

PERPETUA

by David Snoke

List of characters:

PERPETUA

POMPONIUS, a church leader

SOLDIER

THE PROCONSUL

Perpetua's friend SOPHIA

Perpetua's FATHER

Perpetua's friend CONSOLA

GUARD

FELICITAS, a young woman

SATURAS, a young man

Extra crowd members and soldiers

Act I.

Scene 1.

A Spartan set, with a low table, designed to represent a lower-income Roman-empire home. The table is set with various meal items—bread, cheese, olives, grapes, a pitcher of water—for a “love feast” of the early Christian church. A group of Christians are seated or lying around the table. Included in this group is PERPETUA and her child. The child would be best played by a real, small child under two years old, but can be represented by a doll baby, as a babe in arms. Minor distractions by the child are not a problem, as the setting is meant to be a family church.

As the light rises, the group of Christians is singing a Psalm in simple, unison melody.

When they stop, POMPONIUS, the leader of the Christians, picks up a scroll of the Bible to read. The leader stumbles over both the Bible reading and the form prayers which follow, as he is not highly literate. He wipes his face frequently, both out of nervousness because of the fear of persecution and because he is not used to public speaking.

POMPONIUS: *(reading)* ¹Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no re...surr...ect...ion of the dead?

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:12-26

Next line. But if there is no re...surr...ect...ion— Oh, that's resurrection!— of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

Next line. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Another line. We are even found to be mis...re...pres...enting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise.... if it is true that the dead are not raised.

Next line. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.

New line. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is fu...tile and you are still in your sins.

Next line. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have per...ish...ed.

Another line. If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Next line. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Next line. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the re...surr... resurrection of the dead.

Wait, I lost my place. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead... no, that's not right. Here it is... New line. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Next line. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

Next. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying nevery rule and every auth...or...i...ty and power.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

The last enemy to be de-stroyed is death.

He sets down the scroll on the table, wiping his face.

POMPONIUS: That's enough for now. Now I should pray for the blessing.

He picks up the cheese.

POMPONIUS: *(reciting a memorized prayer)* ²Sanctify this brought-together milk, just as you also bring us together in your love. To you be glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in your Holy Church, now and forever, and throughout all the ages of the ages.

POMPONIUS: And now the olives... *(Another memorized prayer)* Let this fruit not leave your sweetness, this olive which is a symbol of your abundance, which you made to flow from the tree, for life to those who hope in you. To you be glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in your Holy Church, now and forever, and throughout all the ages of the ages.

POMPONIUS: And now the bread. Let us pray

Suddenly, a new CHRISTIAN rushes in.

CHRISTIAN: The soldiers are coming! Quick! Everyone out!

In a flurry, all the Christians at the table rush out in the opposite direction. It is every man for himself; no one stops to look behind.

PERPETUA is left behind as she gathers up her child. She starts for the exit, but then stops and looks back. The Bible scroll has been left lying prominently in the center of table. She is torn, starts to go back for it, then starting to leave, then finally goes back for it. she picks it up and is leaving when a Roman SOLDIER appears with two or three others. He shouts to stop her, and she freezes.

SOLDIER: Halt! *(a pause)* Don't move.

(Walking toward her.) What do you have there?

He looks at her and her child, somewhat sympathetically. She is visibly shaking and fearful.

What are you doing here, a young woman?

Here, give me that scroll. I know it's one of your magic scrolls.

She clutches it tightly, and closes her eyes.

SOLDIER: Look, I don't have anything against you, young woman. I'll tell you what. You give me that scroll, and you and your baby can run away.

Perpetua squeezes her eyes tighter, and clutches the scroll more tightly.

² prayers are from "The Tradition of the Apostles" (2nd century).

SOLDIER: You're just a woman, you don't know what they were doing. You're not responsible. Just give me that magic scroll, and run along.

She doesn't respond.

SOLDIER: Look, it's below my dignity to fight with a woman. Certainly not a woman with a babe in arms. But if you make me take that scroll from you, you'll be in trouble.

Perpetua opens her eyes and looks frantically around, trying to measure the distance to the door in her mind.

SOLDIER: *(approaching her)* Come on now, give me the...

Suddenly she darts toward the door. He is after her in a second and grabs her by the arm. The other soldiers are around her quickly. One pulls out a chain with which he binds her feet together.

SOLDIER: You shouldn't have done that. Now you'll have no end of trouble. It'll be a long time before you ever get those chains off. Now give me that baby and that scroll.

He puts his elbow around her neck, forcing her to release her grip on the baby and the scroll, which the other two soldiers take from her. She grabs at her neck and he releases her. She tries to grab at her child but he restrains her. If the child is a real child, it cries at this point.

PERPETUA *(panting)* Give... me... my... child.

SOLDIER: You want your child, do you? You should have thought of that before. We don't want any babies in our prison. Come on now, we'll find something to do with it, but you come with us!

The group marches her out the door as the lights dim.

Scene 2.

The table has been removed and in its place is a seat of judgment. The Roman PROCONSUL sits there. As the light rises he shouts "next!" and two soldiers bring in Perpetua in her chains. Her eyes are red from crying.

PROCONSUL: Leave her here. You can go.

The two soldiers leave. Perpetua remains standing before him as he sits.

PROCONSUL: *Looking at a scroll.* Another Christian, hmmm?... A woman. Perpetua, the name? *She nods.*

PROCONSUL: *(matter-of-factly, holding out his hand)* Okay, kneel and kiss my ring and say "Kaiser is Lord" and you can go.

She stares at him, wide-eyed.

PROCONSUL: Oh, come on, don't take all day. Look, I know how it goes. You do it right now without thinking about it, and then afterwards you can repent and tell your Christian friends you were so frightened you didn't know what you were doing, and they'll forgive you. Come on, no one's watching, it's just you and me. Do you think I have an interest in putting to death a young woman like you?

PERPETUA: *(slowly gaining her tongue)* If you want to let me go, why don't you just let me go?

PROCONSUL: A mere formality. No one else will see.

PERPETUA: But then, if no one will see us, then why not just say I did it, and let me go?

PROCONSUL: Good question. Well, you see, I'll know, and you'll know that you did it. But I won't tell anybody, I promise.

PERPETUA: *(biting her lip)* That's the problem. I'll know. I can't do it.

PROCONSUL: *(sighing)* Oh, no, one of those, is it? Look, let's save a lot of time. Let me tell you what happens to those who refuse to bow the knee to Kaiser. They are strung up in the Coliseum before thousands of people, usually naked, while people laugh and ogle. They are ripped into shreds by wild animals, slowly. And in the end, every knee bows to the name of Kaiser. You are forced down, the sacrifice is put in your hands, and you offer sacrifice whether you want to or not. Then maybe they put your eyes out and let you run around naked and blind for a little while. Then maybe they take off one leg and let you hop on one foot for a while... you get the idea?

Perpetua puts her face in her hands and weeps.

PROCONSUL: I'm not joking. You believe me, right? *(She nods, still with her face in her hands.)*

PROCONSUL: So I know you don't want that. Lots of your friends have been here, you just don't know it, and they have bowed the knee and walked back into your little gathering.

