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A Thanksgiving Sermon

Absalom Jones

This is an annotated edition of the original text of Absalom Jones' *Thanksgiving Sermon*, preached on January 1, 1808, and published by the St. Thomas African Episcopal Church of Philadelphia. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained; minor typographic errors have been corrected.

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Introduction

Absalom Jones (1746-1818), together with Richard Allen, were among the earliest ordained black ministers in the United States. Jones was born in Delaware and sold to a Philadelphia storeowner at age 16. He later purchased freedom for both his wife and himself. Both Jones and Allen were educated by Quakers in Philadelphia, where they were students at antislavery activist Anthony Benezet's school. See Henry Cadbury, "Negro Membership in the Society of Friends," *Journal of Negro History* 21 (1936) 2:154. Following the segregation of blacks in an Episcopal church in Philadelphia in 1786, Jones and Allen founded a black congregation, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church. This was the 'mother church' for what became, beginning in 1816, the African Methodist Episcopal Church movement. Jones functioned as a minister in the Philadelphia community until his death, becoming one of the major African American figures to emerge from the eighteenth century.

Jones preached the *Thanksgiving Sermon* on January 1, 1808, the date upon which the United States outlawed importation of foreign slaves. This holiday became one of the central antislavery celebration days among free black communities in the antebellum North. See William B. Gravely, "The Dialectic of Black Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808-1863," *The Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982) 4:302-317. Jones begins by comparing African slavery in America to the events of Hebrew slavery in Egypt recounted in Exodus, adducing "that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage, is not the only instance, in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name." (page 10) He asserts that God has witnessed the events of African slavery, but divine intervention also brought an end to legal importation of slaves. Jones proposes that the duties of the faithful are devout gratitude for divine intercession against slavery; prayers for divine influence to bring further legal sanction against slavery; personal industry and integrity by blacks to remain deserving of divine deliverance; gratitude towards antislavery societies and individuals for their work against slavery; and annual celebration of New Year's Day as an occasion for historical commemoration of slavery and liberation.

For further discussion of Jones, see Joanna Brooks, "The Early American Republic and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 62 (2005) 1:67-92; Philip Gould, "Race, Commerce, and the Literature of Yellow Fever in Early National Philadelphia," *Early American Literature* 35 (2000) 2:157-186; Thomas E. Will, "Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia's Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen," *Pennsylvania History* 69 (2002) 4:558-576; Jacqueline Bacon, "Rhetoric and Identity in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen's *Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 125 (2001) 1-2:61-90; and Ann C. Lammers, "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Christian Theology and Black Consciousness in New Alliance," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 51 (1982) 2:159-184.

— Joe Lockard

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At a meeting of the Vestry of St. Thomas's, or the African Episcopal, Church, held on Wednesday, February 11, 1808.

Resolved, That the thanks of the Vestry be presented to the Rev. Absalom Jones, for his sermon preached in the said Church, on the first day of January last; and that he be requested to furnish a copy of the same to be printed.

Extract from the Minutes,

WILLIAM COLEMAN, Secretary.

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A THANKSGIVING SERMON.

EXODUS, iii. 7,—8.

And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their task-masters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

THESE words, my brethren, contain a short account of some of the circumstances which preceded the deliverance of the children of Israel from their captivity and bondage in Egypt.

They mention, in the first place, their *affliction*. This consisted in their privation of liberty: they were slaves to the kings of Egypt, in common with their other subjects; and they were slaves to their fellow slaves. They were compelled to work in the open air, in one of the hottest climates

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in the world; and, probably, without a covering from the burning rays of the sun. Their work was of a laborious kind: it consisted of making bricks, and travelling, perhaps to a great distance, for the straw, or stubble, that was a component part of them. Their work was dealt out to them in tasks, and performed under the eye of vigilant and rigorous masters, who constantly upbraided them with idleness. The least deficiency, in the product of their labour, was punished by beating. Nor was this all. Their food was of the cheapest kind, and contained but little nourishment: it consisted only of leeks and onions, which grew almost spontaneously in the land of Egypt. Painful and distressing as these sufferings were, they constituted the smallest part of their misery. While the fields resounded with their cries in the day, their huts and hamlets were vocal at night with their lamentations over their sons; who were dragged from the arms of their mothers, and put to death by drowning, in order to prevent such an increase in their population, as to endanger the safety of the state by an insurrection. In this condition, thus degraded and oppressed, they passed

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nearly four hundred years. Ah! who can conceive of the measure of their sufferings, during that time? What tongue, or pen, can compute the number of their sorrows? To them no morning or evening sun ever disclosed a single charm: to them, the beauties of spring, and the plenty of autumn had no attractions: even domestick endearments were scarcely known to them: all was misery; all was grief; all was despair.

