

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER
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ABSALOM JONES: FRIEND OF GOD

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Text of a Sermon preached on the Last Sunday after Epiphany
February 14, 2021

ISAIAH 42:5-9 | PSALM 126
EPHESIANS 4:1-6 | JOHN 15:12-15

It cannot be a mere coincidence, after the concluding arguments faded on the historic second impeachment of a United States President, that we will, for better or for worse, in the next forty-eight hours, observe both President's Day and Valentines Day! Take your pick. Happy Day!

Look up at sky, the planets are on the move. Look down at your empty cup; what do the tealeaves say? The history of these days is yet to be written, but one thing is certain. The bond we have with each other in this country is difficult; it is in doubt. Our love for one another is strained. Our union is being tested. We have so much work to do.

The Bishop has asked us all today to celebrate the memory of Absalom Jones, a saint of this very diocese and city of Philadelphia, whose feast day we celebrate each year on the thirteenth of February. This history is for all of us, those born here, as well as those who have just arrived.

Absalom Jones was born into slavery in 1746. He was separated from his family at age 16 when he was sold to a merchant in Philadelphia. He taught himself to read, but was only formally educated after he arrived in Philadelphia in his 1762. He married at the age of 24, in 1770, while he was still a slave. By 1780 he had purchased his wife's freedom, so that by law his children would be free. Finally, he himself was freed by his owner in 1784 at the end of the Revolutionary War.

We must try to imagine his life, the profound changes he witnessed. And how he was shaped by the history that was often made here, in this young city of Philadelphia, the first capital of the United States, the birthplace of the Constitution. Three years later, in 1787, he founded the Free African Society to organize free blacks in Philadelphia. Two years after that, in 1789, a failing and weak confederation of states would gather in Philadelphia to hammer out a Constitution that would hopefully save and perpetuate the world's first democratic form of government.

Absalom Jones was at the center of it. His Bible told him he was free. His newly minted Constitution told him he was a citizen, but only just barely, just in his state of Pennsylvania. Every year of his life he faced the institution of slavery and the discrimination that remained the fatal flaw of that founding blueprint of our social agreement with one another.

The symbol of that discrimination was even as a free man, he was required to worship in the balcony of the churches in this city, as opposed to being seated next to their white neighbors. One day, along with his friend Richard Allen, who founded the first official denomination of what is known as the black church in America, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, they decided to walk out of those churches. He was determined to be recognized as a free and equal person, a child of God.

His path, however, was to petition the Diocese of Pennsylvania, to found the first black congregation of our denomination. And he was ordained as the first black priest in the Episcopal Church in 1802. That church remains today as the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas located at 62 Street in the historic Overbrook neighborhood. Absalom Jones died in 1818.

I want us to take just a moment and imagine Absalom Jones, sitting in his study, reading the passages of Scripture we have before us today. Imagine him reading the resounding words of the prophet Isaiah, reminding Israel that they have been called to be “a light to the nations.”

Imagine him reading the soaring spiritual vision of the apostle Paul as he declares that, by virtue of our baptism, we are not separate but equal, but are truly one body, one family in Christ. “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Imagine him reading the words of Jesus in the gospel of John, and recalling the faces of all his Quaker neighbors who helped encourage him to organize. Those Quakers were known to everyone as “The Friends”. Imagine him pondering the words of Jesus that promise that we too can be God’s friends because God has shared with us a love that gives us all knowledge we need, a love that cannot break us apart. “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”

But imagine him also looking at his young country and church take root. He would note, that save but one, all of our first Presidents were slave owners. In fact, ten of our first eleven Presidents would all own slaves. Slaves would served every President in the White House until 1850. One wonders what he would think, to find out that the church that he founded was not allowed to vote at our Diocesan conventions until 1890, two generations after its founding.

Perhaps he would not be surprised by the sacrifice and struggle it would take to free us all from the bondage and generational trauma of racism. No doubt he would stand here right now and ask us what we are prepared to do to face our moment of truth, our need to lay down our lives for one another so that the love of Christ would take root in us.

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.” This is what the Father told him. It is the word that sets us all free. It is information that draws us so close to God that we realize we are truly all one, all one family, all in need of forgiveness and grace to go forward, to create possibility and equity for all.

Come on friends, he says, you can live together in peace and the bond of affection. You must live so.

Whatever we think of the events of this week in Washington and throughout this land – whatever we think the state of our union, our place in this community at this moment – we ought not lose the opportunity to draw hope and inspiration from the prophet when he says:

I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Hear these words as Absalom Jones heard them. Hear these words as you need to hear them. Hear these words as words that will incite what you do next.

Be set free to be God’s friend, friends for one another. Amen.