PERPETUA: Please, let me go free. I have a small child...

PROCONSUL: All the more reason for you to bow the knee.

PERPETUA: I don't understand, if you want to let me go free, and go back to my church, why can't you just say that I did it, even if I don't?

PROCONSUL: Humor me.

PERPETUA: No, I can't.

PROCONSUL: Look, I don't want to go over this all again. Do you understand? I'm not kidding. Bloody torture. Maybe in prison some prison guard decides to have some fun with you, knowing that you will soon be gone and dead so he's got no responsibility. Or maybe more than one soldier. Do I have to go over this with you? Don't you hear the reports? You become a plaything—entertainment for the masses, to see how much you can bear before they kill you off. Let me tell you, you Really Don't Want That!

PERPETUA: *(weeping)* No, I don't. I really don't.

PROCONSUL: *(gently)* Come on, little child. Come here. *(She approaches, weeping quietly.)* Kneel down by my side here... *(She kneels, and he puts his hand on her head, stroking it.)* There, there. I don't want you to get hurt. *(He moves his other hand to her lips.)* That's right little child, I want to be like a father to you... here, kiss my ring...

She has been mesmerized. Suddenly, she jumps up.

PERPETUA: Never!
She is now angry, and gaining strength.

PROCONSUL: *(Surprised)* Oh, come on, are you kidding? You know what I said about the torture, and the death, and the crowds, and the.. did I mention torture and death?

PERPETUA: *(In an outburst of energy)* Yes! I understand! But I will never say Kaiser is God! Never! Jesus is Lord!

PROCONSUL: *(Sighing again. A few seconds go by.)* Is that your final answer?

PERPETUA: Yes!

PROCONSUL: Your really, really, final answer?

PERPETUA: Yes!

PROCONSUL: Last time... your really, really, torture-me-and-string-me-up answer?

PERPETUA: *(suddenly feeling a moment of panic, and collapsing onto the floor.)* Please let me go. I don't understand... why don't you say that I bowed the knee and let me go. You said you pity me and want to let me go...

PROCONSUL: I'll tell you the answer to that if you give me your final word. Now which is it? This is your final chance—I don't have all day. Which is the real you? Are you the Perpetua who wants to go home to her baby and just be normal and say she's sorry to her god for bowing the knee to another god, but she'll be a good girl after this, or are you the Perpetua who wants to make a pointless stand for a powerless god and have really, really nasty things done to her so that she cries out in misery when it's too late?

Perpetua stands, and paces away, deep in thought. There is a long pause as she thinks and paces. The Proconsul watches her.

PERPETUA: *(slowly)* If you hadn't said "powerless god," you might have had me. You reminded me who my God is. I choose Jesus, the mighty one. Kaiser is not God.

PROCONSUL: *(whistling low)* Okay. Well, more red meat for the games. But now you're more interesting for me to talk to. You want to know why you have to die now, why I can't let you go?

She nods.

PROCONSUL: Because, you see, if you have the guts to stand there and tell me that, then you're too dangerous. If you bow the knee, then I know you're not dangerous. But you are dangerous, I see.

PERPETUA: I don't understand. I'm not a danger to anybody. I just want to live and be a mother and take care of my baby.

PROCONSUL: And suppose you have boy babies, and when they grow up you teach them to be just like you?

PERPETUA: What's wrong with that?

PROCONSUL: Do you think the Kaiser wants to have a race of people around who say that he is not God, that he is not the highest power on earth, and that your god stands as judge over him?

We can tolerate any number of gods, you see. Animal gods. Sex gods. Evil gods. But they're all very tolerant gods. They allow that on earth, Kaiser is god. None of them says he is the only god. None of them stands as judge over Kaiser. If someone stands and says he has a law higher than the law of Kaiser, then he—or she—is dangerous. If everyone said that, then what would happen to the government? To the idea of law itself?

PERPETUA: Do you really believe in those gods? Do you really believe that Kaiser is a god on earth?

PROCONSUL: (*musings*) Do I believe in them... what does that matter? ... Say, you are dangerous. What makes you think that you can ask questions of the Proconsul?

PERPETUA: I beg your pardon. But you know, now that I've decided, I don't have anything more to fear, do I?

PROCONSUL: Oh, no, I can make things a lot worse for you. Better be polite to me... Do you really believe in this god of yours?

PERPETUA: Yes... I guess I really do.

PROCONSUL: But you can't see him. You don't even make pictures of him.

PERPETUA: That's true. But I believe what the people in the church have told me.

PROCONSUL: Well, it's one thing to believe somebody, but do you believe them enough to die?

PERPETUA: (*Pausing for a moment*) Yes, I guess I do. If it wasn't true... then what is the point of living in a world with a bunch of fighting gods who aren't any better than us? Or even worse, no gods at all and just Rome and slaves, slaves and concubines and prostitutes, forever?

PROCONSUL: There, see, that's why people like you are dangerous. You go around telling other people these things.

PERPETUA: But when you kill us, people see that too, and they see the great love we have for Jesus.

PROCONSUL: Yes, that's true. They think two things: they respect you tremendously, and they think that is the last thing in the world they would like to have happen to themselves. So even if they do become Christians, they aren't dangerous. If we kill off the dangerous ones, that's all we need.

PERPETUA: But there seem to be more and more dangerous ones all the time.

PROCONSUL: (*Exasperated*) I refuse to debate this with a woman! Who are you, to stand there and say such things? You condemn yourself, by proving that you are more dangerous than I thought.

But you are interesting, after all.

(*Musing again, almost to himself*) You know, you're right. You know why we can't keep killing you off? In the last hundred years, there have been only six years when Rome has really tried to kill you off with any vigor. You know why? Because people don't have the stomach for it. To really get up a good persecution, we have to get the crowds in a frenzy, to love their gods so much that they are outraged that you don't love them. If the soldiers aren't outraged, they let them go, and if the judges aren't outraged, they let them off, and if the crowds aren't outraged, they don't stand for their death at the games. But who loves the gods that much?

I'm not outraged myself, but I know about the way government works. There aren't enough soldiers to enforce the law if the people don't fear the government. If people start to not fear the Kaiser above all, then the laws of the Kaiser will be in question, and then who can rule? ...No, I don't have any outrage, but I do care about civilization...it must go on.

(*To her, abruptly changing his tone, noticing her standing there unabashed*) Why do you not fear me? Haven't I told you enough about what lies ahead of you?

PERPETUA: (*quietly*) I do fear you.

PROCONSUL: (*Becoming businesslike again.*) You know, you will have another chance. At your trial. You can bend the knee and confess Kaiser as Lord then. But then it will be in public, not in private. You won't be able to slip home quietly then. But you will find nevertheless that the shame of changing your mind in public will have a remarkable attraction to you, when you get closer to the tortures that await you.

Perpetua is silent. The Proconsul looks at her, and sighs.

PROCONSUL: Your husband could ransom you, also. How much does he love you?

PERPETUA: (*hopelessly*) I don't know. We have never discussed it.

PROCONSUL: Do you want to be a martyr? Do you think that being killed will make you pleasing to your god so that he will take you out of Hades to his heaven? You don't look like that type.

