

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

St. Luke's, East Hampton

February 4, 2024: Epiph 5B: [Isaiah 40:21-31](#) [1 Corinthians 9:16-23](#) [Mark 1:29-39](#)

It is fitting that Black History Month includes the Feast Day of Absalom Jones, the first Black Man to be ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. Absalom Jones was born into slavery in Sussex, Delaware in 1746. As a young boy, he taught himself to read. When he was sixteen, his family members were sold, and he was taken to Philadelphia where he worked in his owner's store and went to an all-Black school at night. With permission, he married a fellow slave and was later able to buy her freedom (so their children would be free Blacks) and eventually, his own. He was an active member and lay preacher for the Black members of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, where he met Richard Allen. As a result of their evangelistic efforts, Black membership increased ten-fold. The numbers were so threatening to the rest of the congregation that the vestry forced them to sit in the slave gallery -- a balcony around the church -- instead of in the main body of the church. As a result, Jones, Allen, and other Black members left the church to begin their own congregations. While Allen went on to form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, Absalom Jones became the leader of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, the first Black Episcopal parish in the United States. He was ordained a deacon in 1795 and became the first ordained priest of African descent in the United States, thus beginning a legacy of leadership of Black clergy that would include not only Martin Luther King but also the former bishop of Long Island, several St. Luke's curates, and our own Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry.

For ten years beginning in 1995, I was rector of St. John's Church in Olney, Maryland, 13 miles north of Washington DC. Built in the 1830's, St. John's was a simple, rectangular church with a bell tower. Like that church in Philadelphia, it also had a slave gallery, a balcony around the inside of the church which provided a place for slaves to sit away from their masters. Like many buildings in East Hampton, the church had been moved from its original spot, moved to allow expansion of its cemetery due to the Civil War. The memories of that time were memorialized in two large plaques in the back of the church, done for local Cavalry officers who served not for the north but for the south. The church continued to thrive over the years and in the late 1960's expanded its outreach by building a K-8 Episcopal school. It was said that the rector formed the school in reaction to "new math." I wondered if "new math" was a euphemism for desegregation happening in public schools. History, of course, is always more complicated than it first appears and God has the ability to transform the most challenging of times. The rectory, which stood just outside a nearby town in which Quakers housed free slaves, was said to be part of the underground railroad. In the early 1900s, that slave gallery was torn out so that people would sit together and in the early 2000s, the school board called a black man to be its headmaster.

The history of the wider Episcopal Church mirrors some of this same story.¹ There was tacit and sometimes overt support of slavery before the Civil War and discrimination and participation in oppressive systems after. At the same time prophetic voices and courageous fighting for freedom and civil rights, eventually bringing us to

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¹See <https://www.diomass.org/sites/diomass/files/attachments/Reparations%20Toolkit%20Episcopal%20Church%20and%20Slavery%20Historical%20Narrative%202021%2011.pdf>

today where social justice and inclusion are the hallmarks of the church. We have come a long way, but, as described in James Wheldon Johnson's words in *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the road we trod has been stony indeed.

And what about here? As the In Plain Sight project has made clear, slavery was not just a southern thing but existed right in East Hampton.² So, was money connected to slavery or the slave trade used to build St. Luke's? Our own parish historian Lys Marigold dug into this question. St. Luke's was built long after slavery was illegal in New York and we don't have records of how most of the founders and funders of St. Luke's got their money. The one exception is the Gardiner family who had 300 "attendants" – both African and Indigenous – on their island, who provided property in Freetown for some of these, and who had family members who owned a plantation in Virginia, supported the southern cause and slaves there. The Gardiners were not only the founders and first family of East Hampton; they were very much the same for St. Luke's, providing seven stained glass windows, the chapel and the rectory. Did slavery exist in East Hampton? The answer is yes. Did money connected to the institution of slavery help build this church? The answer to this question is yes as well.

In this morning's gospel, we see Jesus going from town to town, healing sickness and casting out demons. The first part of casting out demons is recognizing that they exist. The first part of healing is acknowledging healing that needs to happen. The sharing of the darker parts of our history is not to make us feel bad about it, but to expand our understanding of what happened then and what is still happening today. Expanding

our history is about acknowledging that our story is part of a bigger story, that the history of our country and community includes other people's stories as well as our own. Our stories are more complex, more nuanced, more human and more humble than the heroic versions we usually tell about ourselves. The amazing thing is that God was and is working in and through it all.

In a few minutes we will sing *Amazing Grace*. Written by the captain of a slave ship who in the midst of a storm turned his life over to God, gave up slaving, and became a priest in Olney, England (anyone catch the name of the town where I used to live?), the point of *Amazing Grace* is that God wants nothing more than to bring forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption and a whole new way of life to all people – and in fact has already done just that, through Jesus Christ. When Jesus calls the demons out, they lose their power. When exposed to light and love, the demons flee away.

I wish you all could have been at the Martin Luther King service held here last month and the VANY concert (of local Spanish speaking congregations) last fall. If you had seen the smiles on the faces and the tears in the eyes of those who filled the pews or packed Hoie Hall at those events, you would have realized that something amazing happened at those events. I was excited about those chances to worship with our neighbors.. I knew the Spirit would be here. I had no idea how symbolic and powerful it would be just to open our doors and how in that action ancient hurts would begin to be healed and people who had never felt that they would be welcome would discover that this place could be their home. The same thing happened twice this week as Hoie Hall was filled again with a financial literacy class in Spanish on Wednesday and a health fair in Spanish on Friday. In our second reading Paul talks about being all things for all

people. Opportunities like this help us walk in other people's shoes, to understand their stories, and to grow in our faith as a result. Isaiah's words, "Have you not seen, have you not heard" are a profound message that God has been and is at work and that glimmers of God's future are already here. Those services were moments when that happened. They are a reminder that our history is more expansive than we thought... and with God's help, our future is as well.