

Heroes of the Faith #05: Jeanne d'Albret

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Mrs. Jeanne d'Albret, you see, some of you weren't sure what gender she belonged to. Now when I suggested speaking on Jeanne d'Albret I mentioned to Denis Johnson that her favorite psalm was Psalm 31. In fact, in many ways her life is a commentary, is an illumination of Psalm 31. And you will be dismayed to know that Denis' response to that was that all he could see in Psalms 31 that applied to Jeanne d'Albret was verse 12 which reads, "I have passed out of mind like one who is dead."

And, of course, poor Jeanne d'Albret has passed out of mind like one who is dead. Indeed, she is dead and that is part of the reason.

But I think, I hope I will be able to convince you tonight that she is well worth taking a look at as a real hero of the faith.

I regret personally that too often we don't have quite as much material as we would like as historians on some of the great women heroes of the faith, women who did in the history of the Church contribute so remarkably to the development and faithfulness of God's people. But often because, perhaps, at many ages of the Church they weren't writers or information about them was not preserved, it is more difficult to reconstruct some of their contributions.

But that wasn't true of Jeanne d'Albret because she was one of the most well known women of her day, one of the most well known people of her day. And I thought it would be good to focus on Jeanne d'Albret because also she was a lay person. Too often when we think of heroes of the faith we end up with a list of clergymen and I approve of clergymen, personally. But I think it is important to realize that non clergymen have also contributed greatly, substantially, crucially to the well being of the Church.

But most of all I think it is worthwhile pausing to consider the life of Jeanne d'Albret a little bit because I think her life is a remarkable model of faithfulness in difficulty, a remarkable model and inspiration, I hope, to us of tremendous faithfulness in difficulty.

Jeanne d'Albret, as you may have guessed, was a French woman. She was a French woman living in the 16th century, a contemporary of John Calvin. And the first thing that

strikes one as one looks up the life of Jeanne d'Albret is that she was uncommonly favored, uncommonly favored.

She was born in 1528 and in the things of this world was born into about as advantageous circumstances as possible. Her father was a king. That is always a help in life. Now he wasn't a very important king. He was King of Navarre which was a little kingdom down in the southwestern part of France right near the border between France and Spain, right there tucked in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains.

But even being the daughter of a little king gets you off to a remarkably good start in life. And her father was not only King of Navarre, but he was also one of the most important noblemen of the French kingdom. And, therefore, she was part of the central nobility, the great nobility of what was probably the greatest monarchy in Europe at the time, the Kingdom of France.

She was favored in having one of the most powerful men in Europe as her father. She was favored in having a most remarkable mother. Her mother, Marguerite of Angoulême, or Margaret of Navarre as she was also known, was one of the most cultured and educated women in Europe of the 16th century. A woman of remarkable educational accomplishment and a woman also of deep spiritual sensitivity. She was a woman who surrounded herself with some of the leading religious and spiritual figures of France in the early 16th century and she was a woman who in that circle, entertained people like Clement Marot who would later become one of the psalm writers in Calvin's Geneva and, indeed, for a brief time it appears that Calvin himself was in the circle of Margaret of Navarre and that group of spiritually concerned people who wanted to see some change, some improvement in the Church.

Although Margaret of Navarre herself never became a Protestant, she was concerned as Protestantism began to spread to protect Protestants from the dread Inquisition. And often when word came that a Protestant minister or preacher had been arrested, it was Margaret of Navarre who would see to the relief of that prisoner.

So how was it that Margaret of Navarre could rescue people from the hands of the Inquisition? It was because she was well connected. Not only was her husband a little king, but her brother was a very great king, because Margaret of Navarre was the sister of King Francis I of France.

And so Jeanne d'Albret was not only the daughter of a king, but she was the niece of what may well have been Europe's most powerful king at the time.

Jeanne d'Albret was favored in a sense by the fact that she was an only child of this illustrious couple and, therefore, grew up pampered and cared for in a remarkable extent. She was raised in a household where 20 servants were given basically to her care and support.

That may not sound like a lot to you, but it was a satisfactory number.

She showed herself from early years to be an intelligent, sensitive child and because her mother strongly believed that women as well as men ought to be well educated, she, too, was finely educated in the Renaissance learning of her day. She was remarkably favored in her life.

