



Lamenting Our Whiteness

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis

The Feast of Absalom Jones ~ February 16, 2020

Isaiah 11:1-5

Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom:* The Spirit of YHWH will rest on you—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for YHWH. You will delight in obeying YHWH, and you won't judge by appearances, or make decisions by hearsay. You will treat poor people with fairness and will uphold the rights of the land's downtrodden. With a single word you will strike down tyrants; with your decrees you will execute evil people. Justice will be the belt around this your waist—faithfulness will gird you up.

Psalms 137:1-6

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| 1 | By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, *
when we remembered you, O Zion. | 4 | How shall we sing God's holy song *
in a foreign land? |
| 2 | As for our harps, we hung them up *
on the trees in the midst of that land. | 5 | If I forget you, O Jerusalem, *
let my right hand forget its skill. |
| 3 | For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth: *
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion." | 6 | Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you, *
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. |

Galatians 5:1-5

When Christ freed us, we were meant to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and don't submit to the yoke of slavery a second time! Pay close attention to me—Paul—when I tell you that if you let yourself be subjected to the Law, Christ will be of no use to you! I point out once more to all who subject themselves to even one part of the Law that they are bound to keep the Law in its entirety. Any of you who seek your justification in the Law have severed yourselves from Christ and fallen from God's favor. It is in the Spirit that we eagerly await the justification we hope for, and only faith can yield it.

John 15:12-15

This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 And you are my friends, if you do what I command you. I no longer speak of you as subordinates, because a subordinate doesn't know a superior's business. Instead I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learned from Abba God.

[Today we celebrate the life and ministry of The Reverend Absalom Jones.](#)

Absalom Jones was the first black priest in The Episcopal Church—the first black priest in America! And his story happened here, in Philadelphia.

Jones was born into slavery in 1746. His owner was Abraham Wynkoop, a wealthy Anglican planter in Delaware. As a child, Jones was determined to read; he bought himself books, including a Bible, and, through some instruction and a lot of self-teaching, he learned to read.

When Jones was 16, Benjamin Wynkoop, Abraham's father and Jones' now owner, sold off the plantation and its possessions —including Jones' mother, sister, and five brothers. Jones was brought to Philadelphia with his master. Over the next twenty years, Jones got married to Mary Thomas, who was also a slave; collected enough money to buy her freedom; attended a Quaker-run night school; bought land and built viable rental properties. He also spent those two decades trying to buy his own freedom. In 1784, Wynkoop finally agreed to release him, and Jones was free.

Absalom Jones, along with Richard Allen, served as lay ministers for the black membership at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church a few blocks from here. Their active evangelism greatly increased black membership, and the black members worked hard to help raise money to build an upstairs gallery to enlarge the church. Without telling these members, the church leadership decided to use the gallery to segregate the black worshippers. One Sunday morning, most likely in 1792, Absalom Jones was accosted for attempting to worship in a downstairs pew. He and most of the black members walked out of St. George's that day.

The same year, Jones and Allen established the "First African Church" in Philadelphia. They applied to join the Protestant Episcopal Church, issuing three non-negotiable requirements to the Diocese: the Church must be received as an already organized body; it must have control over its own affairs; and Jones must be licensed as lay-reader and if qualified, ordained as its minister.

In 1794, the church was accepted into the Diocese and renamed the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. The following year Jones became a deacon, but was not ordained a priest until 1802, 7 years later. At 56 years old, he became the first black American priest. He continued to serve and advocate for black Americans for the rest of his life, dying in 1818.

Every chapter of Absalom Jones life embodies the teachings of Jesus and the calling of a priest: To love God and to love God's people. He did this against all odds.

In this amazing story, we are the "against all odds" part. We are the barriers and bets that Jones had to overcome. By we, I mean the white church in America as a whole and St. Peter's specifically, a still predominantly white congregation. Absalom Jones' master was a member here. So was Sarah King, who owned Jones's wife, Mary.

We know our racist history. It's included on our website, because we know it's important to recognize that churches not only allowed our country to be built on slavery, but that we were active participants. We know race is a concept invented by white people to justify the economic gains offered by the transatlantic slave trade. We know that economic discrimination still exists along racial lines. And we know that white people —consciously and subconsciously —have spent the last 400 years filling out this invented, money-centered system with stories, stereotypes, theology, and policy that, collectively, privileges whiteness and dehumanizes darkness. We know this is called White Supremacy. And we know that, ultimately, white people must be the ones to end it.

We know all of this. And that's not nothing. I love St. Peter's because we are good at knowing. But knowing is not enough when it comes to racism. It's a system built on power and false logic; understanding it will only take us so far.

There is a new book by Carolyn Helsel called *Anxious to Talk about It: Helping White Christians Faithfully Talk about Race*. As one review described it: "[White Christians] are afraid of sounding stupid, offending someone, or worst of all, being called a racist. In *Anxious to Talk about It*, Helsel explores the anxiety crippling our conversations and offers us tools and practices for engaging our emotions around race in America.