PERPETUA: No, I really want to live.

PROCONSUL: I'm sorry for you, Perpetua. I think you made your decision in haste. I think you didn't want to be a martyr. But I also know now that you are an intelligent

women who will lead others astray. You stand here before me, and when you forget yourself, you debate me, the Proconsul. You must die. (*He claps his hands loudly.*)
Guards!

As they come in to lead her away, he speaks again.

PROCONSUL: You will be safe until you are condemned, in case your husband decides to ransom you.

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of “Gotta Serve Somebody” by Bob Dylan was played during scene change.)

Scene 3.

The seat of judgment has been removed. Perpetua is on the floor, in a prison. One guard stands nearby.

Perpetua's friend SOPHIA appears.

SOPHIA: Perpetua!

They hug and cry.

SOPHIA: Tell me it isn't true.

PERPETUA: Here I am.

SOPHIA: You're not going to go all the way?

PERPETUA: I have no choice.

SOPHIA: Didn't they offer you... a way out?

PERPETUA: None that I could take.

There is a slight pause. Her friend looks down at the ground.

SOPHIA: You know, I think the martyrs are great. But you have a young child. You should go home.

PERPETUA: I would love that. But the Lord has not sent his angels to open up these prison doors for me.

SOPHIA: But, didn't they give you a chance to, you know, sin and repent?

PERPETUA: Twice. Once when they came to the love feast. They offered to let me go if I gave them the Scripture, and the Proconsul offered to let me go if I would just say Kaiser is Lord.

SOPHIA: Why didn't you do it?

PERPETUA: Sophia, you are a Christian, aren't you? How could I deny Jesus my Lord?

SOPHIA: How can you ask me whether I am a Christian? I'm here with you, to stand with you! But you didn't say they asked you to deny the Lord. You said they asked you to hand over a Bible, and to say Kaiser is Lord.

PERPETUA: Isn't it the same thing?

SOPHIA: What do you mean? Do you see everything as up or down, black or white? You said they didn't ask you to deny Jesus as Lord.

PERPETUA: And to give up the Bible, isn't that denying him?

SOPHIA: Did you save the Bible?

PERPETUA: No, they took it from me.

SOPHIA: So all you did was throw away your life. For the sake of a piece of paper that you didn't save.

PERPETUA: (*crying*) Sophia! Please don't judge me! I need you!

SOPHIA: I'm sorry, I just want you to live! (*They embrace.*)

SOPHIA: (*After a pause while they hug.*) But don't you think there could be a way to get out? You could say what they want. I mean, you wouldn't really reject the Lord in your heart. You would just be saying words, for the sake of your child.

PERPETUA: The time for that is past, I think. He gave me a chance, they both gave me a chance, and I didn't take it.

SOPHIA: But there has been no trial yet!

PERPETUA: No. They will ask me again publicly at the trial.

SOPHIA: And...?

PERPETUA: And what? Shall I deny Jesus as Lord before the whole church?

SOPHIA: No one would condemn you. We all know you have a child you must take care of. And after all, isn't Kaiser a type of lord too? I mean, should we be so adamant about not saying those words? Kaiser is Lord on earth, and Jesus is Lord in heaven.

PERPETUA: Many others have already died to avoid saying those words. Kaiser doesn't mean he is just a type of lord, he means he is God.

SOPHIA: And many others have said those words and have repented and been restored to fellowship. For the sake of your child, who would refuse to forgive you?

PERPETUA: You cut me to the quick, Sophia! I want so much to agree with you! But I couldn't bring myself to do it!

SOPHIA: Perpetua! I love you! I want to save you! You know that.

A pause. Sophia paces.

SOPHIA: Have you decided to be a martyr? I know we all treat them as holy. But that is for virgins. You have responsibility now.

PERPETUA: Are you speaking out of concern for my child now, or your own desire to keep me near?

SOPHIA: Can you blame me if it is the second, as well as the first?

PERPETUA: I am glad that someone loves me. But I am not one of those young women, caught up in fervor, with heaven in their eyes. I don't really know why I am here. I was just there, at the love meal, and then, well, I was late getting out, and...and...

SOPHIA: *(Crying out, aggravated)* It is too terrible to think of you being torn apart at the games! I can't bear it!

PERPETUA: Stop! Stop! You don't encourage me, you weaken me!

SOPHIA: Maybe that is good! If you weaken, maybe you will change your mind and find a way to come back to me, and to your child!

Perpetua tries to run away, in anguish, but trips over the chain on her feet and falls. Sophia runs to help her.

PERPETUA: Here I am, a fool. I try to think of the heavens, and find myself crashing to the earth.

(Picking herself up.) Sophia, tell me, how is Pedia doing? She is with my father, right?

SOPHIA: *(looking away)* Well...

PERPETUA: Sophia! Tell me! She is okay, isn't she?

SOPHIA: If I tell you anything otherwise, you will accuse me of trying to manipulate you, to weaken you.

PERPETUA: Oh no! Sophia! Tell me the truth! I am in here because I believe in truth.

SOPHIA: *(slowly)* Well, she is okay right now. But I fear for her, Perpetua. She cries for you all the time, and she won't eat.

PERPETUA *(clutching her arms to her breast)* Oh no! Sophia! You must help her!

SOPHIA: I do. I go over there all the time. But she needs her mother.

A GUARD enters.

GUARD: Time!

SOPHIA: Let me tell you one thing I can do for you. I can bring Pedia to you. They won't allow her to stay, but if I bribe one of the guards they will let us bring her to you for a while.

PERPETUA: Thank you! Thank you, Sophia!

GUARD: Time!

SOPHIA leaves.

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of "Jeremiah" by Sarah Groves was played during scene change.)

Scene 4.

Lights arise on the same prison scene, with PERPETUA in chains.

Perpetua's FATHER appears. He is gray and bearded.

PERPETUA: Father!

They embrace.

FATHER: What have you done, my daughter?

PERPETUA: I have done nothing for you to be ashamed of, father.

FATHER: Is it true, what they say, that you will die because you are an atheist, who rejects the gods?

PERPETUA: Father, I have tried to explain to you before, that I believe in one God, who has come in the flesh—

FATHER: Don't talk to me of philosophy! Why should anyone die like a common thief for the sake of philosophy? Just say what they want you to say, and get out of here!

PERPETUA: It's not so simple, father. I cannot deny my Lord.

FATHER: I don't know why not. Deny what they want you to deny, and live! Do you hate life so much, and hate me so much? It is all empty words! What matters what words you say! You have a small child, and I in my old years cannot care for it. How can you curse me to outlive my own daughter, to die for mere words?

PERPETUA: They are words, father, but they are not empty words.

FATHER: What good are these words that lead to death?

PERPETUA: And... how is my child?

FATHER: It pines away for you, crying all day and night. What did you expect? And you still had not weaned it!

Perpetua sits on the floor, crying silently in her hands.

FATHER: You want pity and love from your father. But I will not give it. I refuse to see what words would make it good to abandon your daughter and bring shame to your father, in the circuses of the rabble.

PERPETUA: *(after a pause, slowly)* Father, I honor you. Do you remember how you raised me? You raised me to be honest and good.