She had a difficult first marriage. We will talk about that in a minute, but her second marriage was a glorious marriage. She was married to Antoine de Bourbon, Duke of Vendôme, third prince of the blood. That means he was a cousin to the King of France.

She was, therefore, married into the very most powerful centers of French authority, Antoine de Bourbon.

That name Bourbon has been carried has been carried over into America, but it is not that carrying over of the Bourbon name that I want to concentrate on. The Bourbon name is more importantly remembered by historians because it was a dynasty of French kings. And it was Jeanne d'Albret who was the mother of the Bourbon dynasty of kings of France.

Jeanne d'Albret's son Henry became King of France and it was her great, great, great, great, great grandson, Louis XVI who died on the guillotine at the French Revolution.

She was a woman who in the things of this world was remarkably favored and well connected, at the very center of power in this world.

But her life showed that she was also remarkably, uncommonly favored by God. She lived in the years, she matured in the years when the Protestant Reformation began to spread in France. Because the French Reformation was ultimately a failure we sometimes tend to forget that there was a powerful Protestant movement in France in the 16th and 17th centuries. It is estimated that by 1562 there were three million Protestants in France out of a total population of 20 million.

Somebody here could probably give you the percentage. I am not very good at those sorts of things. But it was a significant percentage of the population, three million out of 20 million. And in those years Jeanne d'Albret had opportunity to hear the gospel being preached. And she like many French people found themselves very much attracted to the preaching of the gospel, that clergymen largely trained in Calvin's Geneva were carrying far and wide in France.

There were many appealing features. Perhaps the most appealing was simply the fact that these ministers were carrying the Word of God, were opening the Word of God and saying to people, "Let me show you what the Bible says about the way of salvation."

The Roman Church was forever trying to label the Protestant preachers as innovators, as men who were bringing some new sect before people's minds. And the Protestant preachers were eager to prove that wasn't true.

They said, “We are not teaching anything new. We are only teaching what the apostles taught. We are teaching the old gospel, the authentic gospel. And we can prove it to you by opening the Scriptures.”

They said, “Open the Scriptures and tell me, do you see anything there about priests in the new covenant? Anything about popes in the new covenant? Anything about altars or sacrifices? Anything about the veneration of Mary or saints? No, all of those things that stand at the heart of your practice and experience of the old religion is not in the Scripture. Those things are the innovations. Those things are the novelties that have been intruded into the life of the Church. We are preaching the old religion of the Scriptures.”

And many people were quite simply convinced by that argument that the Protestant preachers were preaching the Word of God in its purity and were drawn to it.

There were also features about the preaching of the Protestants that have particular appeal to women. One of the things that appealed particularly to women was Protestant insistence that women had equal rights in the Church, but for the elders in their administration of discipline. This was a somewhat new idea.

There was a famous case in France—not all that famous, just a case in France in the French Reformed Church at Lyons—where the elders were informed that a man was beating his wife. The elders went to see the man. They said, “It is not right that you should beat your wife.”

The man said, “What do you mean it is not right for me to beat my wife? She is my property. I will do as I please with her. It is none of your business.”

And the elders said, “Well, it is not Christian for you to beat your wife.”

And the man was tempted, I am sure to say, as many said in the 16th century, “There go those Calvinist elders again interfering in our private family matters. That Genevan discipline is worse than the Spanish Inquisition. They are forever interfering in things it is none of their business.”

But the elders said to the man, “Either you stop beating your wife or you will be excommunicated from the Church.”

The wife, you see, was given equality of justice in the eyes of the discipline of the Church by the elders and, you know, many women found that appealing in the preaching of the reformed.

Another thing that was appealing to women in the preaching of the reformed was the sense that family life was really important, that family life was a calling from God. Women really in the medieval Church had a sense that the only important thing that they could do for the Church were to become nuns and give themselves over to what was

called the religious life. And the Protestants came and said, “No, the religious life is lived in the home even more fully than it is in the convent. Being a wife and a mother, whatever else a woman might do, is of itself religiously important. It pleases God.”

And so women felt not necessarily that their roles were changed, but the importance of those roles, the status that they occupied was changed. They saw themselves as actually immediately and directly serving God by what they did.

