

Blessed Absalom Jones

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 13, 2022

Readings: Jeremiah 17:5-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26; Psalm 1

Sermon text: 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. Jeremiah 17:5-6

A child was born into slavery in Sussex County, Delaware, in 1746 and named Absalom. No last name, just Absalom. When he was sixteen, he and his mother and siblings were sold to a neighboring farmer with the last name Wynkoop who kept him but sold his mother and siblings. He sold his farm too and with the money from the sale of his property, real and human, he moved to Philadelphia to become a merchant. Good Christian citizen, member of the Church of England, Wynkoop became a vestryman of Christ Church, a church which later, after the Revolution, became the seat of the new Episcopal Church and of Bishop William White.

Absalom had taught himself to read using the New Testament and Wynkoop allowed Absalom to attend a Quaker-run school, one of the first in the country for Black students. He was smart, hardworking and fell in love with Mary, a girl next door, slave of the King family. They were married in 1770 by Rev. Duche, rector of Christ Church. First thing Absalom did was set about working overtime and borrowing funds to purchase Mary's freedom. Not his own, his wife's.

Tomorrow is Valentine's Day. I've been married 37 years last I checked, and I know the rules. I love my wife. But I would still have had to think a bit about that choice. You know the airline rule, oxygen for yourself first—if Absalom were free he could earn money much faster and purchase his wife's freedom sooner. As it was it took eight more years until he made enough to finalize her freedom. But here's the thing. A child born of a free woman was free, not so for a slave. Absalom and Mary were no way going to bear children into slavery who might then be sold away from their parents, as Absalom had been.

Absalom tried to buy his own freedom then but Wynkoop refused, at first. But finally in 1784, six years later, he freed Absalom—who took the surname Jones as a typical American name. Perhaps Wynkoop was inspired by the revolutionary ideals of the new Republic. But, though I hate to admit it as an Episcopalian, his decision was probably more due to the Methodism that swept through the mid-Atlantic in the 1780's—the beginning of a separate Methodist Church was in 1784—which opposed slavery.

Jones became a lay minister of the interracial congregation of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. The Methodist church admitted persons of all races

and allowed African Americans to preach. Together with Richard Allen, Jones was one of the first African Americans licensed to preach by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Jones and Allen were clearly prominent leaders of the free Black community in Philadelphia, which was the seat of the new American government and growing rapidly, including in numbers of free Blacks and escaping slaves. Attracted by the example of Jones and Allen, many Blacks joined St George's.

So many that the white members felt they needed to step in and assert the dominant racial hierarchy. On a Sunday in November of 1787, while Jones and Allen knelt for prayer, a church officer told them to move to the balcony or to the back of the church. Jones and Allen calmly finished their prayers and then walked out, along with the rest of the Black congregation. They never came back. Instead they formed the Free African Society, a mutual aid society that supported the Black community. Dues entitled members to insurance for funerals and medical emergencies, and the group gave scholarships for students to go to school and raised money to purchase freedom for those in bondage. On January 1, 1791, the Free African Society held religious services for the first time, led by Jones and Allen, and the congregation that grew out of that began to raise funds to build their own church.

Jones's and Allen's reputation in the city was boosted immensely when they and others members of the Black community courageously worked to aid the sick and bury the dead during a three-month yellow fever epidemic in 1793. It began with the arrival of refugees from revolutionary Haiti in August, picked up speed rapidly, and by September 200 people a day were dying. No one knew the causes of this sudden and often horrible death. People avoided the sick, even members of their own family, who were left to die in their homes or on the street. Philadelphia, a city of some 50,000 souls, ended with 5,000 dead. Some 20,000 fled the city, including leaders of the national government (for Philadelphia was the capital then), George Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson, and most of the doctors and nurses. The situation was indeed dire, with unburied corpses and uncared for sick. But a place was found on the edge of the city where the sick were brought and cared for under the direction of Dr Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Constitution, a fervent abolitionist and leading medical theorist—he argued for improved sanitation and draining of swamps—though he also practiced blood-letting as the treatment for many diseases, including yellow fever. The mayor of Philadelphia appealed for help to the Black community—it was thought that Africans were less likely to contract the fever than white Europeans, which was not true, fatalities were equally high among Blacks and whites. The call was answered by Jones and Allen and the FAS. Twenty times more Black people helped the plague-struck than did whites. Jones in particular often worked through the night. Even so, Matthew Carey, a well known white journalist, accused Jones and the members of FAS of making money through the effort. He was answered by Jones and Allen in a detailed article explaining the circumstances, including details of expenses and heroic feats of

