



The Faith of the Martyr's Bible Study 2021

Week 3

Our Savior Lutheran Church and School

“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” – Tertullian

St. Perpetua

Perpetua wrote the story of her own suffering when she was in jail. Second-century Christian author Tertullian preserved the account.

She was a young wife and mother, twenty-two years old, her only child still nursing. She came from a wealthy and noble family in Carthage. She believed in Jesus at a time when the Roman emperor forbade conversion to Christianity. She enrolled, with one of her brothers, as a catechumen even in a time of persecution.

She was arrested leaving church and thrown into a dungeon. Her father came to her, urging her to renounce her faith.

Perpetua pointed to a pitcher of water. “Do you see that pitcher?” “Yes” “Can you call it anything but a pitcher?” “No.” “So can I call myself naught other than that which I am, a Christian.”

In this first imprisonment, she had a dream of a thin bronze ladder that extended up into heaven. All along the ladder were instruments of death, and coiled around the bottom was a massive serpent. Perpetua stepped on the head of the serpent and then climbed up the ladder to a garden.

Perpetua’s father came to her in prison, weeping and begging her to renounce her faith. “Have pity on us,” he said. “Think of your mother and brother and sister.” Perpetua said, “God’s will be done.”

Perpetua was brought to trial. The proconsul was named Hilarian. As she was in line, she heard the others before her confessing Christ. As she stood before the judge, her father came to her with her infant son in his arms. He said with tears, “Perform the sacrifice! Have mercy on your child!” Even Hilarian said, “Spare your father’s gray hair. Spare the infant. Make the sacrifice to Caesar.”

Perpetua said, “I am a Christian.” Hilarian sentenced those who confessed to being Christian to be killed by beasts. He sent them back to prison. “We joyfully went,” Perpetua wrote.

The night before they were to be given to the beasts Perpetua had another dream. She was a gladiator fighting with a great Egyptian. She triumphed over him, stomping his head with her feet. When she awoke, she wrote, “I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew that mine was the victory.”

Perpetua was to be destroyed by a mad cow. She was gorged. Her clothes were torn. “Stand fast in the faith,” she said to those suffering with her, “and love you all one another; and be not offended because of our passion.”

The impatient crowd demanded death for the Christians. Perpetua and the others were lined up and, one by one, put to death by the sword.

St. Perpetua: Martyr. Hero.
We'll meet in the resurrection.

Discussing the Account of Perpetua's Martyrdom

- First 300 years of Christianity it was illegal to be a Christian.
 - During Perpetua's life there was strong persecution in Carthage.
- Perpetua
 - Born 181 AD. Martyred March 7th, 203 AD. She was twenty-two years old.
 - Came from a noble and wealthy family.
 - Much of the account of her martyrdom was written by her own hand.
- What should we make of Perpetua's dreams? And the many other martyrs who reported such things?
 - Not biblical history. They don't come with the promises of Scripture.
 - Could some of the accounts be wrong? – Surely.
 - Did these dreams happen? – Maybe so.
 - We want to look at them and ask: "Are they helpful in strengthening our faith so that we might also imitate their faith?"
 - Romans 16:20 – If you want, write, "Remember St. Perpetua" next to it.
- The struggle of competing vocations.
 - Look back at her father's words to her. Look back at the proconsul's words to her.
 - Perpetua answered her father with a metaphor using a pitcher.
 - She is a Christian.
 - She was in quite the situation: Confess Christ vs. vocation of motherhood.
 - Matthew 10:37-39
 - In her confession, Perpetua also teaches us to bravely confess that we are Christians.



St. Agatha

Agatha was a young woman, fifteen years old, who took a vow of virginity. She committed herself to study of the Scriptures and prayer. This was during the persecution of Decius (250–53).

This was a great disappointment to Quintianus, who was determined to marry her. He was a judge, so he, knowing she was illegally a Christian, brought her into his court, offering her the option of marriage or torture.

She prayed, “Jesus Christ, Lord of all, You see my heart, You know my desires. Possess all that I am. I am Your sheep; make me worthy to overcome the devil.” Weeping and praying for courage, she confessed her faith.

Quintianus sentenced her to a month in a brothel where she was abused and assaulted. He called for her again, and when she still confessed her faith, she was tortured, stretched on the rack, torn with iron hooks, whipped, and burned with torches. She was sentenced to burning at the stake, but an earthquake saved her.

Agatha skipped joyfully to her execution, like she was going to a feast or a dance. She laughed and rejoiced.

- Agatha: Martyr. Hero. We'll meet in the resurrection. -

St. Agnes

Agnes was born in in 291 to a wealthy Christian family. She was a beautiful young girl. Many of the men of Rome sought her, but she refused, committed to prayer and study of the Scripture.

Rebuffed, these men reported her to the authorities as a Christian. She was dragged naked through the streets, forced to live in a brothel for a month, and then beheaded in a spectacle. She was twelve years old.

What follows is from eye-witness accounts:

“But maidens of that age are unable to bear even the angry looks of parents, and are wont to cry at the pricks of a needle as though they were wounds. She was fearless under the cruel hands of the executioners, she was unmoved by the heavy weight of the creaking chains, offering her whole body to the sword of the raging soldier, as yet ignorant of death, but ready for it [she was willing] to place her neck and both her hands in the iron bands, but no band could enclose such slender limbs. . .

. . . What threats the executioner used to make her fear him, what allurements to persuade her, how many desired that she would come to them in marriage! But she answered: “It would be an injury to my spouse to look on any one as likely to please me. He who chose me first for Himself shall receive me. Why are you delaying, executioner? Let this body perish which can be loved by eyes which I would not.” She stood, she prayed, she bent down her neck. You could see the executioner tremble, as though he himself had been condemned, and his right hand shake, his face grow pale, as he feared the peril of another, while the maiden feared not for her own.”

- Agnes: Martyr. Hero. We'll meet in the resurrection. -

Discussing the Accounts of Agatha's and Agnes' Martyrdoms

- These were two of Martin Luther's favorite martyrs.
 - In the 54 volumes of the American Edition of Luther's Works he mentioned Agatha 31 times and Agnes 41 times.
 - Luther understood their joyful confidence in the midst of suffering to be a work of the Holy Spirit, and the mark of a Christian.
- Agatha (Born in Sicily in 231)
 - The eyewitness reports state that she went off to prison *gladly*. She went smiling and laughing and skipping with joy *as if she had been invited to a wedding!*
 - Off she went to imprisonment and torture with happiness...how could that be?
 - That is the challenge the martyrs present to us.
 - Agatha and Agnes treasured the Word of God above all things.
 - Faith works a true change in the Christian heart.

“Faith is a divine work in us that transforms us and begets us anew from God, kills the Old Adam, makes us entirely different people in heart, spirit, mind, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Faith is a vital, deliberate trust in God's grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry toward God and all creatures.” (LW 35:370, Preface to Romans, 1522, 1546, quoted in the Formula of Concord, IV:10,12)

- Agnes (Born in Rome in 291 - Martyred on January 21, 304)
 - Joyfully and confidently extended her neck to the executioner.
 - Faith marries us to Christ and divorces us from this world.
 - Suffering helps us lift our eyes “to the life beyond,” to eternal life.
 - Such joyful dying is not easy.