And then women had a new role in worship. Women had almost no active role in worship in the medieval liturgy. What singing went on tended to be done by choirs in the church that were usually composed just of men. And the Protestants introduced congregational singing. And women were able to take part in that congregational singing.

Now we may take that so much for granted that it is hardly to notice or think much about it. But women found through the opportunity to be engaged in congregational singing a sense of being part of the worshipping community actively in a sense that they had never been before. And they found this exciting. They found it engaging. They found that this notion of the priesthood of all believers was really being manifested in their own experience in worship.

Indeed, of course, Protestants held that women were priests along with men in the priesthood of all believers. Women were one in the worshipping congregation there before God and that new sense of participation, that new sense of being priests before God in the worshipping community enabled them to have a new sense of attraction to this preaching of the gospel.

And all of those things, then, were part of the experience of Jeanne d'Albret as she began to hear the Word preached and be drawn to the Scripture and see the change of life that was being worked in the hearts of many.

Now we have been talking about how she was favored and she was favored even in the kind of spiritual advice and counsel she was able to get because she had several opportunities to meet personally and have long conversations with Theodore Beza, Calvin's right hand man in Geneva. And that was about as good as you could get in terms of spiritual nurturer and discipling in the 16th century.

And she from time to time received personal letters from Calvin himself encouraging her in her spiritual pilgrimage.

So she was favored in the sense that she lived at a time when the gospel was being preached with power and spreading dramatically and had opportunity to hear that gospel preached and had opportunity then to give her life to the Lord.

When she was about 32 years of age on Christmas day in 1560 she and her husband, Antoine de Bourbon announced their conversion to the Protestant cause, to the French

Reformed Church, to that movement known as the Huguenots in France, but most importantly, of course, her conversion to Jesus Christ and to his gospel.

In look back on it she was to observe, “Since 1560 everyone knows that it pleased God by his grace to rescue me from idolatry to which I had been too long given and to receive me into his Church.”

It is interesting how many testified a sense of having been idolatrous in the old Church, of having worshipped that which was not God and now coming to a new understanding of what God really was all about.

It made a tremendous difference in her life because up to till that point she had really lived for her family, for her children, for what would advance the family fortune, what would see that her children would succeed to even more power and wealth and influence that she had enjoyed. And now suddenly she finds that turned around. Now suddenly she finds that it is Jesus Christ who is the most important one in her life. And everything else, then, must take second place.

So one might be tempted to just pause at that point and say, “Well isn’t that great? Someone so uncommonly favored.”

But, you know, she was also uncommonly fettered.

See, mourning Martin and Calvin’s confidence doesn’t have anything on me. Uncommonly favored and uncommonly fettered.

You know, it is not easy to be royalty. You know, we tend to only think of the glamour and the grandeur. Let’s think of poor Princess Diana in England. She could never walk down to the drugstore and buy a pack of lifesavers.

The poor dear is trapped there at Buckingham palace, could hardly ever get out to go shopping. Well, maybe some kinds of shopping, but, you know, it is a life lived, sort of in a fish bowl. It is a life lived with all sorts of limitations. It is a life in which you are not really free to do whatever you want. And for a young woman in a royal family in the 16th century there were even more restrictions, because in the 16th century one of the ways that politics and diplomacy was conducted was through arranged marriages. And daughters of royal families were often used to cement political alliances by marriage. And that is what happened to Jeanne d’Albret.

Her father and her uncle decided that France needed closer alliance to some of the princes of Germany. And so they arranged a marriage between Jeanne d’Albret and the Duke of Cleves. And so Jeanne was married for the first time in 1541 when she was 12 years old to serve the intrerests of her father and of her uncle.

And the wedding was as splendid royal wedding in Germany and princes and archbishops were there to solemnize this great event and in walked little 12 year old Jeanne d’Albret.

And in the course of the wedding ceremony the archbishop came to the part that was required when he turned to the bride and said, “Do you freely enter into this marriage?”

And little Jeanne d'Albret turned to the archbishop and said, “I am forced by my father and uncle to enter this marriage, but I can protest it as against my will.”

That was prophetic of things to come. Jeanne d'Albret even at 12 years of age had a certain amount of steel in her. And ironically enough that protest, although largely ignored on the occasion when her uncles dynastic interests changed became the grounds for the annulment of that marriage.

