



## Slavery, St. Peter's, Absalom Jones, and the Journey To Freedom

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan*

*The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany.*

*The Feast of Absalom Jones ~ February 17, 2019*

### Jeremiah 17:5-10

Thus says the Lord: "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings."

### Psalm 1

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| 1 | Happy are they<br>who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *<br>nor lingered in the way of sinners,<br>nor sat in the seats of the scornful! |   | everything they do shall prosper.   |
| 2 | Their delight is in the law of the Holy One, *<br>and they meditate on that law day and night.  | 4 | It is not so with the wicked; *<br>they are like chaff which the wind blows away.   |
| 3 | They are like trees planted by streams of water,<br>bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not<br>wither;                                   | 5 | Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright<br>when judgment comes, *<br>nor the sinner in the council of the righteous; |
|   |   | 6 | For the Holy One knows the way of the righteous, *<br>but the way of the wicked is doomed.                                |

### 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

### Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles, and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them. Then he looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

In the early days of each new year, I always find myself a bit startled at the seemingly sudden arrival of the Feast of Absalom Jones, one of our Episcopal saints.

Absalom Jones, if you don't already know, was the very first Black person to be ordained to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. He was also the founder of the first Black Episcopal Church: the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, located right here in Philadelphia.

Now, since most Episcopal parishes across the nation do not observe the Feast of Absalom Jones, perhaps it's excusable that it always seems to fall off of my calendrical radar ...or perhaps, it's really not. Because I think, if I'm honest, a part of me wouldn't mind this feast passing us by. A part of me wouldn't mind us forgetting to observe it. A part of me is a bit frightened to fully engage with Absalom's story--scared I'll get it all wrong...or perhaps, scared that I'll get it right.

Because it's quite difficult, you see. It's difficult to figure out how best to tell the story of Absalom Jones. Difficult to figure out how to tell the story of Absalom Jones, here in this particular church. Because this church...this church was one of the locations of Absalom's captivity. You see: before Absalom became a priest, Absalom was first a slave. Absalom was a slave owned by a member of St. Peter's. Absalom was a slave, owned by a member of St. Peter's, who refused to grant him freedom until he was 38 years old, just two years older than me.

So telling the story of Absalom Jones necessarily means telling a story about slavery and also a story about race: a story that should leave us discomfited by our own history and by the sanitized ways that it has so often been written and told.

So let me tell you the story, as best as I can, borrowing from many sources: in particular an excellent essay by Tim Stafford, the current Rector of Christ Church.

Absalom was born into slavery on a farm in Sussex, Delaware. Absalom's owner, Benjamin Wynkoop eventually decided to leave the farm and become a merchant in Philadelphia. Before leaving Delaware, Wynkoop downsized, selling Absalom's mother and six siblings. He then brought the 16-year-old Absalom as his slave to Philadelphia in 1762.

*I wonder. I wonder how Absalom felt when Wynkoop sold his family? How he made sense of losing his mother and siblings? I wonder who they were sold to and whether he ever saw them again? I wonder how Absalom coped with the sadness and the rage he must have felt in the face of this loss?*

After arriving in Philadelphia, Benjamin Wynkoop began attending the newly constructed St. Peter's, which was built because Christ Church had run out of room. At that time, Christ Church and St. Peter's were one parish church, worshipping in two congregations.

Well, Wynkoop's new store in Philadelphia was very successful, and how could it not be? His slave, Absalom, labored from dawn to dusk...often until midnight, according to some accounts. And not only was Wynkoop's store run by slaves, it also sold the fruits of slavery: rum, molasses, coffee, chocolate, pepper, and more. Slavery was big business in Philadelphia, you see. At the time of Absalom's arrival, of the approximately fifteen hundred Black Philadelphians, all but about 100 were enslaved. <sup>i</sup>

While he labored long hours in Wynkoop's store, Absalom also did, for a time, attend a Quaker-run night school for Blacks, which would prove enormously beneficial to his future endeavors.

