

Sermon, Absalom Jones Service of Witness  
February 16, 2020  
Anne-Marie Jeffery

Let us pray.

Set us free, heavenly Father, from every bond of prejudice and fear; that, honoring the steadfast courage of your servant Absalom Jones, we may show forth in our lives the reconciling love and true freedom of the children of God. Lord, set us free in the way that Absalom Jones was set free. Set us free so that your reconciling love and true freedom leads us to do the work that still needs to be done in this broken world. Amen.

Absalom Jones' life spoke volumes about living the freedom and reconciling love of God. I can see why the lectionary writers chose the scriptures they did. From Galatians Chapter 5 verse 1 - For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. From the gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 12 & 13 - Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Absalom Jones was born a slave, but he was always moving forward from that place. He learned to read, worked evenings managing to buy his wife's freedom and then his. He bought property. He took care of his family, but was also focused outward. He formed the African Free Society with Richard Allen, a political and humanitarian organization helping widows and orphans and assisting in sick relief and burial expenses. Both he and Allen were lay preachers in the Methodist church, walking out of that church with others when they were told they had to sit in the balcony because of their color. They formed the African Church in Philadelphia and when the members of that church wanted to join with the Episcopal Church, Absalom served as their leader becoming a deacon and then the first black priest in the Episcopal church. During the 1793 Yellow Fever outbreak in Philadelphia when others fled the city, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen mobilized the Black community to care for the sick. In 1797 and 1799, Absalom along with others, petitioned to congress to end the slavery. Under his leadership, two schools and supportive services for the Black community developed – important because these services weren't available to blacks.

I think we tend to think of Absalom as the safe one when compared to Richard Allen, because he was the one who took members of the African Church to the Episcopal Church, while Richard Allen formed the African Methodist Episcopal Church with other members. You know how we can be in the Episcopal Church. However, in my research, I was surprised that Absalom didn't want to go to the Episcopal Church, but went because that was the desire of many of the members. And if you look at what he did in

his life you will see that his actions were anything but safe. This was a man of action who did much more than preach. He helped those in need, protesting, cared for the sick, petitioned the government, created structures for learning and support. This was a man of many many dimensions who worked for the reconciling love of God and the freedom he knew God intends for all God's people.

As I read about him, I found myself longing to hear his voice – in the same way that listening to Dr. Martin Luther King is different from reading his words. However since that was not possible because Absalom lived before sound could be recorded, I found a sermon that he gave on January 1, 1808 in thanksgiving for the end of the slave trade. This sermon gives us a sense of who Absalom was and allows us to hear his voice in a new light. His text was from Exodus 3:7-8. *“And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.”*

Absalom began the sermon by fleshing out the details of what it might have been like for the enslaved Israelites – the kind of hard labor the work must have required, the heat, the kind of masters they had, the beatings, the poor quality of food - leeks and onions with not much nutrition, and the likely distances they walked to collect the materials need to make the bricks. And then even at home, there was no peace. Their homes were filled with lamentation over the sons were taken from them and drowned so that their population would not increase. Absalom notes that this went on for hundreds of years and he reminds us that God heard every cry and saw every tear.

Finally, Absalom says - God came down from heaven, in his own person, in order to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians. He ends this section with thanksgiving using verses from Psalms 97 and 98. *Clouds and darkness are round about him, but righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. O sing unto the Lord a new song, for he hath done marvelous things: his right hand and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory. He hath remembered his mercy and truth toward the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God.*

Absalom goes on to say that this was not the only time God has appeared on behalf of the oppressed. God has seen the pain inflicted by the slave trade and slavery - the misery so many had endured on the ships from Africa, some drowning in an attempt to to return home or escape the misery of the journey being locked in fetters, being exposed for sale like animals, separated from family, driven into the fields to work under a burning sun with little food to satisfy their hunger, the neglect of religious

instruction or any kind of instruction and the different modes of torture the whip, the screw, the pincers, and the red hot iron.