FATHER: And not to be a criminal tossed into a foul prison like this!

PERPETUA: You taught me to be good. But when I looked around, I saw the governors, the judges of good and evil, themselves slaves to bribes and acting like common criminals. How do you define what is good, father?

FATHER: I am no lover of governors and soldiers. I stay out of their way, and they stay out of mine.

PERPETUA: And the gods, just like the governors. One contradicts another, and they fight each other.

FATHER: Like the governors, best give them what they want and they will leave you alone.

PERPETUA: But if there is no good god, and no good governor, then who shall tell me what is good?

FATHER: You know in your heart what is good. There is such a thing as common sense.

PERPETUA: That is the problem, father. My heart has heard the call of one who is truly good.

FATHER: It is the siren call of dreams and visions. Have more common sense than that.

PERPETUA: If there is no such Good One, then all of life is nothing dreams and empty visions. We are tossed about by the whims of gods and governors, going nowhere.

FATHER: You are an intelligent girl. Too intelligent for your own good.

PERPETUA: Let me tell you about the Gospel of Jesus one more time, father.

FATHER: Spare your trouble! You dishonor me and then want to tell me about your god.

PERPETUA: I honor you, father, who taught me to do good, by seeking to obey the One who is truly good.

FATHER: *(for the first time, softening slightly, looking at her)* I know that you mean it, Perpetua. You are a good girl. You are just... confused. You think too much, and you have now gotten yourself caught up in all this. Try to think straight, as I taught you once. You are throwing your life away over words.

PERPETUA: Father, I do think straight. Remember the logic games we used to play? Let me try one. Do you see this water pot here?

FATHER: *(unsure where she is heading)* Yes?

PERPETUA: Could it be called by another name?

FATHER: What are you driving at? Well, I suppose it could be called by another name.

PERPETUA: But if it were, that wouldn't make it something different, right?

FATHER: Of course not.

PERPETUA: So it would be pointless to call it by another name, right?

FATHER. Yes.

PERPETUA: So, too, it would be pointless to call me by another name. I am a Christian, and to call me otherwise would be as wrong as calling that pot by another name.

FATHER: *(bursting out)* Christian! Don't speak that word to me! Better to call yourself a slut, or a beggar! You will destroy all of us! None of us will ever be able to speak freely again if anything happens to you.

PERPETUA: You yourself said that a man yells when his logic fails.

FATHER: Don't speak my words for me, child! Words are tools to be used the right way on the right occasion! Take not a word to name your father's daughter so lightly!

PERPETUA: If I were a slut, or a beggar, it would do you more honor to call myself thus than to deny it! At least then I would also not be a liar.

The GUARD enters.

GUARD: Time!

FATHER: These guards! They want ten denarii for fifteen minutes alone! Well, there is no point in bribing them to stay longer now. I have said all I have to say.

PERPETUA: Father, please, don't stay angry with me.

FATHER: You beg to me not to be angry? Try sleeping at night with a wailing child who wants its mother! What do you stand for? Hating small children?

PERPETUA gives a wordless wail into her hands.

GUARD: Time!

Her FATHER leaves silently.

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of “Who Will Sing Me Lullabies” by Kate Rusby was played during scene change.)

Scene 5.

The same prison. Lights are a little dimmer, indicating night. Perpetua is lying on the floor, sleeping. Her friend CONSOLA enters.

CONSOLA: (*shaking Perpetua lightly*) Perpetua! Wake up! I'm sorry to come so late!

PERPETUA: (*dreamily, lethargically*) Where am I?

CONSOLA: Wake up, Perpetua! You are still in prison! It's me, Consola!

PERPETUA: (*wakening more, still dreamy*) Consola! How good to see you! Oh, how is my child Pedia? Have you seen her?

CONSOLA: She is healthy. Don't fret yourself about her.

PERPETUA: I've seen her twice now since I've been in here. Sophia is so good to bring her; I can't imagine what she must pay. My father and my husband won't speak to me.

CONSOLA: Perpetua, I'm here because I found out that your trial is tomorrow!

PERPETUA: (*Still dreamy*) Tomorrow?

CONSOLA: Let me pray for you, and strengthen you.

PERPETUA: You're not going to try to talk me into denying I am a Christian, like the others?

CONSOLA: No. The Lord will lead you to do what is best.

PERPETUA: What do you think is best?

CONSOLA: I don't know what I would do, if I were in your place. I... haven't been very bold in telling people I am a Christian.

PERPETUA: But what do you would be the best? If you just had to look at it objectively, and it wasn't you?

CONSOLA: I... I do respect the martyrs. But I never thought you would be a martyr. It has been so long since anyone has been martyred, it seems like they are ancient heroes, not something to really worry about.

PERPETUA: In other words, you think I should not bow the knee to Kaiser.

CONSOLA: Don't let the word of a foolish girl like me be your wisdom.

PERPETUA: *(She is still dreamy, distant, throughout this whole dialogue)* Consola, did you ever notice that the great plays are all either tragedies, in which the hero makes the wrong decision, or victories, in which the hero does the right thing and never looks back, or comedies, in which there is no hero at all?

CONSOLA: I...

PERPETUA: The heroes of the dramas never seem to have any second thoughts, no doubts, no wavering. Or if they do waver, they fall. Why are there no plays about someone who does waver, who isn't a strong hero, but who ends up doing the right thing anyway? Or where the hero isn't even sure what the right thing is, but somehow stumbles into doing what is right?

We make our victorious heroes statues, not real people. It is as if we think, those victorious heroes are different people from us. The tragic heroes are like us, we can relate to them—it is human to sin and compromise. But people who do the right thing must be some other type of person, not real, they never feel as I feel, they never struggle with doing what is right, as I do.

CONSOLA: The stories of the martyrs make them seem pretty heroic. I've never seen a play about a martyr, though. It would seem disrespectful to make entertainment of them.

PERPETUA: I thought martyrs were holy people, leaders of the church, saints. Not people like me... The Apostle Paul said that those who get married entangle themselves in the affairs of the world, and I am certainly entangled in my feelings.

What is the right thing, Consola? Is it to die? Are you really sure that that is the right thing?

CONSOLA: I can't say that to you. Only God can show it to you.

PERPETUA: That's the problem. I think he has.

CONSOLA: What do you mean?

PERPETUA: When all this started, I didn't think I was called to be one of those martyrs. But just now, while I was sleeping, I had a dream. A vision, just like they talk about in the stories.

CONSOLA: A real vision? Tell it to me!

PERPETUA: *(pausing, almost going into a trance, then distantly)* ³I saw a ladder of tremendous height made of bronze, reaching all the way to the heavens, but it was so narrow that only one person could climb up at a time. To the sides of the ladder were

³ This speech is taken verbatim from the Testimony of St. Perpetua (early 3rd century).

attached all sorts of metal weapons: there were swords, spears, hooks, daggers, and spikes; so that if anyone tried to climb up carelessly or without paying attention, he would be mangled and his flesh would adhere to the weapons.

At the foot of the ladder lay a dragon of enormous size, and it would attack those who tried to climb up and try to terrify them from doing so.