Eventually, Absalom married another slave, Mary, who was owned by Wynkoop's neighbor and fellow St. Peter's parishioner, Sarah King. Following their marriage, Absalom petitioned Sarah King to allow him to buy Mary's freedom, so that any children they might have would be free. King priced Mary's freedom at 40 pounds.

Absalom succeeded in raising this money, primarily through gifts and loans from the Quaker community. Absalom purchased Mary's freedom in 1770. But Absalom remained a slave. <sup>ii</sup>

*I wonder. I wonder how it felt at home that first night, the night after Mary was finally freed from slavery? Any joy Mary and Absalom felt must have been coupled with grief and frustration over Absalom's continued enslavement. Their spirits must have cried out: "When will it end, Lord, when will it end?"*

In 1788, 8 years after buying Mary's freedom, Absalom asked Benjamin Wynkoop to allow him to purchase his own freedom. Absalom and Mary had finally paid off the debts that they incurred in buying her freedom. They had also saved sufficient funds to be prepared to purchase both Absalom's freedom and a home for themselves.

Wynkoop denied Absalom's first request for freedom. With the money they had saved, hoping to buy Absalom's freedom Absalom and Mary were still able to buy a house.

In the ensuing years, Absalom continued to petition Wynkoop to allow him to buy his freedom, but Wynkoop refused, again and again.

There was a particular urgency about securing Absalom's freedom because as long as he remained a slave, Wynkoop could, at any time, take Mary and Absalom's property and money. Indeed, they lived in this precarious state for many years.

In 1784, Wynkoop finally...finally relented, granting Absalom freedom fourteen long years after Mary had been freed.

Upon being granted his freedom, Absalom took the last names Jones for himself. He was finally, finally a free man—and he had become Absalom Jones.<sup>iii</sup>

*I wonder. I wonder if it was a day of rejoicing? I wonder what Absalom did on that momentous day on which he was freed? Did he, and Mary, and their friends celebrate in some way? Or did he simply collapse in a heap of relief and exhaustion? Something so long awaited had finally come to pass. How did it feel to finally be free? I wonder, too, about what happened next, in the days and weeks after he was freed? I wonder, for instance, about Absalom's last Sunday at St. Peter's. Presumably, Absalom had at least sometimes attended church with Benjamin Wynkoop.*

*But I wonder: Did Absalom ever return to St. Peter's after he was freed, prior to his ordination as a deacon here 11 years later? Did anyone notice or comment on his absence? Would Absalom's freedom ever have been spoken of publicly in this place? Or rather, was it a topic that was avoided in polite company, where differing perspectives on abolition were likely present?*

*I'm guessing there was most likely no goodbye. No fare-thee-well. No good luck and godspeed. Absalom probably just never returned. His freedom leaving a great silence in its wake. There was no room for Absalom's freedom at St. Peter's.*

Well, after being freed, Absalom Jones went on to worship at St. George's Methodist Church, located on 4th Street, near Vine. Richard Allen, Absalom's friend and a fellow former slave, was one of the regular preachers at St. George's. And largely because of Allen's excellent preaching, the Black population of St. George's was growing rapidly. One Sunday in 1792, white elders approached a group of Black congregants and told them to move up to the balcony, just as the worship service was beginning.

The Black congregants stayed where they were. Richard Allen recounts what happened next:

“We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and loud talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees having hold of Absalom Jones, pulling him off his knees, and saying, ‘You must get up, you must not kneel here.’ Mr. Jones replied, ‘Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up, and trouble you no more.’”<sup>iv</sup>

Well, the trustees continued pulling others up off their knees. And by the time the prayers were finished, the entire black population of St. George's, including Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, had walked out in protest.

Soon after this walkout, the Free African Society, which Absalom Jones and Richard Allen had founded, decided to begin work on building a new church for the exiled Black members of St. George's. It was called the African Church of Philadelphia and was located on 5th Street between Locust and Walnut. The members of the new church voted to affiliate with the Episcopal Church, and they asked Absalom to be their pastor.