Our text mentions, in the second place that, in this situation, they were not forgotten by the God of their fathers, and the Father of the human race. Though, for wise reasons, he delayed to appear in their behalf for several hundred years; yet he was not indifferent to their sufferings. Our text tells us, that he saw their affliction, and heard their cry: his eye and his ear were constantly open to their complaint: every tear they shed, was preserved, and every groan they uttered, was recorded; in order to testify, at a future day, against the authors of their oppressions. But our text goes further: it describes the Judge of the world to be so much moved, with what he saw and what he heard, that

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he rises from his throne—not to issue a command to the armies of angels that surrounded him to fly to the relief of his suffering children—but to come down from heaven, in his own person, in order to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians. Glory to God for this precious record of his power and goodness: let all the nations of the earth praise him. *Clouds and darkness are round about him, but righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. O sing unto the Lord a new song, for he hath done marvelous things: his right hand and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory. He hath remembered his mercy and truth toward the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God.*

The history of the world shows us, that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage, is not the only instance, in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name. He is as unchangeable in his nature and character, as he is in his wisdom and power. The great and blessed

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event, which we have this day met to celebrate, is a striking proof, that the God of heaven and earth *is the same, yesterday, and to-day, and for ever*. Yes, my brethren, the nations from which most of us have descended, and the country in which some of us were born, have been visited by the tender mercy of the Common Father of the human race. He has seen the affliction of our countrymen, with an eye of pity. He has seen the wicked arts, by which wars have been fomented among the different tribes of the Africans, in order to procure captives, for the purpose of selling them for slaves. He has seen ships fitted out from different ports in Europe and America, and freighted with trinkets to be exchanged for the bodies and souls of men. He has seen the anguish which has taken place, when parents have been torn from their children, and children from their parents, and conveyed, with their hands and feet bound in fetters, on board of ships prepared to receive them. He has seen them thrust in crowds into the holds of those ships, where many of them have perished from the want of air. He has seen such of them as have escaped from that noxious place of confinement, leap into

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the ocean; with a faint hope of swimming back to their native shore, or a determination to seek early retreat from their impending misery, in a watery grave. He has seen them exposed for sale, like horses and cattle, upon the wharves; or, like bales of goods, in warehouses of West India and American sea ports. He has seen the pangs of separation between members of the same family. He has seen them driven into the sugar; the rice, and the tobacco fields, and compelled to work—in spite of the habits of ease which they derived from the natural fertility of their own country in the open air, beneath a burning sun, with scarcely as much clothing upon them as modesty required. He has seen them faint beneath the pressure of their labours. He has seen them return to their smoky huts in the evening, with nothing to satisfy their hunger but a scanty allowance of roots; and these, cultivated for themselves, on that day only, which God ordained as a day of rest for man and beast. He has seen the neglect with which their masters have treated their immortal souls; not only in withholding religious instruction from them, but, in some instances, depriving them of access to the

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means of obtaining it. He has seen all the different modes of torture, by means of the whip, the screw, the pincers, and the red hot iron, which have been exercised upon their bodies, by inhuman overseers: overseers, did I say? Yes: but not by these only. Our God has seen masters and mistresses, educated in fashionable life, sometimes take the instruments of torture into their own hands, and, deaf to the cries and shrieks of their agonizing slaves, exceed even their overseers in cruelty. Inhuman wretches! though You have been deaf to their cries and shrieks, they have been heard in Heaven. The ears of Jehovah have been constantly open to them: He has heard the prayers that have ascended from the hearts of his people; and he has, as in the case of his ancient and chosen people the Jews, *come down to deliver* our suffering country-men from the hands of their oppressors. He *came down* into the United States, when they declared, in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade in our African fellow-men, should cease in the year 1808: He *came down* into the British Parliament, when they passed a law to put an end to the same iniquitous trade in May, 1807:

