

Feast Day of the Blessed Absalom Jones  
St. David's Church 8 am, Chapel and Livestream 9.15 am  
February 13, 2022  
Isaiah 42:5-9; Psalm 126; Ephesians 4:1-6; John 15:12-15  
The Rev. Emily Zimbrick-Rogers

Following the Father of Peace and the Prince of Peace

Happy Feast Day of the Blessed Absalom Jones. It is a humble honor to be with you today to reflect on this important local saint. There is much good information on the internet about his life and work, which I commend to you, as we unfortunately will not be able to do justice to fully in our short time together. This week I very much pondered, how do I, a white woman in the year 2022, do justice to the story of the Rev. Absalom Jones, the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church, who was enslaved by a white Episcopalian vestryman in his parish of Christ Church and Saint Peters, a member of a church that helped found St David's? How do I speak about Absalom Jones, a person whose mother and siblings were sold away from him, who used his extra pennies to buy himself books to learn to read. History and his experience feel so far away from us.

Yet, there is a reason his story, life, his words have stuck with me so profoundly since I first heard about him about 10 years ago. He's very much celebrated as the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church, yet there often appears to not be enough reflection on the fact that our white ancestors had him enslaved and tried to segregate him and other black parishioners in church,

which led to the founding of the first African church in Philadelphia. Or how he was allowed to be ordained yet Bishop William White and the Diocese did not allow his church to be a full voting member of our diocese.

I really struggled with how to speak about our Scriptures and tell the truth about the complexity of history and where we might relate.

In the Episcopal Church, there is a beautiful labyrinth that is used in the Becoming the Beloved Community framework which is based on ideas from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and others.<sup>1</sup> The four quadrants have themes and questions to guide our efforts to respond to racial injustice and grow a community of reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers. The road to reconciliation and healing invites us to move in and out of all the themes, discovering new revelation and challenge each time. Like a real labyrinth, this one invite us in to walk and do the work to move through these different areas to reach the center where God is and then move back out into the world transformed. The quadrants are telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way of love, and repairing the breach.

Over the last six months, 85 people in St. David's and St. Peter's in the Great Valley have been walking the curriculum of Sacred Ground together. This

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/becoming\\_beloved\\_community\\_summary.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/12/becoming_beloved_community_summary.pdf)

has been a rich experience of looking at race and American history through a lens of faith—and the Becoming the Beloved Community labyrinth is one of the frameworks we have used. Many people in our sacred Ground program have really wanted to focus on the theme of practicing the way of love and growing in a call to be healers, reconcilers, seeking Christ in the other. Many of us have also really focused on the difficulty of repairing the breach—how can we as individual people participate in repair, restoration, and healing of people, institutions, and systems. It seems too big and too difficult.

I am a person you probably know who loves the first quadrant—telling the truth. I do believe that truth will set us free. Yet, there is a limit in just focusing on information—we could spend hours talking about Absalom Jones’ life, his writings, the difficulties he had, how he overcame his circumstances with grace, love, and peace. And there is real beauty, inspiration, and hope in seeing God move even through the pain and horror Absalom Jones suffered. However, often, telling the truth about our history fills us with incredible sadness and guilt. Some of us get stuck in the feeling of shame about the truly shameful ways white immigrants treated the indigenous people whose country we stole, or the ways we enslaved Black people, and mistreated other people of color. Others of us struggle with the connections between the past and the present difficulties in our society. And so we’re all stuck in a difficult place.

*What do we do? A question we wrestle with every day. What do we do?  
How do we follow Jesus? How do we live out our faith in the world?*

And these are not questions I simply pose to you. I too am struggling with this, along with you all. It is easy to say we have done many wrong things and notice all the places of brokenness, but it is much harder to know what to do next.

But I do believe that the reason we celebrate Absalom Jones today is because he does have some of the answers for us to move forward into telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way of love, and repairing the breach.

Absalom's name means father of peace, Ab is Abba father the term we hear from Jesus' lips about God as father. In our Ephesians passage, we have one God and Father of all. And then salom, *shalom* the Hebrew word for wholeness, peace, restoration, a state of grace. Every church service has this focus on peace, shalom, being restored to ourselves, God, and our neighbor.

In a few minutes, we will say the peace of the Lord be always with you. And we share that with one another. The peace is placed importantly after we have heard God's word in holy scripture, and after we have heard how to apply scripture to our own lives through the sermon, after we have prayed for God's grace on all that is broken or hurting in the world in the prayers of the people, after we have confessed our sins against God and our neighbor.

Peace is hard work and only comes after we have been willing to humble ourselves under God's word and confess our sins. We are reconciled and made right with God and our neighbor, only after we had reflected on where we have fallen short. The things we have done that don't bring peace, the things we have left undone. We confess we have not loved God with our whole heart and we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. In a newer version of the confession from *Enriching Our Worship*, we also repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf.

We can be children of Absalom the father of peace as we begin to recognize every person as our neighbor, as our friend, as our sibling in Christ. As we confess and turn and repent from the sins of ourselves and our ancestors.

I believe that Absalom Jones, like all the saints, is reunited with God in heaven praying for us for peace. I imagine that he and all other saints who worked to restore both people and institutions and systems to shalom and peace have continued to advocate for wholeness. The fact that we know about Rev. Jones today is proof, I think, that his ministry of reconciliation continues. True peace does mean acknowledgement and repairing what is broken or healing what is hurt. But peace is not about making people feel guilty and leaving them there—we say a prayer of confession, but it is always followed by an absolution—a blessing of

God's grace and mercy and forgiveness and strengthening us for goodness and eternal life.

We end our service with Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord, to which we all reply, Thanks be to God.

We go in peace, following Absalom, the father of peace, and Jesus, the prince of peace. Let us each seek out how we might live in peace—perhaps one of the ways will connect with you most right now in your life—telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way of love, or repairing the breach. We are called to making God's dream of peace real in our individual lives, in our parish, in our communities, and in the world.

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.