And as with the Israelites, God heard every cry and every prayer and now Jehovah has “come down to deliver our suffering country-men from the hands of their oppressors. He came down into the United States, when they declared, in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade in our African fellow-men, should cease in the year 1808: He came down into the British Parliament, when they passed a law to put an end to the same iniquitous trade in May, 1807. He came down into the Congress of the United States, the last winter, when they passed a similar law, the operation of which commences on this happy day. Dear land of our ancestors! thou shalt no more be stained with the blood of thy children, shed by British and American hands: the ocean shall no more afford a refuge to their bodies, from impending slavery: nor shall the shores of the British West India islands, and of the United States, any more witness the anguish of families, parted for ever by a publick sale.”<sup>1</sup>

Absalom calls upon the congregation to give thanks to God for this delivery. And once again he uses scripture to express praise for what God has done. He said, “Let the song of angels, which was first heard in the air at the birth of our Saviour, be heard this day in our assembly: *Glory to God in the highest, for these first fruits of peace upon earth, and good will to man: O! let us give thanks unto the Lord: let us call upon his name, and make known his deeds among the people.*”

But then Absalom asks a very interesting question - How shall we show our thanks to the Lord? Since sacrifices and burnt offerings are no longer pleasing to him, he suggests that the festivities of that day be accompanied by actions. He calls them duties and identified five. The one I want to focus on is this - “*Let us, further, implore the influence of his divine and holy Spirit, to dispose the hearts of our legislatures to pass laws, to ameliorate the condition of our brethren who are still in bondage; also, to dispose their masters to treat them with kindness and humanity.*”<sup>2</sup>

Absalom was calling for action. There was more work to be done – much more work and Absalom knew it. Think for a moment about what was happening in 1808 as that congregation gathered on the first of January and gave thanks for the end of the slave trade in America. While slaves were free in Pennsylvania where Absalom Jones lived, slavery would not end in the US until 1865.

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<sup>1</sup> A Thanksgiving Sermon, Absalom Jones, given on January 1, 1808 on the occasion of the end of the slave trade in America. <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/ajones/thanksgiving1808.html>

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If you know your history, you will know how deeply the country was divided during those times, the vitriol that was being expressed - all culminating in the Civil War where so many lives were lost. Despite the country being in that terrible state, Absalom gave thanks and had hope for the future, because he knew that God was hearing every cry. He knew that God would come down among us, he knew God's reconciling love and freedom would prevail, and he knew that those gathered there had to be part that work and so he called them to action.

Brothers and sisters, we too live in a divided time. I don't know about you, but I am frustrated at the present state of our country – frustrated that our leaders can do wrong and it doesn't seem to matter, frustrated at the injustices that are going on while some stand by and say it is all fine, frustrated that it seems to be ok to openly demean to one another, frustrated that programs desperately needed by the poor like food stamps are being cut, frustrated that by racism and all the other 'isms' that don't seem to be getting better, frustrated at the treatment of immigrants - taking children from their families and locking them in cages, and limiting immigration from countries where the people are fleeing violence and appalling living conditions. One of those countries where immigration is being limited is Nigeria. "How ironic these many years later the US is limiting entry into the country of a people from whom we literally stole their countrymen and brought them here for forced, free slave labor?"<sup>3</sup>

Absalom Jones words in this sermon are just as important to us today as they were to that congregation back on the first day of January in 1808, because we cannot afford to let our frustration hold us back and kill our hope. I know that in my frustration, I am getting tired and I hear others getting tired. This is not a luxury we have. It is not one that Absalom Jones had.

His words call us away from despair to know that God hears our every cry, and every prayer. His words call us to trust that God will come down among us. They call us to use our voices, to sign those petitions, to go the rallies and to call our congress people when we see that something is wrong. They call us to go into the food pantries, into the soup kitchens and to know about how food stamps, welfare and other programs for the poor work. They call us to stand with immigrants and find ways to help them negotiate our convoluted immigration laws. They call us to go out into the world and see what needs to be done. They call us to go forward and to act.

Do you remember what this service is called? It is a service of witness – a time to remember and celebrate the witness of our African American congregations and people in our diocese. Absalom Jones was a witness in his time when our country may well

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Clark, Canon to the Ordinary, Diocese of Washington.

have been more divided and broken than it is now - as hard as that is to imagine. Absalom's witness calls us to witness – to witness in the midst of despair and brokenness, to witness that God hears us, to witness that God will come down among us and that God's reconciling love and freedom will prevail.

Absalom's witness calls us to witness – with our hands and hearts and minds. Let our witness be proclaimed in this land that others may be called forth from their despair into hope, into action and to be about the spreading of God's reconciling love and freedom into this world. Amen,