

“Slaves Arriving”

*Part I of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Jeremiah 31:15

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From the Pulpit

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 28, 2019, Pentecost Seven, Proper 12, dedicated to the more than 12.5 million African men, women, and children who were brought to North and South America as slaves, to the 10 million souls who died in transport, to William Owen who passed to eternal life on July 17 and to Emerson Leigh Marker on her baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“Slaves Arriving”

“A Voice is heard in Ramah. Lamentations and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

Jeremiah 31:15

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Antonio and Isabella came to America on August 25, 1619.

They landed at Point Comfort (now Fort Monroe), in the settlement that would become Virginia. They arrived on the English Privateer ship, the White Lion. They were among the “20 and odd” Africans (as it was recorded) who had been captured from the slave ship San Juan Bautista in a fierce battle in the Bay of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico. Along with the White Lion, the English privateer ship, the Treasurer, also took enslaved Africans north to the colonies arriving a few days later.

Antonio and Isabella and the other Africans who arrived that day in August 1619 were slaves. This was not Ellis Island. This was not Plymouth Rock. These were not free men and women landing in the new world filled with hope and ready to begin their adventure in freedom and exploration.

They were arriving in exploitation. They were called human cargo. They had been captured in Kabasa, in the Angolan region of Africa, chained and then sold as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While the Portuguese had started taking and selling slaves from Africa in the late 16th Century, it had not reached the colonies until that August day. Over the next 246 years, the slave population in the United States would

grow to over 3.9 million by the 1860 Census. There were also another 500,000 free blacks in America by 1860.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, 57% of the population of South Carolina were slaves. In Mississippi, 55% were slaves. In Louisiana, 47%; in Alabama, 45%; in Georgia and Florida, 44%. In terms of absolute numbers, Virginia had the most slaves with 490,865. Across the south, by the outbreak of the Civil War, 33% of the total population were African Americans and 98% of them were slaves.

For those who argue that slavery was not the cause of the Civil War, I always say "*follow the color of money.*" All the Confederate paper currency had pictures of happy slaves picking cotton, serving their masters in the big house, and dancing for joy around campfires. If the economics of slavery didn't matter, why did war start in South Carolina, the state with the most slaves, and the first seven states to secede were the ones I just mentioned? The painful and evil truth of the economics of slavery meant that the men and women pictured on the money would never see a penny of it.

And now we live in a nation where the first American currency intended to right the wrong of exploitation with the picture of Harriet Tubman, leader and liberator in the Underground

Railroad movement, who was scheduled to replace the face of proud slave president Andrew Jackson on the \$20 is put off until 2025 by the current administration. Following the color of money is not just an old truth, it still holds sway today.

The first generation of slaves arriving, along with Isabella and Antonio, were Africans captured and brought to Virginia from the villages of Kabasa in Angola (as mentioned) and Ndongo, Kongo. Those first enslaved Africans were skilled farmers, herders, blacksmiths and artisans. They had the perfect skill set needed for the colonies to survive. Along with their culture, they also brought many ideas and innovations including floodways, crop cultivation, music and dance. It was their unbridled spirit and labor that helped build Hampton, Fort Monroe, America, and the White House, but they toiled through many generations of unpaid bondage servitude, civil unrest, and the march for civil rights, before their descendants became legal citizens.

Those first “20 and odd” enslaved Africans who arrived at Point Comfort marked the beginning of 246 years of unpaid servitude. For the first two generations from 1619 until 1661 some of the enslaved Africans were granted their freedom and in some cases were able to purchase the freedom of their relatives, start their own homesteads, and employ indentured

servants. Yet others were held in bondage for life or until 1661 when Virginia established a law legalizing lifelong servitude of all un-free Africans. Other colonies followed Virginia's example and established laws in the early 1700s which legalized lifelong servitude of ALL un-free Africans. There was seemingly no way out of slavery except escape or death.

Slavery is an indelible stain on America's soul. Slavery is our nation's original sin. While our nation was not the first and will not be the last to enslave others, the African slave trade which chained and packed 12.5 million people on ships much too small to safely hold such loads, cost the lives of 20% of those packed below deck for centuries. The bones of the dead, 2.5 million or more, are on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. If the ocean were dredged, you could find your way from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States by following the trail of bones. (*I had this number flipped in my Reflections on Friday.*)

Slavery is the worst human transgression perpetrated by one human being on another – whether in 1619 or 2019. In his book, *Adventures of an African Slaver*, published in 1854, Captain Theodore Canot wrote:

*I have no hesitation in sayings that three-fourths of the slaves sent abroad from Africa are the fruit of wars fomented by the avarice of (white people). We stimulate the negro's passions by the introduction of wants and fancies never dreamed of by the simple native, while slavery (in Africa) was an institution of domestic need and custom alone. But what was once a luxury has now ripened into an absolute necessity; so that **man**, in truth has become the coin of Africa.*

Canot goes on to describe the packing of people on the ships that he commanded:

As I crawled between decks, I could not imagine how this little army was to be packed or draw breath in a hold but twenty-two inches high! We made them lie down in each other's laps, like sardines in a can, and this way obtained space for the entire cargo.

