

*Feast of Absalom Jones 2025*

*In the words of Blessed Absalom Jones - Give peace in our day, we beseech thee, O thou, God of Peace. Amen.*

I am one of those weird people who loves tweens and middle schoolers. It is such an odd time in life - like puppies who haven't quite grown into their paws. I think that is what drew me to being a Christian formation professional for most of my life in the church. One of my greatest joys was the opportunity to guide teenagers through their preparation for Confirmation. In my most recent church, I invited each of the kids to write down questions on post-it notes during the first session so I could gear our time toward addressing what mattered to them. One of the questions read, "Why didn't they write more Bibles? Didn't people after Jesus have things to say, too?"

When I read it, I clapped my hands a little in delight because this was something I could work with. This was an excellent question on more than one level.

It points (partially) to the fact that we do a disservice to our children when we start with creation in September of every year and then rarely get past the Holy Spirit appearing in the form of wind and fire at Pentecost, which roughly corresponds with the end of the school year. I have been guilty of planning a year that way more than once but we miss so much of our sacred story when we teach that way. As followers of Jesus, we aren't very versed in how the early church grew through the faithfulness and the desire of countless people like us. How we are part of a broader heritage of faith that spans millennia.

What I heard at the heart of that post-it note question was, "Where is God now?" and is "God still speaking?" "Am I living in a time that God cares enough about that it should be written down and told to people in the future? "Do I matter to God?" and maybe even a bit of... "Why should God matter to me?"

So, when I addressed this question with the confirmation class, I assured them I believe God continues to speak in many different ways—some of which are written down, and some are passed from person to person as they share their faith.

One of the ways God continues to speak is through the lives of saints (ancient and modern). Real people who did remarkable things for God simply by showing up and making themselves available to respond to the call of God in their own time. People who helped to make the space between heaven and earth seem thinner. People who lived out what Bishop Desmond Tutu called the "DREAM of God" instead of the "Kingdom of God."

Today, we commemorate the life of one of those saints: Blessed Absalom Jones. This is particularly noteworthy and exciting because Absalom Jones was a saint who lived and ministered right here in Philadelphia. He is a very real part of our story, one that is being celebrated across the entire church today.

For those unfamiliar with Absalom Jones, he was the first African American priest ordained in the Episcopal Church. He and his family were enslaved in Delaware by an Anglican Family and became part of the “property” passed down from father to son. As a child, Absalom was recognized for his many abilities and elevated to work in the house. He was brought to Philadelphia as a teenager, where he continued his education despite his enslavement. Absalom would go on to lead the first African American Episcopal congregation, which was received as an organized body by Bishop William White in 1794. The congregation we now know as the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in the Overbrook section of the city.

Most saints' days pass without us noticing, but because Absalom Jones is an integral part of this diocese, we pause to listen to his story, bear witness to his life, and consider how he can speak to us now.

John's Gospel gives a clear message - “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.” It is one of the shortest Gospel readings we hear all year, but I would venture to say that it is the most crucial piece of scripture we have as a guide for our lives.

If I had to summarize all of today's readings, Jesus' message to us is, “*I've got you.*” I've got your back.

The Gospel from John continues to convey that Jesus has moved past our relationship of master and servant. We are now considered his friends, and a certain level of intimacy comes with that. “*I've got you.*”

Psalm 126 is a word of encouragement. This psalm has been called “a community song of trust or confidence.” Most likely, it was written in reference to the end of the Babylonian exile. Life experiences can bring us to our knees, but through the mercy and care of God, “our mouths will be filled with laughter,” and those tears we have been weeping will water unexpected places in our souls and lives. We will be “restored.” There will be gladness where there is brokenness. It may not look like what we expected yet ... “*I've got you*”

In the Epistle, the prophet Isaiah (800 years before the life of Jesus) shares the Good News of God revealed to him.

I made everything and breathed life into it.

I have taken you by the hand and kept you safe.

I made a covenant - a sacred promise.

Things are passing away, and new things are happening. Don't be afraid. *"I've got you"*

It leads us to consider why these readings would be selected to commemorate the feast day of Blessed Absalom.

If we look past the surface details commonly shared about him, we see a truly extraordinary man. Absalom did not lose faith when he and fellow worshippers of color were pulled out of their pews mid-prayer and told they could only worship in the balcony from then on. Absalom walked out because he heard the message of Jesus, reminding him - *I've got you*.

He is the very embodiment of John's gospel. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Absalom paid for his wife's freedom (14 years before his own). He was one of the only people willing to go in and out of homes teeming with Yellow Fever without fear. He suffered injustice after injustice before starting a faith community where the Diocese of Pennsylvania finally recognized his leadership—seven long years in the making. Not only is Absalom significant to us as Episcopalians, but he also grew to become one of the foremost leaders of this country during the post-revolutionary period.

Before we swell too full of pride for our hometown guy, we should consider the words of Dr. Katherine Meeks, the founding Director of the Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing. "The life of Absalom Jones should call us to integrate our conversations about love. Are we able to move past the roles of victor and victim and really LOVE?" To consider when was the last time we really laid down our life for someone." If we haven't, Dr. Meeks suggests, then we should consider putting away the word LOVE until we actually know how to use it. Absalom would call us to embody it. Make it known. He is not a fairytale to dust off once a year but a man to emulate because of his fierce care for his neighbor and unwavering dedication to the Gospel.

So the post-it note wondering is valid. "Didn't people after Jesus have things to say too?" I can answer with great confidence, "Yes." They did, and we do. God is speaking in apparent ways through theologians, preachers, writers, and the reading of scripture with new eyes ...

And also (maybe more importantly) through - you, Blessed Absalom, and all the faithful ones who will follow. Most of us will never gain notoriety or be named a saint for the work God calls us to do. St. Teresa of Avila (one of my favorites, as you know) once wrote: "We can only learn to know ourselves and do what we can by surrendering our will and fulfilling God's will in us."

May our prayer be to learn how to surrender our wills and strive to bring about the reconciling hope this world profoundly needs. To lay down our lives. To truly love. To say to others, *I've got you*. Amen.