Slowly, as though he were afraid of me, the dragon stuck his head out from underneath the ladder. Then, using it as my first step, I trod on his head and went up.

Then I saw an immense garden, and in it a gray-haired man sat in shepherd's garb; tall he was, and milking sheep. And standing around him were many thousands of people clad in white garments. He raised his head, looked at me, and said: 'I am glad you have come, my child.'

He called me over to him and gave me, as it were, a mouthful of the milk he was drawing; and I took it into my cupped hands and consumed it. And all those who stood around said: 'Amen!' At the sound of this word I woke up, with the taste of something sweet still in my mouth.

That is why when I saw you, I was confused. I thought at first that you were part of that vision.

CONSOLA: (*awestruck and a little excited*) This is incredible. Just like one of the stories of the real martyrs of old... oh, I'm so sorry, Perpetua, I didn't mean to say that it is good for you... to..

PERPETUA: There's only one way to interpret this dream, right?

CONSOLA: Well, I'm not an interpreter of dreams, but it sounds.... it sounds...

PERPETUA: Heroic?

CONSOLA: Yes.

PERPETUA: Then I must suffer, and from now on I no longer have any hope in this life.

CONSOLA stares at her for a moment, awestruck, and then bows down to the ground and kisses the hem of her dress, as though she has just realized that she is in the presence of a saint.

PERPETUA: (*Shaking herself to reality*) What are you doing? Stop that! You know better than that! Shall I die for refusing to bow the knee to Kaiser, and then accept you bowing the knee to me?

CONSOLA: (*rising, slowly*) Yes, you're right. I'm sorry.

PERPETUA: Consola, promise me, if you want to make my days happy, that you will be just like you were in old times. Don't treat me any differently. I don't want to be worshipped, I want to have a friend with me in my last days. I'm not any different. Don't you be different. Let's forget all this, and think about those good times.

CONSOLA: Yes, I promise. Just do one thing for me.

PERPETUA: What?

CONSOLA: Promise me that if I bring a scroll, that you will write down all your thoughts and dreams, so that it may encourage others.

PERPETUA: So that you can have a heroic story to venerate?

CONSOLA: You are a part of history, whether you like or not. Would you rather have others write your history for you?

PERPETUA: You drive home to me more forcefully than anything so far that I am doomed. I can see people reading the story, and talking of poor Perpetua... (*shaking herself*) Oh, stop it!

I have one regret, Consola. I have not been baptized yet. I have only been a catechumen for two years. Do you think the church could make an exception, in my case? But how would they baptize me in prison?

CONSOLA: That gives me something to do, instead of just sitting around mourning your fate. Let me see what I can do. You must be baptized! It would not be fitting for you to go to heaven unbaptized!

PERPETUA: You're not going to try to talk me out of it, then, Consola?

CONSOLA: Tomorrow, there will be plenty of people who will try to talk you out of it. I pray you will be strong in the faith.

PERPETUA: Then you think it is the right thing?

CONSOLA: How can you ask that, after that vision?

PERPETUA: Nothing is ever so certain as you would like.

CONSOLA: Let us pray!

Lights dim as they kneel together.

ACT II.

Scene 1.

The judgment seat is back in the place where it was, and the PROCONSUL sits in it. This is not a private hearing, however, but a public trial, and the PROCONSUL is stiff and formal. There is a small altar on a table near him, with incense or candles which can be lit.

The front row of the audience is populated with actors who are part of the crowd come to see the trial.

PERPETUA is led out in her chains by the GUARD.

PROCONSUL: The next case is Perpetua, daughter of Samantus!

There is a general murmuring from the crowd.

PROCONSUL: Perpetua, you understand that your words and deeds at this time are on the record. You may not change the record after you have spoken.

PERPETUA: Yes, I understand.

PROCONSUL: Do you see this altar here? Are you ready to perform the sacrifice?

Suddenly, Perpetua's FATHER appears, with her baby in his arms. All eyes turn to him. The crowd is silent, and he is silent as he marches forward with the baby. The PROCONSUL waits until he reaches the front. He is not a strong figure, but rather a pathetic figure, evidencing sleepless nights and grief.

PROCONSUL: Who are you?

FATHER: I am her father.

PROCONSUL: What do you have to say?

FATHER: *(turning to Perpetua)* Perform the sacrifice—have pity on your baby!

Perpetua is speechless. She was not expecting this.

PROCONSUL: Have pity on your father's grey head; have pity on your child. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperors.

FATHER: Perpetua, what can I say to this child, if it lives? Your mother left you to follow a dream and a vision? What inheritance is that to leave to a child?

PERPETUA is silent.

PROCONSUL: You may speak. I would like to hear your answer.

There is another long pause as PERPETUA is silent. Finally, she speaks.

PERPETUA: I came prepared to speak of my faith. But you have stripped me of any of those words.

FATHER: Can you look her in the eyes?

PERPETUA: Could I look her in the eyes if I compromised? What inheritance would it be to her, to have a mother who would sell her soul to gain a short time more in this world?

FATHER: A short time for you, a long time for her.

PERPETUA: Father! Why not question them who condemn me! I cannot be a good mother to her, and also a perjurer!

FATHER: Look into her eyes and tell her that.

She is silent as she looks mournfully at the child. Her father draws nearer. As she reaches out to touch her child, he grabs her hand and pulls her from her place toward the altar.

FATHER:(*nearly in tears*) Now is not the time for lofty words or speeches. You have a duty to your child, perform it.

PERPETUA: (*Shaking herself to get free*) Father, stop!

They stand in tension, moving neither forward nor back. In the silence, the PROCONSUL speaks.

PROCONSUL: Old man, she must speak for herself. Perpetua, will you sacrifice?

PERPETUA: No, I will not.

FATHER: Pay no attention to her, she will in just a minute.

PROCONSUL: Perpetua, are you a Christian?

PERPETUA: Yes, I am.

FATHER: *(groaning)* Pay no attention. Perpetua, as your father, I command you to sacrifice. *(pulling her harder)*

PROCONSUL: Old man, I pity you, but the girl has spoken.

FATHER: No, she hasn't! She will mind me, just you wait and see!

PERPETUA: Father, stop! I am not a child!

PROCONSUL: Old man, you disturb my court. Let it be.

FATHER: *(Loudly, nearly shouting and partly groaning)* Perpetua, can you look into the eyes of this little one and tell me you have no pity? Have you so much pride?

PERPETUA: *(in tears)* Pride? I had never thought that it would be called pride!

PROCONSUL: Old man, you are creating a disturbance. I pity you, but I cannot have this in my court.

FATHER: *(ignoring him)* Perpetua, obey me!

PERPETUA: Please, father, please....

PROCONSUL: *(sharply)* Old man, desist at this minute or I will have you beaten!

FATHER: *(still ignoring him, shouting)* Come home with me this minute, young woman! You are a rude and insolent child who needs to learn to respect....

PROCONSUL: *(over top of him, to guards)* Remove this man at once!

A GUARD steps forward and raps her FATHER sharply with the flat of his sword. He slumps and lets go of her, still holding the child. Another guard holds Perpetua. The guard then kicks her father and beats him a few more times on the ground, as he cries out. Perpetua screams. There is a moment of silence as all parties breathe heavily.