When King Francis lost interest in the German alliance he said, “Let’s get little Jeanne back and we will end that marriage by remembering that she had protested entering that marriage in the first place.”

In 1548 when she was about 19 she then entered her second marriage and this one looked so good. This was the one Antoine de Bourbon. Antoine de Bourbon was not only one of the most noble men in the realm, good looking and rich, but also a great military leader already having established himself as a fine general and everything looked so promising in that first marriage.

But difficulties began to mount as the years went by. Six children were born to the union, but only two survived infancy, her son Henry and her daughter Catherine. More grieving to her was that it began to become obvious in the years that followed that her husband Antoine was a philanderer, betraying her with other women.

And then most crushing of all, only two years after their combined conversion to Protestantism which made Antoine de Bourbon really the secular leader of Protestantism in France, Antoine de Bourbon returned to the old church, betraying the Protestant cause.

It became obvious that he had only become a Protestant because he thought it might help him politically. And when the Roman Catholics made him a better offer, he returned to the old church. And he brought tremendous pressure to bear upon Jeanne at that time, wanting her also to return to the old church, threatening to take her children away from her, threatening to keep her from her kingdom. She had now become Queen of Navarre.

And in the face of all that pressure Jeanne d'Albret was able to say, “Rather than ever go to mass, if I held in my hand my kingdom and my son, I would rather than throw them into the sea than return to the old church.”

This was a woman who once had lived for her family and their advancement, had lived for her own ambitions and glory and now was willing to say, “Rather than betray Jesus Christ my Lord, I would rather lose it all, lose children, lose kingdom, lose all for I stand for Jesus Christ.”

Antoine de Bourbon shortly after his apostasy was killed on the field of battle and that, in one sense, gave Jeanne a greater liberty now to pursue her own life, to care for her children. But even in that greater realm of liberty she still found herself often hemmed in. She remained a pawn of politics. She was too important a person to be let just free. And she often found herself almost a prisoner in the royal palace in Paris under the watchful eye of Queen Catherine de Medici as Catherine rolled all of her strange ways through French politics, serving one side and then another in religious struggles.

Jean remained uncommonly fettered and in 1561 her health began to break down. The first signs of tuberculosis began to manifest themselves and from 1561 on she fought that ravaging disease seeing her health increasingly weaken.

But what is remarkable as we look about her life, as we look at her life, is her uncommon faithfulness in the midst of it all. She was a faithful sovereign to her subjects in Navarre, providing them with fair taxes and fair administration beyond what they had known before.

And she was a faithful Christian in every way that she could. Her faithfulness to the cause of Jesus Christ and to the advancement of his gospel was remarkable.

She said, “You know, it is not always easy to live as a Christian.”

In a letter to Queen Elizabeth near the end of her life she wrote, “Events which order the destinies of great personages are usually so beset with difficulties that it is impossible to divine their conclusions.”

It is hard to know how life is going to come out. It was hard for her, but she was faithful in what the opportunities that the Lord gave her.

She was faithful there in Paris even though she was at times almost a prisoner in the royal palace. She insisted that as a queen she had a right to her own chaplain and saw to it that some of the most effective preachers in France were there in the royal palace with her. And whenever she could she would invite anybody available in the palace in to hear the preaching of the gospel.

At one point she was so successful that she even got Queen Catherine and the king to come and to listen to the protestant preaching. And at another time when Catherine would turn against the Protestants very militantly, she would say to Jeanne, “You keep those preachers in your own apartment. I don’t want them wandering though the palace and corrupting everybody.”

And then Jeanne d'Albret would take her preachers back to her apartment and open the door and put the preachers there by the door and have them preach at the top of their voices so at least down the corridors the word of the gospel could drift.

She supported the cause, as the French called it, the cause of the Church under the cross.

That is what the Protestants in the 16th century called their churches when they were in circumstances of persecution, churches under the cross. And she did all she could to support that great cause.

In old territories in Navarre she advanced the Reformation as far and as fast as she possibly could.

Calvin wrote to her once and said, “Now that the government is in your hands, God will test your zeal and fidelity. You now have an obligation to purge your lands of idolatry by taking into consideration the difficulties which can hold you back, the fears and doubts which can sap courage. And I do not doubt that your advisors, if they look to this world, will try to stop you. I know the arguments advanced to prove that princes should not force their subjects to lead a Christian life, but all kingdoms which do not serve that of Jesus Christ are ruined. So judge for yourself. I do not say that all can be done in a day.”

