

ABSALOM JONES

AMERICA'S FIRST BLACK PRIEST

MARK FRANCISCO BOZZUTI-JONES

Illustrated by
CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL TAYLOR



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Dedicated to Kathy and Mark Anthony Bozzuti-Jones

and

Black Christians throughout the world.

Mark Francisco Bozzuti-Jones

I dedicate this work to my mother,

Audrey Chaney Taylor.

Christopher Michael Taylor



Introduction: Absalom Jones and the Faith Heritage of Black Christians

Absalom Jones is a son of Africa, a descendant of a faithful people. Since the beginning, Africans have known God.

God was in Africa from the moment of creation and continues to be in Africa today.

Africans, from the whole of Africa, with diverse tribes and cultures, have always practiced their faith in God as Creator and Sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen.

Africans practiced their faith in God by honoring nature: giving special respect to the mysteries of life manifested in plants, the creatures of the seas and air,



the animals in the forest and wilderness, the power in nature and the weather, and in all the mysteries of life.

They practiced their faith in God by loving each other, respecting the things they did not understand, living their lives to the best of their ability, honoring the ancestors, learning from other peoples, and striving to be good stewards of the earth.

In honoring God since the beginning, they tried their best to live *Ubuntu*, a word that can be translated as “I am because we are,” and to live the golden rule of treating others the way they want to be treated. They tried to honor God and each other and ensure that life had meaning for each person.

They also believed in learning from other cultures and different religions. Like all human beings, they had moments when they turned away, disobeyed God, and failed to practice the way of love.

It is important to remember that, since the beginning of time, there have always been Africans who remained faithful to God and who have been called as prophets,

saints, martyrs, and evangelists. There have always been righteous, saintly, and faithful Africans. And with the passage of time, Africans encountered many other religious faith traditions.

African countries are present in the Hebrew scriptures: Ethiopia, Egypt, and Libya. African Jews are as old as Judaism itself. In Acts 8:26–40, we read the story of an Ethiopian eunuch who converts to Christianity. He is the first individual convert to Christianity, and he is African.

What this tells us is that Judaism and Christianity existed in Africa long before they existed in many European countries.

God, faith, and Christianity existed in Africa long before the arrival of Europeans.

When the European slave traders and colonizers arrived in Africa, many Africans were practicing Jews, Christians, and Muslims, as well as practitioners of all manner of indigenous religious practices. Africans treasured and practiced their faith with devotion, reverence, and commitment.

Among the captured slaves brought to the Americas (the United States of America, Jamaica, Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba, to name a few) were practicing Christians who knew the story of the enslavement of the Hebrew people, and they knew how Christians had been persecuted and crucified by Rome.

Their faith in God and their knowledge of how faithful people had been persecuted for hundreds and thousands of years prepared them for their journey from Africa, where they were shackled in the bottomless pits of slave ships, arrived in strange lands, and lived as persecuted and enslaved people.

Even in the most dehumanizing and soul-stealing situations, the Africans held fast to their faith. They sang their faith and practiced their faith. The Christian slaves encouraged each other to remain faithful to God and they passed on their faith: they sang Spirituals, read the Bible, shared the Scriptures they had memorized, and remembered that they were beloved children of God.

This is the lineage of Absalom Jones. It is to people such as these that Absalom Jones was born.

Slaves were often forced to follow the religion of their owners. So, a Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, or Anglican owner would have insisted that the slaves observed the same religious practices.

The slave master of Absalom Jones was an Anglican. Absalom Jones learned the Anglican faith and practiced the Anglican faith. He accepted the Anglican faith as the path in which God wanted to lead him. At its root was the legacy of faith from his parents, grandparents, and a family tree of ancestors, stretching all the way back to Africa.

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1 Born into Slavery

Absalom Jones was born on February 8, 1746, about midway between the time when the first slave ship arrived in North America and when slavery finally became illegal in the United States.

Between 1619 and 1865, more than five million people from Africa were kidnapped, sold, enslaved, and shipped to America, making the era one of the ugliest and most brutal periods in history.

Enslaved people were sold as property. Those who bought them thought of them as objects, not people. They tried to tell the enslaved ones that they were subhuman, and that God wanted them to be that way.

Many slave traders used the Bible to justify their evil actions, even though that is not what the Bible teaches. Look at the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12, where Jesus commands us to love one another and to do to others as we would like them to do to us.

Enslaved people worked in the sugar, cotton, and tobacco fields to enrich their captors. The labor was harsh and brutal. They also built schools, churches, homes, government buildings, and provided the main workforce in America, even though they didn't get to take advantage of most of what they had built.



They were forced to work long hours in the hot sun. If anyone tried to escape, they were brutally beaten, often publicly punished, and sometimes killed. However, many enslaved people managed to escape, and many others risked their lives to help them do it.

Of course, the enslaved brought their varying tribal cultures and religious traditions with them from Africa. They had faith in God and carried deep within them the desire for freedom and a good life. Absalom Jones was born into slavery.





2 A Special Child

Absalom Jones was born in Sussex County, Delaware.

Because his mother was enslaved, he, too, was considered a slave from the moment he was born.

It was raining the day his mother went into labor, and it kept raining until the next day, making the fields too wet for anyone to work.

An elderly couple who helped deliver Absalom presented him to his mother and said, "This child will be special. Among your seven children, he will be a light and a true servant of God. He will bring God's peace, justice, and freedom to many. Absalom will be a child of goodness, truth, and beauty. He will show God's love to all who meet him."

His mother remembered all these things and pondered them in her heart.

As Absalom's mother held her son in her arms, she prayed that God would protect him and make him a servant and a man of peace. She cried because she knew the many dangers of slavery. But as a woman of faith, she believed in her heart that God would protect her child. She also offered her son to God, as she had done for all her children.

Every day his mother asked God to protect Absalom and make him a child of goodness, truth, and beauty — to make him a person of peace. As she fed him and nurtured him, she told him Bible stories about the ways God protected and freed the people of Israel. She also told him stories of the enslaved people who committed their lives to attaining freedom for others.



Absalom grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and all the people who met him. People spoke about his determination, kindness, and bravery, even as a child. He worked hard to be helpful to his parents and his friends. More than anything else, he loved to listen to the Bible stories and sing songs in worship.