PROCONSUL: This is the inheritance you leave. A motherless child and a mad father.

PERPETUA stands dazed.

PROCONSUL: *(to the guards)* Remove them.

The guards lift and escort her FATHER and baby out.

PROCONSUL: I now pass sentence. Perpetua, daughter of Samantus, the madman, you

are sentenced to be killed by wild beasts in the circus, with whatever dress and circumstances shall please the master of the circus. You shall stay in the prison without leave until that time. No ransom is allowed.

(to Perpetua) And no long speeches for you. That is all.

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of "They" by Jem was played during scene change.)

Scene 2.

Back in the prison. There are now two other people awaiting death with PERPETUA: a young girl, FELICITAS, who is eight months pregnant, and SATURAS, a young man. All are in chains. They are all silently praying.

The GUARD enters, bringing food. He is trembling, clearly afraid of them.

PERPETUA: *(looking up)* Are you okay? What are you afraid of?

GUARD: Please, don't mind me, I'll get out of your way right away.

SATURAS stands up to speak. His quick motion makes the GUARD jump.

SATURAS: Say, what news?

GUARD: I have bad news for two of you, and good news for one. Or perhaps two.

SATURAS: What do you mean?

GUARD: The circus is to be held in four days. You will be dressed in the robes of temple priests, with face paint. But the Proconsul has ruled that since this one here has not delivered her baby yet, she will be spared, since two shall not be put to death for the crime of one.

FELICITAS: What? What does that mean? What will happen to me, and my baby?

GUARD: Since it will be at least a month until your baby is born, you will have at least that much time. After that, there are no more circuses for a half a year. So you will be crucified with the common thieves, most likely.

FELICITAS: This is good news?

GUARD: Well, it gives you at least a month, and who knows? Maybe you can find a way to change your fate, perhaps a powerful spell...

FELICITAS: We told you, we don't perform spells.

SATURAS: What do you mean, dressed as priests? For this reason we are here, to not participate in the pagan rituals!

GUARD: I only know what they tell me. It is better than being naked.

PERPETUA: Is there any way to get them to change their minds? Almost anything would be better than having the face paints and robes of pagans.

GUARD: Will you pray to your god for me? I can tell that you have a powerful god.

PERPETUA: We would be happy to pray for you.

GUARD: I can tell them what you said.

He leaves them in silence.

SATURAS: This is not what I thought it would be like.

FELICITAS: (*wringing her hands*) I thought we would be together at the end. What will I do? To die by myself! What will I do? If you hadn't been here with me, Perpetua, I don't know if I would have been able to stand it!

SATURAS: You know, you hear the stories of the martyrs, and you sort of imagine what it would be like. I imagined walking boldly forward, hand in hand, in white robes, singing a Christian hymn, while the beasts watched us, and then suddenly dying in one blow when a leopard leaped at my throat. But now it seems we will walk out looking like fools.

PERPETUA: Did you want to be a martyr?

SATURAS: I can't say. I didn't plan to be a martyr. But in some ways, I think I always expected it.

PERPETUA: I never thought of it. I don't know why. I didn't make any plans for my baby. I just thought I would be a mother.

FELICITAS: (*emotionally*) Oh, please stop! Stop talking about it!

PERPETUA: (*quietly*) Felicitas, let's pray about it.

FELICITAS: I am so tired of praying.

PERPETUA: Instead of praying for God to set us free, let us pray that He will allow us to walk together to the end.

FELICITAS: But there are only four days to the circus! Would you pray that my child die with me? Your baby is safe!

There is an awkward pause.

FELICITAS: (*downcast, broken*) I'm sorry. I... guess I am like Saturas. I expected that we would walk nobly in, with our heads held high. I... didn't think it would happen so soon. To you, that is. Now I will be thrown out on the dung heap, a leftover. Maybe I should not have stood up to them, as a pregnant mother.

PERPETUA: It's not like you volunteered, at the time of your choosing.

FELICITAS: (*standing, angry*) Where is the rest of the church? Why of all people should it be us here, mothers with babes? Are there no other people who will stand beside us? Has everyone else perjured themselves?

SATURAS *coughs slightly*.

FELICITAS: Oh! I'm sorry, Saturas, I didn't mean you were a pregnant mother! I mean...

SATURAS: No, you are right. We are in an age where there are no heroes. We are relics of the past. The church has a deal with the government now. They are all embarrassed of us.

PERPETUA: Listen to you two! Are we here to put on a performance, to be killed in just a certain way, looking noble? And if the show doesn't go the way we planned, we are like actors at a play when no one came?

I'm not here because I wanted to carry on a noble tradition. I'm here because I couldn't say three little words, that "Kaiser is Lord." God might have forgiven me if I said those three little words. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. Because they wouldn't be true. And they still wouldn't be true even if everybody else in the church said them.

FELICITAS: Perpetua, you bring me back to sanity. Oh, what will I do when you're gone!

There is a short pause as they hug, then the GUARD brings in CONSOLA and POMPONIUS. The GUARD remains in the background.

PERPETUA, FELICITAS, and SATURAS: Consola! Pomponius! It is so good to see you!

CONSOLA: I told you that you gave me a task to keep me occupied.

POMPONIUS: (*nervous, as always, looking every now and then at the Guard*) Perpetua, I come with tidings that the church has approved that you may be baptized. Tonight.

PERPETUA: (*clapping her hands*) Praise the Lord, who hears the prayers of his servants!

POMPONIUS: I... didn't bring any of the Scriptures. Or the prayers. But it's still official.

PERPETUA: What do we do?

POMPONIUS: Well, basically I pour water over your head and pray for you.

PERPETUA: I am ready.

She stands stage center, looking serious. The FELICITAS, SATURAS, and CONSOLA form a tableau around her, looking at her. POMPONIUS looks around, awkwardly.

POMPONIUS: Um, do you have any water?

FELICITAS points to the water pot. POMPONIUS runs to get it. He looks in it to make sure it has water.

POMPONIUS: Is it living? You should only use living water, not old water.

He looks from face to face. They are facing the other way. Finally, he turns, questioning, to the GUARD, who nods silently.

POMPONIUS: Okay, I guess we have good water.

He shuffles over to the others in their tableau. He lifts the water pot over Perpetua's head. He has been awkward, nervous and comic, but now he becomes serious.

POMPONIUS: Perpetua, this is a serious thing. You have stood before the courts of Man and said that you are a Christian, and they have condemned you to death. But you now stand before the court of God, who can condemn you to hell. You may fear the circus lions which you will face soon, but fear God more. It is possible to go to the lions and not be a Christian at all, to give your body to be burned and to not have love. To love the fifteen minutes of acclaim from the crowd when you die but not be willing to give to God fifty years of repentance and good works and prayer done in secret. So now I will ask you a question, and if you have ever loved truth, give me the true answer.

Perpetua, are you a Christian?

PERPETUA: *(after just one second of pause)* Yes, I am.

She begins to recite the Apostles' Creed as the lights fade.

I believe in God the Father Almighty
Maker of Heaven and Earth.
And in Jesus Christ his only son our lord
Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary
Was crucified, died, and buried.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty
From whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Blackout

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of “Bread of Life” by Second Chapter of Acts slowly rose during Perpetua’s recitation of the Apostle’s Creed.)

