

The 13th day of February each year is when we honor the Rev. Absalom Jones, priest in the Episcopal Church. Technically we transfer his day to the 14th this year, but I'd like to honor him today anyway. I've preached about Absalom before and many of you know his story; born a slave, then freed and living in Philadelphia, he was a member of the Methodist Church. But when he and his friend were compelled to move to the balcony of the church because Black people were not allowed downstairs, he began attending an Episcopal Church instead and the rest is history.

And it was by no means an easy history. We're talking about the late 1700s. Slavery was still in full swing in the South and the Fugitive Slave Act had just been passed in 1793. Although he was free, Absalom was not free from discrimination by any means. But he trusted in the Lord, he persisted in his call, and he became our denomination's first black priest, ordained in 1802.

We remember in this Black History Month what enslaved people have had to endure, and how that has caused structures of racism that persist to this day. Black people are still more likely to be moved out of the way when the country has wanted to build roads and highways. Black people are more likely to be paid less, passed over or not even considered for higher paying jobs in many fields...even on the field of football as we've heard in the last couple of weeks about NFL hiring practices.

For the past few years our Episcopal Church has been making a concerted effort to focus on doing our part to recognize and address the wrongs of our country's past. We want to uncover racism's consequences that are still felt by many, many people. Some people have told me that all of this has nothing to do with us, and our church. Well, it does. Jesus was always standing up for people with no power and who were discriminated against in his own society and era. Jesus specifically went to visit those despised Samaritans.

Our own Geoff Brown has uncovered, in his exhaustive search of our history, an incident that involved Trinity Church back in the 1960s. It didn't happen AT Trinity but the rector here at the time, the Rev. Standish MacIntosh, lifted his voice publicly in a matter of social justice at that time. He wrote a letter to the Lakeville Journal concerning some young people who had been planning a minstrelsy show in Norfolk and were going to perform in blackface. Even at that time, in the early '60s, people were realizing that it was a bad practice to appropriate someone else's history and stereotype them. I'm glad the rector here raised his voice to say that it was not respectful or right. Here's what he wrote in the Lakeville Journal:

“It is not enough to be abstract, merely thinking about majority versus minority. We are dealing with human beings, real persons, individuals. Too often Negroes have been rejected as persons, humiliated, insulted, hurt.”¹

So as the Social Justice movement was going on the South, and President Lyndon Johnson was intent on passing the Civil Rights Act, even OUR quiet community recognized that there was discrimination in going on and we needed to speak up about it. It was there alright, and it still is, in a more subtle way even now.

Please read more about this incident in Geoff’s newly published book, *Trinity Lime Rock in Context A History*. Knowing our individual and community history is important to remind us of our roots and allowing us to imagine where we’ll spread our branches.

I’ve been drawn to aspects of our readings this morning that show our rootedness in Jesus and our inter-connectedness in faith and in life.

Today’s readings from Jeremiah and Psalm 1 both use the example of a tree growing beside a stream. It is a beautiful metaphor for how we connect with God and stay vibrant and flexible as we live and trust in God’s love and laws. I think of it also as a metaphor for attentiveness to the place we’re at and the time we’re in. Jeremiah may have used this popular image in his writing because he would have prayed the psalms in his life.

The Hebrews were a people being buffeted about by attacks from other powerful nations, sometimes fended off, and ultimately not. What keeps one able to withstand assaults, droughts, death of loved ones? They, and we, need the water of life to course through our veins. If we are like a tree planted near a stream we have a source of sustenance to last us through our years. This keeps our leaves green and our branches reaching to the sky. For us Christians, Jesus is that stream which gives us everything.

God has given us blessings from the beginning. Jeremiah tells us that if we trust in God then we are blessed and will continue to know we are nourished from the stream of cool fresh water that is the love of God.

Jesus tells the people on the great level place that they are blessed if they trust in his words of blessing. These are comforting words to the people who are listening; a great crowd of people who include those who are poor, hungry, afflicted, sorrowful and persecuted.

¹ Lakeville Journal letter to the Editor Feb. 20, 1964, quoted in *Trinity Lime Rock in Context A History*, Geoffrey Brown, 2022, pg. 394

And the woes that Luke records Jesus saying are warnings to us to remember that if everything is going just great right now, that doesn't mean that we have no need of the refreshing water of the stream. The woes make us all prepared for things that may lie ahead of us in life.

If we are thriving and growing now. That's great. We are able to reach to new places in the sky because everything is wonderful. But we must remember that we are rooted in the here and now. We can't reach new heights if we don't pay attention to where our feet (our roots) are now.

Isn't it both odd and wonderful how many things just sort of come together in God's world. Our readings call us to think about how we are trees with roots reaching into the stream of Life. And Rev. Marilyn Anderson chose for us the book for our Lenten study that is about being rooted. You'll see something brief about it in the bulletin, and a longer article about it in the upcoming Trinity Update.

And this has also made me think of the famous book and TV series by Alex Haley, **Roots**. In his book and related movie Alex Haley tells the story of his search for his family's roots. He painstakingly researched where his family had originally been from in Africa and how they ended up enslaved and later became free here in the United States. Through his research he became connected to his ancestors, and particularly, Kunta Kinte, through the roots of his family tree. He became more connected with his relatives and with his history.

Being a tree planted near a stream, having deep roots reaching into the streambed, means that we will not be overwhelmed by a drought, a scorching sun or by the cold winds of winter. The water will keep us alive and fresh and able to withstand many difficulties and tragedies.

I feel like my tree is planted near a stream of love and understanding. If I'm feeling frail and down and feel like the sap running through my veins is flagging, I have only to remember that the stream is right there. Warmth and energy and food are just there through trust in the Lord. I feel at this time in my life that the trust I have in God and in the faithful community is everything to me. We are all bound together through our roots our branches and our God.