

ASH WEDNESDAY SERMON
February 17, 2021

This sackcloth and ashes are our reminder of physical mortality on Ash Wednesday. They also serve as symbolism of lament, of mourning, of sorrow. On Saturday, Bishop Prince and the Rev. Billy Daniel delivered ashes throughout the diocese in these bags which was quite a feat. However, if we had lived in ancient Israel, we may have been much closer to the site of real ashes, for the people of Jerusalem are described as clinging to ash heaps in the book of Lamentations. Even when a glimmer of hope is on the horizon, we realize hope is a very fragile thing.

As human beings, our longing for God's forgiveness is perpetual.

We stray from God;
we suffer; and
we long for God's mercy.

In chapters 63 -64 of the Book of Isaiah, the prophet concludes a long lament and plea for forgiveness with these words:

"Look down from heaven and see, from your holy and glorious habitation.
Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
They are withheld from me.
Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
Turn back for the sake of your servants,
for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
Your holy people took possession for a little while;
but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.
We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name.
O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence" (Isaiah 64:15-19, 64:1 NRSV).

This last line of Isaiah's prayerful lament is brought forward over 2000 years by an individual that we commemorate in the Episcopal Church this week, the Blessed Absalom Jones. Because of COVID, we have combined our Ash Wednesday service with our commemoration of the first African American Episcopal priest and founder of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia in 1792, Absalom Jones. I want to share a prayer he wrote in thanksgiving for the abolition of the slave trade in 1808. In his supplication that marked the date when the kidnapping and transport of enslaved people across the Atlantic was deemed illegal, Blessed Absalom prayed the words of the Prophet Isaiah,

“Rend thy heavens, O Lord, and come upon the earth; and grant that the mountains, which now obstruct the perfect day of thy goodness and mercy towards them, may flow down at thy presence.”ⁱ

In the Biblical version familiar to Blessed Absalom, the King James translation, God's appearance causes the mountains to do more than quake or shake. These mountains literally flow down like molten lava flowing before the presence of the Almighty. The entire lament of Isaiah is encapsulated in Jones' prayer as he recognizes

God's goodness and mercy on the one hand, and

God's power and reckoning on the other hand.

When Blessed Absalom offered this prayer of thanksgiving for the abolition of the slave trade, he fully realized that the pall of slavery still covered America, and would cause the hand of death to pull our civilization into a war of bloodshed.

Blessed Absalom prayed for the mountainous obstacles of his day to melt before the mercy and power of God. He saw these obstacles as mountains of misunderstanding, as mountains of self-serving exploitation, as mountains of white supremacy that continually degraded the people he served. Yet he persevered without bitterness, but as scripture says, he was as wise as a serpent while being as innocent as a dove. As we gather this evening to begin the season of lent over 230 years later, we may ask where have the mountains that Absalom faced gone? Have they completely melted away? If they have not then let us begin this season with the plea:

Lord have mercy
Christ have mercy
Lord have mercy.

The mountains of oppression that we see today have merely replicated themselves from the ones that Absalom Jones experienced over 230 years ago. Like the pandemic that we are experiencing, the human spirit is infected with a spiritual virus that keeps mutating throughout time. I call this the replicating DNA of Division. On the surface we think that we have found a cure for racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of oppression and hatred. But as soon as we have removed one form of oppression, division, and sin in the world, the human DNA of Division mutates into malefic mountains of inequity once again, blinding us to the mercy of God.

Mind you, God's mercy never ends – but we turn our backs on it.

This is why we need to reclaim the prayer of the Prophet of Isaiah and the Prayer of Absalom Jones. Our only immunization against the DNA of Division perpetuating the mountains of

inequity in our society is the grace, help, and love of Almighty God. So, let us pray that God WILL rend the heavens and come down to melt these mountains that are dividing us.

Absalom Jones called on God's grace, and a measure of that grace was accorded to him and to others in Philadelphia through the power of love, compassion, and mercy. Absalom Jones, who was enslaved at his birth, was a leader among the African American free community along with Richard Allen when Philadelphia experienced a virulent epidemic of Yellow Fever in 1793. Prior to this time Benjamin Rush had promised to assist in raising money for an independent African Church. However, the pledges did not come through when the wealthy of Philadelphia decided to divert funds pledged to Jones and Allen to instead assist refugee slaveholders from Saint-Domingue.ⁱⁱ This was the same year that Yellow Fever gripped the city of Philadelphia. In the middle of this discord, Jones and Allen knew something about the blood of Jesus - the blood that flowed from the source of Love, Jesus' own body on the cross. Jones knew that the love of Jesus working in and through the Church could melt the mountains of racism so that every valley would one day be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low making way for God's love. However, Blessed Absalom knew that the church was called to make that love evident in Philadelphia at the onset of the Yellow Fever epidemic.