Scene 3.

In the dark, before the scene, there is a scream from FELICITAS. In the dark, we hear running to and fro. Still in the dark, the following dialogue:

PERPETUA: Felicitas, what is it?

FELICITAS: It's the baby! It's coming now!

PERPETUA: Praise the Lord! You know what this means?

FELICITAS: Yes, I will die with you at the circus, if I don't die now! God has answered our prayers! *She screams in pain again.*

GUARD: You suffer so much now—what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts?

FELICITAS: What I am suffering now, I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him, and he will help me.

There is more running to and fro, and the sound of Felicitas moaning.

Lights rise to PERPETUA, FELICITAS, and SATURAS on stage. Felicitas is lying down, weakly. Perpetua is stroking her. Saturas paces.

The GUARD lets in the PROCONSUL, and then bows to the background obsequiously. The three bow their heads in humble deference. PERPETUA rises to her feet.

PROCONSUL: What's this I hear about you protesting about your clothes? Do you think people who defy the Kaiser get to throw their own parties?

PERPETUA: Sir, we hear we are to be dressed as priests and priestesses.

PROCONSUL: Yes, so what? Die one way or another! You can't say I didn't warn you!

SATURAS: Sir, you must understand, it is precisely to avoid such pagan rituals that we are here, condemned.

PROCONSUL: Oh I remember you. You're the boy so intent on being a heroic martyr.

SATURAS is abashed and falls silent.

FELICITAS: Sir, we plead with you...

PROCONSUL: You! Are you happy now? You get to be a martyr right away! Your baby is safe and you get to go to heaven!

FELICITAS is also abashed and starts to cry silently.

PROCONSUL: *(to Perpetua, who is standing silently)* What about you? Don't you have anything to say?

PERPETUA: *(after a pause, thinking hard)* It would seem that the only argument that would work with you would be what would contribute to good order in the society...

PROCONSUL: Precisely.

PERPETUA: *(thinking out loud)* So... it seems to me that dressing us in the robes of pagan priests and priestesses, you send a mixed message...

PROCONSUL: Yes? Continue.

PERPETUA: Do you want to convey that the priests are to be despised and slaughtered? If the people take the costumes as real, it would seem that they would conclude that. On the other hand, if they know that the costumes are false, then it would seem you defile the robes of your own temples by putting atheists such as we in them.

PROCONSUL: *(looking at her intently)* You know, it's a real shame. In another day, in another age... someone like you would not be wasted like this. In another day... you might have been respected... an advisor... even in the government.

PERPETUA: Is that the most honorable life you can imagine?

PROCONSUL: *(taken aback)* What else? I suppose you are like the others and think it is desirable to be a martyr?

PERPETUA: No, the most happy state I could imagine would be to stay with my baby and be able to say that I had never perjured myself, that my word was true.

PROCONSUL: You would never have been content with that.

PERPETUA: I can't say. I guess I'll never know.

PROCONSUL: *(To Guard)* Take these other two away.

The GUARD complies. Felicitas looks forlorn, and reaches her hands to Perpetua as she leaves.

FELICITAS: Perpetua! Til we meet again!

SATURAS: Courage! and stay steadfast!

They leave. The PROCONSUL paces for a second.

PROCONSUL: You know, I didn't have to come down here. I came down because I wanted to talk to you one last time.

PERPETUA: I am honored.

PROCONSUL: What if I told you right now that you could still escape all this? You are not like those... those children. They seemed to have a death wish, to want to die heroically. You are not dreaming of having tales told of you. Why die beside such fools?

PERPETUA: If you belittle the children of my Lord, you insult his Body of which I am a part and do no kindness to me, however well you may intend your words.

PROCONSUL: Exactly the type of thing I would expect you to say! Wonderful woman! ... I said before that what matters is whether you are dangerous. If I just knew that you shared—not our beliefs, but just... my concern for looking at the big picture, for not just the petty affairs that people concern themselves with, but the future of the nation... then I could trust you.

PERPETUA: You are saying that despite the public trial, in which I confessed myself a Christian, that you could free me?

PROCONSUL: It could be done quietly. First you could be transferred to my custody, your punishment deferred. Then after a while your sentence could be commuted, on the basis of some pretext. Yes, I have that much power. What matters is whether I could trust you.

PERPETUA: Transferred to your custody?

PROCONSUL: Does that surprise you? Your father is high born. Perpetua, I am not speaking hypothetically. Your husband has abandoned you. You are free. If you joined me by my side I could make you immune of all crimes. Such can I do.

PERPETUA: *(Looking downward)* Yet another temptation.

PROCONSUL: Think of it. You could change policy. Influence the council to be more tolerant toward your Christian brothers and sisters.

PERPETUA: And what would be involved in this? Sacrificing to Kaiser?

PROCONSUL: Are you afraid of public shame, going back on your word? No need for that. One can show allegiance to Kaiser in different ways. Such as embracing the Kaiser's representative.

PERPETUA: Selling myself in another way.

PROCONSUL: I wound your pride. I expected as much from you.

PERPETUA: Again pride! Can't anyone see it is just... not possible?

PROCONSUL: No, I don't see. I know your religion. Your god is a forgiving god. Your people all sin and repent, and are forgiven—even when they confess Kaiser is Lord. So if you refuse, what else can there be but a death-wish, which is not you, or pride? Don't get me wrong—I like pride! A true Roman is proud, not stooping and servile!

PERPETUA: Do Romans know nothing of simple truth? Once before, you said that if I compromised, you would know it, and I would know it. I would know it. That is what I cannot get past.

PROCONSUL: Have you never compromised?

PERPETUA: Yes, I have.

PROCONSUL: And you know that, now?

PERPETUA: Yes.

PROCONSUL: So what is different now? You know that; you know the other.

PERPETUA: (*turning aside, frustrated*) It is the knowing of the other that compels me to avoid that pain again.

PROCONSUL: (*after a reflective pause*) Would that Rome had a thousand women like you, as committed to virtue. I give up. Go, then, to your death. It is a waste.

PERPETUA: If you understood that my feelings are not unrelated to what I know about my God, you would be more curious about him. You see only Rome, your high calling, but I see a more permanent and higher kingdom.

PROCONSUL: Don't go all spiritual on me. Save it for your death speech. Rome will outlast your silly religion.

He gets up to go to the door and raps it once. The GUARD appears to open the door for him.

PROCONSUL: (*to the Guard*) It is enough. Leave her alone to consider her fate.

GUARD: And... about the request to be dressed differently?

Perpetua looks sharply at the Proconsul.

PROCONSUL: *(He pauses a second, looking at her. Then, waving his hand)* Ah! Let them dress as they wish!

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of “Orphans of God” by Mark Heard was played during scene change.)

Scene 4.

Lights come up on just Perpetua by herself, sleeping. CONSOLA enters.

CONSOLA: Perpetua, wake up!

PERPETUA sits up, sleepily.

PERPETUA: Consola! You are always waking me up out of my sleep!

CONSOLA: Where are the others?

