

## The Collect for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Set us free, heavenly Father, from every bond of prejudice and fear; that, honoring the steadfast courage of your servant Absalom Jones, we may show forth in our lives the reconciling love and true freedom of the children of God, which you have given us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## The Gospel John 15:12-15

Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."

## Exodus 14:1-15

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying "Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and camp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea." For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, 'They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.'

"Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." And they did so. When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?"

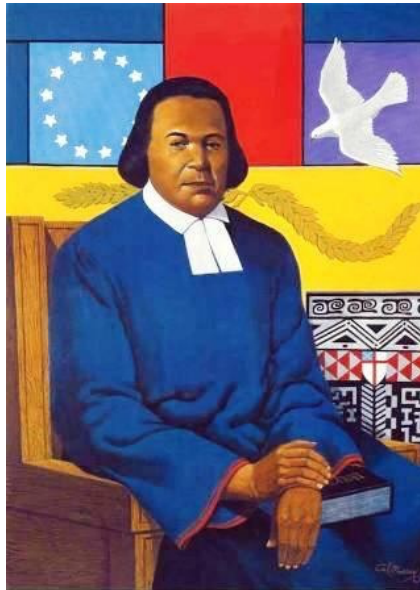
So, he made his chariot ready and took his people with him; and he took six hundred select chariots, and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out boldly.

Then the Egyptians chased after them with all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and they overtook them camping by the sea, beside Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon. As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD.

Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt? "Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians.' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for you will never see them again forever." "The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent."

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward.



Sermon by Rev. Dr. Aloha Smith  
**Father Absalom Jones 1786-1818**

- This Exodus passage was a favorite of Absalom Jones.
- Poised at a point of land between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aquaba on the border between Egypt and Arabia, water on both sides, how can the fleeing Jews go forward?
- How can anyone think of going forward? In fear and anger, they think only of looking backward to the oncoming Egyptian army, with the Pharaoh's own chariots.
- Absalom Jones was possessed of an independent and self-sufficient spirit. He must have been set up to understand and respond to Moses' words, given in this terrible circumstance, as pertaining to himself and his people.  
"Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for you will never see them again forever."
- He purchased himself out of slavery.
- He taught himself how to read - how do you suppose that was even possible?
- But the Bible was his textbook, and he used it to fulfill his vocation of a leader to the people.

- He organized insurance companies, health care treatment and compassionate burials during a yellow fever epidemic.
- He helped to establish institutions to give Black people some economic stability.
- When Fr. Bob and I were getting our doctorates at the University of the South in Sewanee, TN, we attended Otey Chapel, which was the town Episcopal Church off campus. One Sunday, the second lesson was read by a Black woman in charge of a college summer program there for Black and impoverished high school students to accustom them to the idea and the possibility of a college education for themselves. Her ancestors had been enslaved at the same spot years ago where she stood that day. She had experienced what Paul had experienced, and it was as if the 2nd letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 11:16-33) had just come to life. As Moses repeated what God had said, "Tell the people to go forward!"
- If we look at the Gospel passage for today, I have a bit of a question. Remember that Greek does not have the kind of punctuation that we're used to in English. There are no periods. The grammar, if we can figure it out, usually can make the meaning clear. But at verse 14, the punctuation might require some extra thought. Is it "You are my friends if you do what I command you" or is it "You are my friends. If you do what I command you, no longer do I call you slaves." Absalom was clear that he was a friend of God. And he followed Christ's command. It works out to be the same in Absalom's life. Will it be the same in ours? Those folks in the Philadelphia church, even though the name of their town means "Brotherhood", did not understand either friendship with God or brotherhood with people. Absalom's preaching was so successful that Black people filled the church, outnumbering the whites. And so, one morning, they were asked to leave the building. And the same thing happened right here at Good Shepherd in our century! Which is why we have Good Shepherd today, a place that welcomes everybody.
- But how do we learn? How do we profit from these tragic stories? How do we keep on keeping on?
- Absalom Jones did. Even though he was ordained Deacon in the Episcopal Church in 1795, he was not allowed to be a priest until 1802, the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church, but even then, his church had to be segregated.

- His life-long friend, Richard Allen, could not put up with this treatment and took a different path, founding the African Methodist Episcopal Church.
- How do we do that? Each of us must hear this commandment and inspired by Absalom Jones's tirelessness, and we should carry on. It does not mean that we will see success. It does not mean that we are in charge of the timing. He wasn't; he had to wait, but in his heart, he had to say, "Here I am, Lord."
- He knew what God had said, "***Tell the people to go forward!***"

Amen? Amen.