

## Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary

In 1619, "...20 and odd Negroes...." arrived in the English settlement we now call Virginia. Abducted, brutalized, enslaved and transported they were brought to the "The New World" from their homeland of Angola. Or, at least that is what it was renamed. Lost forever are their native names, language, customs and religion. What we know is captain William Tucker took two of them, a man and a woman, into his household renamed them and allowed them to marry. So, Isabella and Anthony gave birth to William the first recorded black child born in what would become the United States of America. William was baptized as an Anglican in 1624.

This year in The United States, and in the Episcopal Church some will mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of William's parents, their fellow travelers and subsequent generations of Africans that were taken, broke and distributed to the Americas and the Caribbean. There's no consensus in the nation or in the church about acknowledging or marking this anniversary. Marking Individual or communal participation in and benefit from past evils are rarely acknowledged or accepted. Individuals and communities regularly dodge realities in at least two ways, "...by euphemism or denial..." When it comes to Africans transported and enslaved in America, the nation and the church has employed both means. This is why tonite is important. To break this cycle.

With the coming ashore of those first few people and William's birth and baptism was begun a wildly iterating economic, legal, political, psychological and theological system. A system begun and enlarged for the sole purpose of creating capital to found and maintain a colony and then a nation. As one author has put it, "Nearly everything that has made America exceptional grew out of slavery." This is no overstatement. Still, we avoid this inconvenient truth as individuals and stewards of institutions because it threatens our the national mythology etched on monuments, sung as political and religious hymnody and penned in the soaring rhetoric of our founding documents. What butchery did Thomas Jefferson do to his own conscious as he poetically spoke of freedom and liberty by day but slept next to an enslaved African woman each night? If you go to the Jefferson Memorial, you will hear on the third

panel of that monument, Jefferson's oblique confession and the dread that haunted him, "*Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever.*"

What further complicates this anniversary is the longstanding role of the Anglican church in slavery. In the year William was baptized, 1624, the Bishop of London wrote, "... Christianity is so far from discharging men from the duties of the station and condition in which it found them, Rather, it lays them under stronger obligations to perform those duties . . . ." Given his statement, one wonders if the Bishop of London had ever read the Book of Exodus and God's clear bias for the enslaved Hebrews and the defeat of Pharaoh! Closer to home, those deformed ideas are etched into the founding DNA of our institutions of higher learning. For example, the Cornerstone of The University of the South, popularly known as Sewanee was laid in October 10, 1860 with the following words, "...the gravest mission ever entrusted to man [is], that of redeeming Christianity, through the portals of slavery, an inferior, subject, dependent and necessary race, on which his whole order of civilization is based." What is popular to say when faced with this kind of archival documentation is simply that "those were the times and that was the thinking then." We recently heard Senate Majority Leader McConnell virtually utter those exact same words. But we should remember, when it comes to the apparatus of the development of white supremacy as a theology, economy, sociology and psychology, it is naive to underestimate its malignancy in our country, culture or our souls. William Faulker's popular quote is applicable and poignant here, "*The past is never dead. It's not even past.*"

This is Toni Morrison's point from her essay entitled, *The Slavebody and the Blackbody*. "What is "peculiar," she says "about New World slavery is not its existence but it's conversion into the tenacity of racism. The dishonor associated with having been enslaved does not inevitably doom one's heirs to vilification, demonization, or crucifixion. What sustains these latter is racism." Just this year, Morrison's point was tragically illustrated in an article in the New York Times. The article was about Keith "Bo" Tharpe, a man sentenced to death for the assault and murder of his sister-in-law right here in Georgia. Bo has been on Death Row for 28 years. I have met and spoken

with Bo. Bo is an African-American. Death Row in the State of Georgia is physically located in the heart of the Diocese, in Jackson Georgia. At the time of the Bo's trial, a juror in the case signed an Affidavit stating that there are two types of black people: "good ones and "niggers." That same juror went on to wonder out loud, "if black people even have souls." The point here is that this juror and many other citizens of our country have been successfully formed either consciously or unconsciously by a country, culture and even a church to understand that those of African descent are inferior, spiritually and otherwise. Bo's guilt or innocence in committing a crime should have been the focus of the juror, not wondering if the race of people he belongs to are endowed by their Creator with a soul. How did the juror even get to that trajectory of speculation? Have we interrogated our own formation and speculations? How many more Bo's have suffered because of juries not of their peers that harbor and act on these same kinds of speculations?