Elsewhere he writes in the chronicles of his role in this evil institution:

"We created conditions for a smallpox epidemic aboard the ship. At length death was satisfied but not until 800 beings we had shipped in high health had dwindled to 497 skeletons."

In time, Isabella and Antonio were among the few slaves across the generations who were able to stay together. They had a son, William. William was the first child of African ancestry we know was born in America. William was baptized on January 4, 1624. From William, the generations of slaves born on our soil extends through history. Most of them, like William and Emerson today, were baptized Christians. Slavery was justified and rationalized in the name of Jesus in the heinous twists and turns of theology and history. Fortunately, there were churches like ours, who on September 26, 1852 said, we as America Christians can no longer abide in the connections between slavery and our faith – setting out as Abolitionist Christians and leaders in Ohio’s underground Railroad movement. Thanks be to God for our ancestors in faith here at First Church!

The sin of slavery and the deep and abiding effects of this original American sin are a stain on our soul as a nation. As I was preparing this first sermon today, the words of the prophet Jeremiah 31:15 kept haunting me. *“A Voice is heard in Ramah. Lamentations and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”*

I kept seeing the faces of mothers of Isabella and Antonio (obviously not their native Angolan names) weeping hysterically on the beaches of Angola watching their son and daughter sail away in chains, their lives stolen from them, their freedom stolen from them. I can see them refusing to be comforted for their lost children, because “they are no more.” My heart breaks over and over and over again as I see this trauma induced millions of times over the hundreds of years that ensue. Mothers giving birth to babies who are taken from them and sold to God knows who and only God knows where— carried away from them forever. I have no capacity whatsoever to conceive of this and hold this image in my heart and mind. This is the root of evil writ large. It is also the root of outrage, pain, trauma, distress and struggle of 400 years of Africans in America.

Through it all, the descendants of Antonio, Isabella and William have endured with dignity the cruelest barbaric acts of enslavement. They have endured through the Jim Crow era, segregation, and the disparity of basic human rights.

But, the chains of slavery have not gone away.

The chains of slavery have now become the unfair prison sentences for minor crimes where other ethnic groups receive

less or no prison time. The chains of slavery have now become racial profiling where you can get stopped merely because of the color of your skin or arrested for a crime you did not commit. The chains of slavery are now the disparity of young Brown and Black people not being able to get a quality education or a job because of the socioeconomic, financial conditions of their living environment. The chains of slavery are now people being moved out of urban communities because of gentrification. The chains of slavery are young Black and Brown girls being captured and forced into human trafficking and the sex slave industry. The chains of slavery are young people hooked on crack; heroin and opioids as a way to deal with the deck of cards they have been dealt. When will it **all end?**

The Transatlantic slave trade, just like the systematic elimination of the Native American Indian in the United States, and the Holocaust of the Jews and those challenging Nazi Germany are human tragedies and mammoth acts of inhumanity that changed the world. We cannot change history or the impact that it had on past generations. But we should always recognize and learn from the perils and transgressions of humankind's inhumanity against one another. And while we must fully acknowledge, lament, mourn and grieve the history of African Americans and the experience filled with too much

tragedy that has shaped black experience in America, we also need to ALWAYS remember this is not the whole story of African American history.

African Americans have contributed to the economic, academic, social, cultural and moral well-being of this nation. Without African Americans, some of America's crowning achievements would never have been possible. Would American moral leadership be as strong without Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. or Thurgood Marshall? Would American literature be as prolific without the giants of the Harlem Renaissance and the writers and poets of our generation? Would American music have conquered the world without pioneers like Robert Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Marian Anderson and James Brown? Could we claim America as the most innovative nation on earth without the [invention of the modern traffic light](#), the perfection of the [carbon filament](#) or the [use of the mathematics that propelled *Apollo* astronauts to the moon](#)? – to name only a few inventions. In government, law, science, industry, education and more, African Americans have given us tremendous leadership in this country.

African American culture is American culture, and African American discoveries are American discoveries. Without the

accomplishments of African Americans, the United States could not boast the ingenuity and cultural richness that we cherish. As we contemplate the challenges and injustices that African Americans still face, we remember the tragic way in which African American history began and draw inspiration from the heroes and trailblazers who fought under our country's principle that all people are created equal. These heroes and trailblazers, along with the millions of African Americans who have worked, created, invented, discovered, lived, aged and died over the past 400 years, have molded our national character such that the United States would be unrecognizable and, indeed, lesser without their cumulative presence.

In the next five Sundays, we will hear from the prophetic voices of African American preachers in our pulpit. We will grow in our faith and we will remember – Isabella, Antonio, William and the millions who came as slaves and rose through the tears and the pain to challenge and change the face and the faith of this nation forever. Amen.