And so Calvin encouraged her and she was faithful. She followed his advice. She purified the churches of images. She sent Genevan ministers to preach and organize consistories, to discipline the people. She established a seminary of the teaching of ministers. She realized that seminaries are absolutely crucial for advance of the gospel.

Was that subtle, Denis?

And she made remarkable progress in advancing the cause of the gospel there in her kingdom of Navarre.

One of Calvin’s close associates wrote to him only a few months after the letter that he had written to Jeanne d’Albret with advice and Francis Hokeman wrote to Calvin, “The Queen of Navarre has banished all idolatry from her domain and sets an example of virtue with incredible firmness and courage.”

She was tough as nails. And she worked hard to advance the gospel in her own kingdom.

There was a very real threat to her in this work. For the old Kingdom of Navarre, you remember, was nestled right on the border with Spain. And at this time Spain was ruled by King Philip II who was styled His Most Catholic Majesty. King Philip II was the one who engaged in the war in the Netherlands to suppress Protestantism. And at one point he said, “I would rather see the Netherlands utterly destroyed than heretics tolerated there.”

He was as zealous and militant a Roman Catholic as the 16th century produced. And he was appalled to think that there was a heretic kingdom there on his own border. And he devoted himself to try to think how he might end this.

First he thought he might get Jeanne to marry one of his sons and neutralize her that way. But she turned him down, wasn’t interested in such a marriage. Another point he thought of kidnapping her and carrying her off to prison. He thought of sending assassins to

destroy her. He did ultimately send assassins to the Netherlands who assassinated William of Orange, the leader of the revolt against Spain there. He was a ruthless man in the pursuit of the cause that he served.

He wrote at one point after abandoning hope of marrying Jeanne to his son, Philip of Spain wrote, "This is quite too much of a woman to have as a daughter-in-law. I would much prefer to destroy her and treat her as such an evil woman deserves."

Jeanne lived in real danger of her life for pursuing the gospel in her own realm. But she expressed her trust in God. She wrote, "Although I am just a little princess, God has given me the government of this country so that I may rule it according to his gospel and teach it his laws. I rely on God who is more powerful than the King of Spain."

That was a very courageous statement because the King of Spain may well have been one of the most powerful men in Europe with a vast army. But she trusted God. She said, "I do my duty. I will remain faithful. I will do what I know God wants me to do and then I will leave my faith, my future, my circumstances to God."

She was uncommonly faithful.

She could be kind of tough in her faithfulness. She had a reputation as such amongst her enemies as being too aggressive, too pushy, to quarrelsome.

One of her enemies once wrote of her, "She spoke again in the dry impertinent tone which she alone can command."

But facing what she faced, as I said before, she needed a little steel in her. She was a tremendously generous woman with the cause, a wealthy woman to be sure, but sacrificial in her support. She founded two seminaries for the training... I keep coming back to that, don't I? She founded two seminaries of the training of clergy. She provided scholarships for ministerial students. She gave gifts and travel expenses to ministers as they traveled around France preaching. She paid for the printing of an edition of the New Testament in French and when war broke out between Protestant and Catholic in France, she mortgaged her own jewels in order to help finance the Protestant cause.

She was sacrificial in her giving for the cause.

And when the second war of religion in France broke out centering around the city of La Rochelle which was sort of the Protestant capital in France, a port city, she went there to help provide some leadership in the resistance against the Roman Catholic armies.

The city of La Rochelle, if any of you saw the movie *The Four Musketeers* a few years back, was the city where that battle was fought, Protestant against Catholic.

But she went there to La Rochelle because she wanted to help the cause. And she showed the breadth of her abilities and her interests. She was there almost three years. And in

that time she wrote propaganda for the cause, wrote defenses of the Protestant cause that were circulated throughout France. She helped in the administration of the city. She helped supervise the increasing of the fortifications of the walls. She went outside the city walls to see to the fortifications once was almost captured by the enemy there outside the walls.

When one of the leaders of the French troops was killed in battle, she rushed to the front to encourage and strengthen the troops and rally them to continue the resistance.