PERPETUA: I don't know. They took them away two days ago, and I haven't seen them since.

CONSOLA: I don't know how long I can stay. How can I strengthen you? How are you doing? You know that—

PERPETUA: Stop! I asked you before to be nothing but my friend. Let's not talk of anything serious. I have prayed all I can pray, and thought all I can think.

CONSOLA: Anything you want.

PERPETUA: Do you remember how when we were young girls we used to go up to the hill and pick flowers in the summers?

CONSOLA: Yes, I remember.

PERPETUA: And we used to talk about who we would marry.

CONSOLA: Yes.

PERPETUA: Even at that time, I think God was calling me. The air, and the flowers, and the hills, so beautiful... I could not believe that a bunch of warring gods with bad digestion were behind it all.

In a way, I felt a desire to worship. But that sense of worship I could never turn toward the gods. I think even then I knew in my heart there must be another.

CONSOLA: "What they worship as unknown, we now proclaim to you."

PERPETUA: Is there not a part of us that wants to simply worship more than anything else?

CONSOLA: That reminds me. There is a new style of hymn going around, which some churches sing in worship. Two people, or two groups, sing the same song, but at different times. It sounds really good!

PERPETUA: What do you mean? That they sing it twice?

CONSOLA: Yes, but without waiting for the other person to stop. Like this: *(she sings)*

I will arise, so early in the morning
Rise to sing my savior's praises
Rise with joy in my heart to greet the Lord
Who gave me life
Everlasting life.

Now I keep singing the next part, but you sing the part that I just sang, at the same time.

I will arise
With joy
To greet the Lord who gave me life
Everlasting life.

Try it!

They work together trying to sing the round, stumbling and laughing as they make mistakes. They have become two girls focused on the "latest thing." Suddenly the GUARD appears. They are both surprised into silence. They had forgotten why they were there.

GUARD: It is time.

PERPETUA: Time for what?

GUARD: You go to the circus.

PERPETUA: Now?

GUARD: Now. I'm sorry.

PERPETUA and CONSOLA look at each other. There is no time left to say anything.

PERPETUA: Consola, just one thing. I kept my word. I wrote my thoughts on a scroll. It is over there.

They hug. PERPETUA is shown to the door by the GUARD. She exits, while he comes back to CONSOLA, who is still there, picking up the scroll.

CONSOLA: I'll just be a minute. I will take her things.

GUARD: Is that a magic scroll?

CONSOLA: No, it is a story she wrote. About herself. About her feelings and her dreams.

GUARD: She could write? Can you read?

CONSOLA: (*Perusing the scroll*) Yes. Better than our deacon.

GUARD: (*with genuine curiosity*) Read it to me.

CONSOLA: (*looking up at him quizzically*) This looks like it is her last vision.

She sits to read.

⁴“I dreamed that Pomponius came to the prison gates and began to knock violently. I went out and opened the gate for him. He was dressed in an unbelted white tunic, wearing elaborate sandals. And he said to me: ‘Perpetua, come; we are waiting for you.’

Then he took my hand and we began to walk through rough and broken country. At last we came to the amphitheatre out of breath, and he led me into the centre of the arena.

Then he told me: ‘Do not be afraid. I am here, struggling with you.’ Then he left.

I looked at the enormous crowd who watched in astonishment. I was surprised that no beasts were let loose on me; for I knew that I was condemned to die by the beasts. Then out came an Egyptian against me, of vicious appearance, together with his seconds, to fight with me. There also came up to me some handsome young men to be my seconds and assistants.

My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. Next there came forth a man of marvelous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.

And he asked for silence and said: ‘If this Egyptian defeats her he will slay her with the sword. But if she defeats him, she will receive this branch.’ Then he withdrew.

We drew close to one another and began to let our fists fly. My opponent tried to get hold of my feet, but I kept striking him in the face with the heels of my feet. Then I was raised

⁴ This speech is taken verbatim from the Testimony of St. Perpetua (early 3rd century).

up into the air and I began to pummel him, without touching the ground. Then he fell flat on his face and I stepped on his head.

The crowd began to shout and my assistants started to sing psalms. Then I walked up to the trainer and took the branch. He kissed me and said to me: ‘Peace be with you, my daughter!’ I began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life.

Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.”

They both pause in silence after this.

GUARD: Truly she was—I mean, is—a remarkable woman.

CONSOLA: Yes, she truly is. But she was also just a girl who told the truth.

GUARD: Can you... can you teach me more about this great power some time?

CONSOLA: *(A pause as she looks at him, thinking.)* Out of death, life. Yes, I can talk to you about it some time.

(When performed in Pittsburgh, part of “For All the Saints” by Indelible Grace was played during scene change.)

Scene 5.

As the lights rise there is a roar of a crowd. Several actors are planted in the audience, cheering the circus.

FELICITAS and PERPETUA come stumbling in from opposite sides, both with blood-stained robes. They meet stage center. FELICITAS sinks to her knees.

FELICITAS: (*panting*) So we can go hand in hand after all.

PERPETUA: And Saturas, too. He is already dead. A leopard caught him in the throat, as he foresaw.

FELICITAS: But we never did sing hymns...

PERPETUA: We will sing hymns soon enough...

FELICITAS: It may be the right thing to do, but it still hurts.

She slumps, and lies down to die. Perpetua leans over her.

PERPETUA: Oh, I so much wish I had some great wise thing to say right now. I have heard of the saints standing giving a great speed to the crowds, like the heroes of the tragedies. But now I have no words. Goodbye, Felicitas! My dear friend! I do believe it, after all, that God will take us to paradise!

She kisses Felicitas and lays her down gently, then stands up.

PERPETUA: (*to herself, almost dreamily*) I do believe it. What a strange and fleeting dream this life is...

(slowly turning to the crowd, noticing them, but still "disengaged" as if she can see heaven opening behind them) What do you want with me? Who are you?

A SOLDIER appears on stage, sword in hand. The CROWD cheers and yells for her death.

VOICE IN CROWD: Come on! Finish her off! Kill her!

PERPETUA: (*To the crowd, still detached, but visionary*) You want me to die? You want a fleeting entertainment? Don't you think of your own deaths?

CROWD: Shut her up! Kill her!

PERPETUA: (*Directly to audience/crowd*) You have come here for an entertainment tonight. You wanted to see something interesting to divert you from your empty life.

You run from one thing to the next, to be entertained, because you fear looking at the depth of eternity. Listen! God is calling you! Life is more than entertainment.

The SOLDIER comes up to her. She stands, limping slightly, facing him, looking him in the eye. A long pause goes by as they stare at each other. He seems unwilling to come near her, and his sword drops slowly. The crowd becomes angry.

CROWD: Come on! What's taking so long? Finish her off!

VOICE IN THE CROWD: If he doesn't kill her, then his life is forfeit!

She seems to notice this last comment, and has pity on him. She steps forward toward him. He takes a slight step backwards, defensively, as if parrying an enemy, and raises his sword. Slowly, as if painfully, she reaches out her hand to take hold of his sword, still looking him in the eye. At first he draws it back, then lets her take hold of it. She then slowly moves the sword tip to her neck. They stand for a moment like this. Then blackout.