patriarchal church and world into a reality they would both endorse. May this baptism of her insight, which has touched us all, continue to cleanse and empower us to embrace radical inclusivity and break through, go beyond, the confines of tribal, historical and religious exclusion which enslaved our ancestors in faith and which continues to enslave the religions of the world.