Despite the support offered to the refugee slaveholders over the African American population, Jones and Allen answered the call from Benjamin Rush to come to the aid of Philadelphia, enlisting African Americans who buried the dead, nursed the sick, dug graves, and carried on the most loathsome tasks associated in keeping the city afloat. They were, in essence, the front-line workers of the day. Instead of being thanked, many were criticized in the press as exploiting the wealthy when African American nurses were paid a fair wage

comparable to that of white nurses. Additionally, the suffering of these front-line workers of color was trivialized with the misconception that they were immune to yellow fever. Jones and Allen refuted this claim by citing burial records as proof that African Americans were dying at phenomenal rates from Yellow Fever. There were also attempts to introduce classism as the press sought to distinguish between the respectable Africans of Philadelphia and those described as the “vilest”ⁱⁱⁱ blacks among those who were toiling to save the lives of the city’s residents.

Seeing this unscrupulous attempt at class division, Blessed Absalom and the Reverend Richard Allen would have none of this final attempt at degrading the human dignity of the front-line workers of color. Their statements issued in their writings clearly demonstrated that those working tirelessly, in their words, demonstrated a “humanity and real sensibility”^{iv} that was unprecedented, and that an affront to the poorest worker was an affront to all who were struggling in the epidemic of yellow fever.

The epidemic of Yellow Fever passed and Philadelphia recovered. However, we must examine our society to see how much have we addressed the epidemics of white supremacy, xenophobia, gender bias, classism, and other forms of division that have stood between us and the beloved community that God has intended for us to have. So, we enter this Lenten period with the prayers on our lips and lament in our hearts for

inequities we have experienced and

injustices inflicted upon others due to our failings.

As the prophet Isaiah asked Israel, we must also ask ourselves, “do we really fear God?” Have our hearts been hardened?

Have we forgotten what is good when we see children ripped from their mother's breasts once again and families separated at the Mexican border of our nation never to be held in each other's arms again?

Have we forgotten what is good when we see those suffering from mental illness in the streets – when Daniel Prude cried out “Jesus help me” in his final hours?

Have we forgotten what is good when a child calls for her Daddy but instead is met with pepper spray by adults charged with protecting the vulnerable?

Were you there?

Was I there?

God you call us all to account for complicity with injustice.

We admit that we live with the mountains of injustice that blind us to the suffering around us.

God, we pray, do not leave us in our slavery to sin.

God, we pray, do not abandon us to exist with the hardened hearts of indifference.

God, we pray, do not forsake us in the storms of life that rage about us as

COVID-19,
unemployment,
insurrection at the highest levels of government and
domestic terrorism.

O God, we pray, that you melt the mountains of despair and grant us the mercy that flows down from the cross of Jesus as our healing grace.

make straight the pathway as you to rend the heavens and come among us to reshape the landscape of our world;

Erect new mountains where we can climb to see the vision and hope for a beloved community.

For we know

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be*

*Great is Thy faithfulness, great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me^v*

remember:

The Lord's kindness has not ended;

God's mercies are not exhausted.

They are renewed every morning.

Great is Your faithfulness, O God (Lamentations 3:22-23)^{vi}

ⁱ Washington, James Melvin. *Conversations with God: two centuries of prayers by African Americans*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995 (12).

ⁱⁱ Miller, Jacquelyn C. "The Wages of Blackness: African American Workers and the Meanings of Race during Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever Epidemic" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 129, No. 2 (2005): 163-194.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, Absalom, Richard Allen. *A Narrative of the proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the year 1793: and A refutation of some censures thrown upon them in some late publications*. Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, at Franklin Head, 1794 (13).

^{iv} *ibid.*, (10).

^v Boyer, Horace. *Lift Every Voice and Sing II: an African American hymnal*. New York: Church Publishing Inc., 1993.

^{vi} Scripture Reference taken from "A Lament" in The Episcopal Diocese of Rochester Ash Wednesday Liturgy, 2021.