Just few years later, Bishop William White would ordain Absalom, and the African Church of Philadelphia was be admitted to the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania as the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas.

Concurrently, Absalom's friend, Richard Allen, who wanted to remain Methodist, founded Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. They are still our neighbors, at 6th and Lombard.

Well, hearing all of this, you might find it strange that I've not elaborated further upon Absalom's success and accomplishments as a free man, and especially as the priest who led the rapid growth of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. This success, of course, is a vitally important part of the story.

But in so many of the tellings of Absalom's story that I've heard and read, there seems to be an attempt to move a bit too quickly beyond his enslavement.

Between the lines, I sense that many writers have wanted to imagine that being a slave in Philadelphia somehow just wasn't quite as bad as being a slave on a southern plantation. Indeed, we know from the historical record that Absalom continued working for Benjamin Wynkoop after he was freed, which has led many tellers of Absalom's story to the apparent conclusion that maybe northern slavery was somehow less pernicious and despicable.

Absalom Jones ended up a successful leader in the Black community, so why dwell on whatever might have happened before that?

Well, in part, because slavery had an incredible impact on the psyche, regardless of how particular forms of labor and particular forms of abuse impacted the body. Furthermore, because Absalom may never have been freed if he hadn't been able to convince Wynkoop. Indeed, "Pennsylvania passed its Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery in 1780. But this Act offered no immediate emancipation. Children born to slaves after 1780 would be enslaved until their 28th birthdays. Anyone enslaved before 1780 would remain a slave until death, unless their masters voluntarily freed them."<sup>v</sup>

I think it's incredibly important to remember, again and again, that Absalom spent the first 38 years of his life as a slave, owned by a member of this church, before it was possible for him to become the Episcopal church's first black priest.

Furthermore, although Absalom was ordained a deacon shortly after the The African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas was admitted to the Diocese of Pennsylvania, Absalom was not ordained a priest until 7 years later, quite a long time, on my reckoning, and perhaps indicative of ongoing racial inequities.

It's also important to remember that Absalom Jones founded the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas because of the inherent racism of most white churches. He founded St. Thomas in order to "witness to God's love amid a world of pain," in the strong words of our sequence hymn.<sup>vi</sup> In his own words, Absalom founded St. Thomas "to encourage [his fellow Blacks] to arise out of the dust and shake ourselves, and throw off that servile fear, that the habit of oppression and bondage trained us up in."<sup>vii</sup>

*To throw off that servile fear, that the habit of oppression and bondage trained us up in.*

Absalom founded St. Thomas to work for the liberation of his people. Liberation from the oppression of white society and a white church complicit with slavery. Liberation from a God used to justify the bondage of African peoples.

It never ceases to amaze me that enslaved people could still hear the Gospel, even when their masters had perverted it almost beyond recognition. Somehow, the Beatitudes could miraculously still be heard beneath the din of white supremacy, conferring dignity to those who had ears to hear.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven."

Strong words for weary souls. Strong words to liberate the psyches of the oppressed.

Thanks be to God that Absalom Jones could hear them, even as so many of our slave-owning forebears might have preferred he not. For those who have ears to hear, they are words of life; stronger even than death.

May we, too, hear them. Hear and understand who these words are trying to liberate, right here and right now. Who are the blessed in our very midst? Let us go and sit at their feet, and may they be to us a word of life in a dying world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/free-black-communities/>

<sup>ii</sup> Details on Sarah King come from an essay by Elizabeth Browne in *St. Peter's Church: Faith in Action for 250 Years* (Temple University Press, 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> Much of the foregoing text was adapted from: <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/giving-full-history-who-owned-absalom-jones>, with additional information gleaned from multiple sources, including <https://houseofdeputies.org/2018/01/30/new-biography-absalom-jones/>, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/free-african-society/#22517>, and others.

<sup>iv</sup> <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/community/text3/allenmethodism.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/documents/1776-1865/abolition-slavery.html>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/they\\_did\\_not\\_build\\_in\\_vain](https://hymnary.org/text/they_did_not_build_in_vain)

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h1588t.html>