By focusing on white people's emotions, Helsel exposes one of the strongest protectors of white supremacy: This barrier between knowing and feeling.

I want us to pause here. Take a breath, pay attention. This is the moment when that barrier between knowing and feeling is the strongest. It's the jolt of defensiveness, saying, "I have feelings when it comes to racism!" "I cry just thinking about it." "She's not talking about me." "She doesn't know what she's talking about."

Of course white people have feelings about racism. But most likely they're feelings of fatigue and despair, and that

is not what I'm talking about. Those are the guardians of white supremacy—warning you that this is what it will feel like to face your racism. Nudging you back into the world of knowing.

I'm asking you to stay with me, past this barrier. Would you put a hand on your head, your place of knowing? Thank it for working so hard. Now place your other hand on your heart. Imagine a tunnel between the two. Let your head know it is okay, you are ready to feel, to move to your heart. You can take your hand off your head, but keep your other hand on your heart. Maybe put your free hand on your stomach—your gut—another place of deep feeling. Take another breath, and hear this with your heart:

For a very long time, we have attempted to tell ourselves this story without acknowledging the organized effort by white people to harm black people.

White supremacy makes it possible to see only the story of progress. To celebrate that Absalom Jones was the first black Episcopal priest, instead of wondering: Why did his ordination take 10 years from that day at St. George's? Why didn't that ordination happen right here? Did Jones' owner ever seek counsel from his priest at St. Peter's, during those 20 years when Jones was asking for his freedom? And what did that priest say?

Our hearts hold the answers to those questions. But they'll need to break in order for us to really feel them.

One of our readings today can show us how:

We heard the choir chant Psalm 137 earlier. It is a song of lament, sung as the Israelites go into exile—leaving behind everything they've known, with no idea how they will rebuild their lives.

Except we didn't hear the whole psalm. The revised common lectionary, which is the official readings calendar used by the vast majority of mainline churches in North America, cuts out the final verses of the psalm.

Our Director of Music initially ignored the lectionary's cuts and rightly included the entire psalm, but together we decided to use the edited psalm, and have the choir chant those final verses now:

7 Lord, remember what the Edomites did

on Jerusalem's dark day:

"Rip it down, rip it down!

All the way to its foundations!" they yelled.

8 Daughter Babylon, you destroyer,

a blessing on the one who pays you back

the very deed you did to us!

9 A blessing on the one who seizes your children

and smashes them against the rock!

God's chosen people asking God to smash their enemies' babies on rocks. We can maybe see why the lectionary committee decided to skip those verses. But they miss the whole point when they do.

Psalm 137 is a whole story that points to a whole person: one who feels the full human experience, including anger, including violence. To do otherwise, to hold back or deny or pretend to be above those feelings, is to be in false relationship with God. With your community. With yourself.

Remember Helsel's book, *Anxious to Talk About It?* It exists because white people must face our anxiety about being called racist in order to stop black and brown people from being killed by racism. That is what makes racism powerful and what makes it sinful: white people's feelings are more important than black people's lives. When we skip over lament, we uphold white supremacy. This is a profound disobedience to God, to skip over the parts that make us uncomfortable.

When the Israelites are exiled, God doesn't call them to reclaim their strength and make Jerusalem great, nor does God call them to read a bunch of books by the people they had exiled before them. God called them to enter into a space of lament. To see that the way they were living was wrong, and that life as they knew it has changed forever.

Only then can they call out to God with honest and imperfect prayers, like Psalm 137. Our sacred stories tell us God always imagines something better than what we can, but their prayer opens a way.

With their lament, they ask God to stay with them and, at their most vulnerable and perhaps least deserving, they ask if God will still love them. And that is an act of hope. To sit by the waters of Babylon in 587 BC or the pews of

St. George's in 1792 or the boxes of St. Peter's in 2020 and to confront the reality of hate, as if God is faithful and God's promises are true. That they will happen, are happening. Right now. Our gospel says you do this even and especially when God's promises will cost you something, because whatever you lose for the sake of God's promises will be nothing compared to what will be gained.

In 1992, The Reverend Harold T. Lewis wrote the hymn Blessed Absalom. Lewis is a black priest who also struggled with the systems of oppression in The Episcopal Church and in America. His hymn is a powerful story of Absalom's life. But it's a hymn that always feels hard when white churches sing it. Because the white church has not repented for doing violence to Jones' life. We skipped the lamenting part. We've never told the whole story.

We have to go to painful places. So they can die and Christ can rise in and through us.

Today, we're going to try. We've changed some of the words to the hymn so that it still honors Absalom and also recognizes our own part in a story that is still being told. It's a communal lament that holds both grief and hope; that invites us to the edge of our knowing, so we might take a leap of faith. May it be so. Amen.