self sacrifice, the first copyrighted pamphlet written by Black authors in the nation's history.¹

Now Jones wanted to establish a black congregation independent of white control while remaining part of the Episcopal Church. Allen preferred to remain Methodist, and went on to found the independent denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (or AME) Church. Jones and Allen remained friends and colleagues all their lives.

After a successful petition and fund drive—with the help of Bp William White and many prominent Quaker families—the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas opened its doors on July 17, 1794. Jones was ordained as a deacon in 1795 and as a priest in 1802, becoming the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church. A historical charter "The Causes and Motives for Establishing St. Thomas's African Church" proclaims the community's intention "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. And in meekness and fear we would desire to walk in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. That following peace with all men, we may have our fruit unto holiness, and in the end, everlasting life."

The Rev. Absalom Jones went on to become a sought after preacher. One of his sermons, preached on January 1, 1808, the date when a law prohibiting the international slave trade in the United States went into effect, is titled "A Thanksgiving Sermon" and was published in pamphlet form. It is well worth reading today and can be found online ([here](#)) or as reprinted in the collection of *American Sermons* published by the Library of America. Jones preached on an Exodus text— part of great stream of Black Church preaching that produced later orations by Frederick Douglass and many other great Black church preachers. A portrait of Jones in formal clergyman's attire was painted by Raphaele Peale and hangs today in the Delaware Museum of Art.

Jones died in on February 13, 1817 and since 2010 he has been added to the Episcopal Church calendar of saints and this day celebrated as the feast of Blessed Absalom Jones. That's his full name now. Not just Absalom. Not even Absalom Jones.

Blessed Absalom Jones.

¹ When the publisher Mathew Carey, who served on the city's health committee, issued his account of the epidemic beginning in October 1793, he accused members of Philadelphia's free black community of profiting off the epidemic, even stealing from the houses of fever victims. In response, Allen and Jones published their own pamphlet in early 1794 refuting these accusations in detail. By including eyewitness testimony of the work black Philadelphians did to treat patients, along with detailed documentation of payments and expenses, the two ministers forced Carey to revise his chronicle of the epidemic in later editions. Allen and Jones' work was the first copyrighted pamphlet written by black authors in the nation's history. Titled [A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793](#), it documented the racism and poor treatment that free African Americans experienced, even as they played a crucial role in combating the most serious epidemic of disease in the history of the still-young nation.

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, the prophet Jeremiah tells us, whose trust *is* the Lord. They shall be like trees planted by water sending out its roots by the stream. They will stay green and fruitful even through the heat and the year of drought—unlike those who trust in human strength, who will end up like desiccated shrubs in a lifeless desert when the days of hardship come and stay.

Happy are those, sings the Psalmist, who delight in the study of Torah. (And the Hebrew word translated as happy is the same as the word for blessed, *'asre*.) They shall be like trees planted by the stream, unlike the wicked who are like chaff which the wind blows away.

Blessed are the poor, and those who mourn, Jesus says, and those who suffer persecution for righteousness sake, as did their ancestors in the faith. Their endurance in the Way will triumph in the end, and sustain them even in the fire, for God is with them always, Emmanuel. Our God is the God of Resurrection and hope.

Blessed is Absalom Jones and we are blessed by his life and witness. Like chaff in the wind of history are Wynkoop and Carey. But the name of Blessed Absalom Jones lives on and bears much fruit, one of the great cloud of witnesses pointing to the bright star of hope, Jesus Christ our Lord and Liberator. Amen.

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