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He came down into the Congress of the United States, the last winter, when they passed a similar law, the operation of which commences on this happy day. Dear land of our ancestors! thou shalt no more be stained with the blood of thy children, shed by British and American hands: the ocean shall no more afford a refuge to their bodies, from impending slavery: nor shall the shores of the British West India islands, and of the United States, any more witness the anguish of families, parted for ever by a publick sale. For this signal interposition of the God of mercies, in behalf of our brethren, it becomes us this day to offer up our united thanks. Let the song of angels, which was first heard in the air at the birth of our Saviour, be heard this day in our assembly: *Glory to God in the highest, for these first fruits of peace upon earth, and good will to man: O! let us give thanks unto the Lord: let us call upon his name, and make known his deeds among the people.* Let us *sing psalms unto him and talk of all his wondrous works.*

Having enumerated the mercies of God to our nation, it becomes us to ask, what shall we render

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unto the Lord for them? Sacrifices and burnt offerings are no longer pleasing to him: the pomp of public worship, and the ceremonies of a festive day, will find no acceptance with him, unless they are accompanied with actions that correspond with them. The duties which are inculcated upon us, by the event we are now celebrating, divide themselves into five heads.

In the first place, Let not our expressions of gratitude to God for his late goodness and mercy to our countrymen, be confined to this day, nor to this house: let us carry grateful hearts with us to our places of abode, and to our daily occupations; and let praise and thanksgivings ascend daily to the throne of grace, in our families, and in our closets, for what God has done for our African brethren. Let us not forget to praise him for his mercies to such of our colour as are inhabitants of this country; particularly, for disposing the hearts of the rulers of many of the states to pass laws for the abolition of slavery; for the number and zeal of the friends he has raised up to plead our cause; and for the privileges, we enjoy, of worshipping God,

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agreeably to our consciences, in churches of our own. This comely building, erected chiefly by the generosity of our friends, is a monument of God's goodness to us, and calls for our gratitude with all the other blessings that have been mentioned.

Secondly, Let us unite, with our thanksgiving, prayer to Almighty God, for the completion of his begun goodness to our brethren in Africa. Let us beseech him to extend to all the nations in Europe, the same humane and just spirit towards them, which he has imparted to the British and American nations. Let us, further, implore the influence of his divine and holy Spirit, to dispose the hearts of our legislatures to pass laws, to ameliorate the condition of our brethren who are still in bondage; also, to dispose their masters to treat them with kindness and humanity; and, above all things, to favour them with the means of acquiring such parts of human knowledge, as will enable them to read the holy scriptures, and understand the doctrines of the Christian religion, whereby they may become, even while they are the slaves of men, the freemen of the Lord.

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Thirdly, Let us conduct ourselves in such a manner as to furnish no cause of regret to the deliverers of our nation, for their kindness to us. Let us constantly *remember the rock whence we were hewn, and the pit whence we were digged. Pride was not made for man*, in any situation; and, still less, for persons who have recently emerged from bondage. The Jews, after they entered the promised land, were commanded, when they offered sacrifices to the Lord, never to forget their humble origin; and hence, part of the worship that accompanied their sacrifices consisted in acknowledging, *that a Syrian, ready to perish, was their father*: in like manner, it becomes us, publickly and privately, to acknowledge, that an African slave, ready to perish, was our father or our grandfather. Let our conduct be regulated by the precepts of the gospel; let us be sober minded, humble, peaceable, temperate in our meats and drinks, frugal in our apparel and in the furniture of our houses, industrious in our occupations, just in all our dealings, and ever ready to honour all men. Let us teach our children the rudiments of the English language, in order to enable them to ac-

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quire a knowledge of useful trades; and, above all things, let us instruct them in the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, whereby they may become *wise unto salvation*. It has always been a mystery, Why the impartial Father of the human race should have permitted the transportation of so many millions of our fellow creatures to this country, to endure all the miseries of slavery. Perhaps his design was, that a knowledge of the gospel might be acquired by some of their descendants, in order that they might become qualified to be the messengers of it, to the land of their fathers. Let this thought animate us, when we are teaching our children to love and adore the name of our Redeemer. Who knows but that a Joseph may rise up among them, who shall be the instrument of feeding the African nations with the bread of life, and of saving them, not from earthly bondage, but from the more galling yoke of sin and Satan.