When one of the great captains was wounded in a battle and was brought back to the city the doctors looked at him and said that his arm was shattered and had to be amputated. And that great captain [?] was fearful, didn't want his arm amputated. And Jeanne d'Albret said, "I will hold the other hand while they do the surgery."

She was there nursing sick when they were needed in general. She was there when the cause needed her at whatever cost to her. She was faithful.

And yet her life from a worldly point of view would have to be called a failure. She died June 9th, 1572 at the age of 44 from tuberculosis. Her son became an apostate, returned to the Roman Church making that famous comment, "Paris is worth a mass."

Her daughter remained faithful, but within months of her death a horrible blow was struck against the whole French Reformed Church when in August of 1572 a secret plot was hatched against the leadership of the Protestant movement and in a single week beginning on Saint Bartholomew's Day, the cream of the Protestant leadership in France was slaughtered. Estimate ranges up to around 50,000 Protestants massacred in a single week by the Roman Catholic forces in France. And, in a sense, the French Reformed Church never really recovered from that loss of leadership, that loss of wisdom, that loss of strength.

For a time Protestants came to be tolerated in France thanks to her son when he became king, but towards the end of the 17th century when Louis XIV was king in France that toleration was removed and Protestants were, once again, persecuted and hounded out of France.

Some argue, some historians argue that that loss of French Protestantism is what almost ensured the coming of the French Revolution, because many of the French Protestants were the heart of the French middle class. And with the driving out of those French Protestant artisans who were the heart of the middle class, the French economy was so severely damaged it never really recovered. It was left as a country with a very wealthy group at the top and a large relatively poor peasant class below, setting up the conditions that led to the violent revolution at the end of the 18th century.

And so, in a sense, her life, her mission, was not a success. And yet she would say to us her calling for God was not to be a success, but was to be faithful. Her calling from God

was to recognize that one can't put one's trust in the events and circumstances of this life, but one must recognize that God alone is reliable and his purposes alone are right.

Look with me just for a moment at this Psalm 31, how it speaks of her experiences. Look, for example, at verse 11.

As Jeanne d'Albret lay dying one of the Scriptures she asked read to her was this Psalm 31. And how much as she looked back over her life must she have identified with the concerns of the psalmist.

Psalm 31 verse 11.

"I am the scorn of all my adversaries, a horror to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances. Those who see me in the streets flee from me."

Jeanne d'Albret had lived that in her life.

Or, verse 13.

"Yeah, I hear the whispering of many. Terror on every side as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life."

Or verse six.

"Thou hatest those who pay regards to vain idols, but I trust in the Lord."

She felt in her own life how she had experienced these verses.

[?] the refuge of God, verse three.

"Yea, thou art my rock and my fortress. For thy name's sake lead and guide me."

Or verse five which our Lord himself used on the cross.

"Into thy hands I commit my spirit. Thou hast redeemed me, oh Lord, faithful God."

It was God who was her refuge.

She identified with those words of verse 22.

"I said in my alarm, I am driven far from thy sight, but thou didst hear my supplications when I cried to thee for help."

And, perhaps, most importantly of all, the words that we find in verses 14 and 15.

"But I trust in thee, oh Lord, I say thou art my God. My times are in thy hands."

What a glorious concession that was of the psalmist and how glorious at testimony Jeanne d'Albret's own life was to that truth. Our times are in God's hands.

How wonderful it is when we can live for him and trust him with our times and with our life and with our circumstances.

And Jeanne d'Albret as one of the heroines of the French Reformed Church lived that way.

The French Reformed Church, you know, had a symbol, had a kind of emblem. If they had printed stationery they would have put it on their stationery, it was the emblem of a burning bush, the burning bush that Moses had seen. And accompanying that emblem was a slogan. [?] And yet not consumed. And that was the confession of the Church and that was the confession of Jeanne's life. In the midst of flames, in the midst of difficulty and persecution, and yet not consumed, because she had a faithful God.

Let's pray together.

Oh Lord our God, we pray that we might be people who trust you, who trust that our times are in your hands. Help us, oh Lord, to face every difficulty and every opportunity looking to you and to your Word and to your will and ways that we might be found faithful so that whether our labors meet with success or failure in the eyes of this world we may have lived our lives with you as our lot and fortress. Bless us with that kind of faithfulness we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.