To remember Isabella, Anthony and their arrival of 400 years ago is to begin to understand that some of God's children systematically stripped away and justified the abuse and diminishing of some of God's other children and that the residue of that theft of labor and personhood lives on and is experiencing a resurgence today. There is safe harbor being given to hate with speeches from pulpits and presidential podiums alike these days. And safe harbor for hate is being provided by adoring crowds looking for relief from the difficulty and insecurity of modern life by accepting and amplifying ignorance dressed up as national pride. This new boldness around this old tragic creed is one part historical and one part futuristic. What I am saying is hate, xenophobia, voter suppression, mass incarceration and the militarism of local policing is increasing because white live births are down and black and brown live births are up in America!

Still, what propels us forward are the two irreducible ideas implicit in our conversation today. The irreducibility of God and of neighbor. Primacy of God and dignity of neighbor are our politics and govern our menu of possible solutions to complex problems. Any other approach grieves the heart of God and corrodes the soul of the perpetrator and the victim. God and neighbor are our politics. The opportunity for all of us now on this 400th anniversary is to pledge ourselves more fully to brave actions and conversations that intentionally acknowledge and address even

the most difficult parts of our life together as an American family, one home, one church, one community one legislative session at a time.

One more thing. A couple of years ago, a group of folks and I took a pilgrimage to Ghana, West Africa. Millions of Africans came to this country through the slave castles of the Cape Coast. So there we were in Ghana. Retaking the voyage. Retracing the steps. Reversing the exit through the *door of no return*. But something happened for me and for others on that trip that encouraged me. There we were the three of us, The Archbishop of West Africa, Daniel. A man with jet black skin, beautiful and shining. An Ashante. The dominant group of that region for centuries. They gained their dominance by capturing other Africans and selling them to Europeans. Sitting beside him was a member of our diocese. A white woman. A South Carolinian. A Charlestonian to be exact. A descendent of the purchaser of slaves. A direct beneficiary of stolen labor and stolen personhood- four of every ten Africans brought to America came through the port of Charleston. On the other side of the table from these two was me, a German, Irish and African American. This incredible conversation took place where else, in a Chinese restaurant! Steps were retraced in that conversation. Responsibility was accepted. The need for any contrived innocence was put to flight. Shame was put to shame in that brave conversation. Burdens were lightened. Both agreed that what we have together is now. What we have together is now. What is necessary on this journey of commemoration- seeing and repenting and repairing is not shame, guilt or self-flagellation by some or disorienting rage and despair by others, but rather a mutual and inspired courage to interrogate our lives and the institutions we are a part of for collusion with unjust systems and then to make appropriate amends.

Reconnecting with Isabella, Anthony and William and their story and their descendants story provokes lament and hope simultaneously. “When I think of them, their force, their life-giving properties, their humanity, their joy, their will, i think it ought to be enough to forestall the reach of racism’s tentacles-ought to be enough to protect us from its uninformed, uneducated, relentlessly toxic touch.” Just as the commitment of this community to Jesus’ vision of the Beloved Community ought to be enough. But allow me to let sister Maya Angelou have the final word in this sermon. Her words still

*dance in the imaginations of so many of us who are hoping AND working for an America that pleases God.*

*She says:*

*“Now if you listen closely, I’ll tell you what I know  
Storm clouds are gathering, The wind is gonna blow*

*The race of man is suffering, And I can hear the moan,  
‘Cause nobody, But nobody Can make it out here alone.”*

*Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise*

*Up from a past that’s rooted in pain  
I rise*

*I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise*

*Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear  
I rise*

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,*

*We are tonight with the beginning of this work... “the dream and the hope of the slave.”*

*Glory to God!*