Fourthly, Let us be grateful to our benefactors, who, by enlightening the minds of the rulers of the earth, by means of their publications and remonstrances against the trade in our countrymen, have

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produced the great event we are this day celebrating. Abolition societies and individuals have equal claims to our gratitude. It would be difficult to mention the names of any of our benefactors, without offending many whom we do not know. Some of them are gone to heaven, to receive the reward of their labours of love towards us; and the kindness and benevolence of the survivors, we hope, are recorded in the book of life, to be mentioned with honour when our Lord shall come to reward his faithful servants before an assembled world.

Fifthly, and lastly, Let the first of January, the day of the abolition of the slave trade in our country, be set apart in every year, as a day of publick thanksgiving for that mercy. Let the history of the sufferings of our brethren, and of their deliverance, descend by this means to our children, to the remotest generations; and when they shall ask, in time to come, saying, What mean the lessons, the psalms, the prayers and the praises in the worship of this day? let us answer them, by saying, the Lord, on the day of which this is the anniversary, abolished the trade which dragged your fathers

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from their native country, and sold them as bondmen in the United States of America.

Oh thou God of all the nations upon the earth! We thank thee, that thou art *no respecter of persons*, and that thou *hast made of one blood all nations of men*. We thank thee, that thou hast appeared, in the fulness of time, in behalf of the nation from which most of the worshipping people, now before thee, are descended. We thank thee, that the sun of righteousness has at last shed his morning beams upon them. *Rend thy heavens*, O Lord, and *come down* 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*. Send thy gospel, we beseech thee, among them. May the nations, which now *sit in darkness*, behold and rejoice in its *light*. May *Ethiopia soon stretch out her hands unto thee*, and lay hold of the gracious promise of thy everlasting covenant. Destroy, we beseech thee, all the false religions which now prevail among them; and grant, that they may soon *cast their idols, to the moles and the bats* of the wilderness. O, hasten that

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glorious time, when the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall cover the *earth, as the waters cover the sea*; when *the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them*; and, when, *instead of the thorn, shall come up the fir tree, and, instead of the brier, shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name and for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off*. We pray, O God, for all our friends and benefactors, in Great Britain, as well as in the United States: reward them, we beseech thee, with blessings upon earth, and prepare them to enjoy the fruits of their kindness to us, in thy everlasting kingdom in heaven: and dispose us, who are assembled in thy presence, to be always thankful for thy mercies, and to act as becomes a people who owe so much to thy goodness. We implore thy blessing, O God, upon the President, and all who are in authority in the United States. Direct them by thy wisdom, in all their deliberations, and O save thy people from the calamities of war. Give peace in our day, we beseech thee, O thou *God of peace!* and grant, that.

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this highly favoured country may continue to afford a safe and peaceful retreat from the calamities of war and slavery, for ages yet to come. We implore all these blessings and mercies, only in the name of thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. And now, O Lord, we desire, with angels and arch-angels, and all the company of heaven, ever more to praise thee, saying, *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty: the whole earth is full of thy glory.*

Amen.

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NEW YEAR'S ANTHEM,

Sung in the African Episcopal Church of ST. THOMAS.
Jan. 1, 1808.

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL FORTUNE.

I.

TO Thee, Almighty, gracious power,
Who sit'st, enthron'd, in radiant heaven;
On this bless'd morn, this hallow'd hour,
The homage of the heart be given!

II.

Lift up your souls to God on high,
The fountain of eternal grace,
Who, with a tender father's eye,
Look'd down on Afric's helpless race!

III.

The nations heard His stern commands!
Britannia kindly sets us free;
Columbia tears the galling bands,
And gives the sweets of Liberty.

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IV.

Then strike the lyre! your voices raise!
Let gratitude inspire your song!
Pursue religion's holy ways,
Shun sinful Pleasure's giddy throng!

V.

From Mercy's seat may grace descend,
To wake contrition's heartfelt sighs!
O! May our pious strains ascend,
Where ne'er the sainted spirit dies!

VI.

Then, we our freedom shall retain,
In peace and love, and cheerful toil:
Plenty shall flow from the wide main,
And golden harvests from the soil.

VII.

Ye nations that to us restore
The rights which God bestow'd on all;
For you His blessing we implore:
O! listen further to his call!

VIII.

From one parental stem ye spring,
A kindred blood your bosoms own;
Your kindred tongues God's praises sing,
And beg forgiveness at his throne:

IX.

O, then, your mutual wrongs forgive,
Unlock your hearts to social love!
So shall ye safe and happy live,
By grace and blessings from above.