

## **Sermon Transcript**

**The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber**

**Black History Month Evensong**

**Feb. 23, 2025**

Black history is the story of the enslaved, of immigrants, of people who have been here since before we were a country and people who just arrived yesterday. Black history is the story of people who built the wealth, prosperity and culture of this nation. It is a story of resistance, from Harriett Tubman to Marsha P Johnson to Tarana Burke, to babies born today who will lead the movements to come.

Black history is resistance and excellence and joy in the face of evil and oppression, from Jesse Owens winning medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics to Kendrick Lamar sending his own message in New Orleans just this month, not to mention all the excellence on display during the game.

Black history is the sublime, the transcendent, and the day-to-day. It is the great achievements, and it is your grandma's ham or pernil recipe passed on to the next generation.

Black history is American history, but more than that, there is no American history without Black history. Black history has always been here. It is right now. It cannot be siloed, it cannot be contained, it cannot be erased.

Black history is Absalom Jones and Richard Allen walking out of St George's when they were told to take their prayers upstairs to the gallery. Black history is Absalom then founding the St Thomas' African Episcopal Church, nearly 100 years before this church of St Martin's was founded, with whom we are so happy to be in community this evening.

Black history is Pauli Murray, nearly 100 years after Absalom Jones was ordained the first Black Episcopal priest, Pauli being ordained as the first female-presenting Black Episcopal priest.

Absalom had to go through a lot of trials, a lot of struggles -- from buying freedom for his wife and himself, to the St George's gallery incident, to waiting for years to be ordained a deacon and then a priest. Pauli Murray went through struggles too, from facing Jim Crow at UNC and Harvard to Jane Crow at Howard, to never quite being able to get the recognition they deserved or even make a living

as an attorney or a writer or a priest. And for both of these saints, Absalom and Pauli, that is just the tip of the iceberg of their challenges, and the tip of the iceberg of their greatness.

How is it that Absalom and Pauli and Harriett and Marsha and Tarana and Jesse and Kendrick and so many others are able to resist, able to overcome, able to rise above the obstacles and create positive change? How are all the Black saints and ordinary heroes of yesterday and today able to hope, to achieve, to shine their lights in this world? To thrive in systems, in a country where as Audre Lorde put it, "We were never meant to survive"? How are any Black folk or immigrants or trans people or government workers or lovers of democracy able to do that in the chaos of today?

I am the good shepherd, Jesus says. I know my own. I lay down my life for the sheep.

How did the Black saints of the past keep their vision and hope in their times? How do we keep going in the times we are in now?

By staying focused on who we are. By knowing there is a deeper truth. By seeing that underneath all the fear and confusion and violence there is something waiting to be born.

By listening for the voice of the good shepherd. The good shepherd who knows us. The good shepherd who cares for us and who would give his life for us.

There are lots of hired hands out there, hired hands who tell us they can lead us to where we want to go, hired hands who promise to make us richer, to make our lives easier, to make us great. Jesus is clear about what those hired hands are really about. The hired hand does not know us. The hired hand will scatter us, divide us, think that they can lie to us, fool us, erase us.

And when things get hard, when things get dangerous, the hired hand will run away. The hired hand is really about their own power and safety and wealth, and we all know about those hired hands, our earthly leaders and organizations, our corporations, even our churches sometimes, we all know about the limitations of even the most benign and well-intentioned hired hands.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus.

Black history month reminds us that our common story is a story of the colonizers and the indigenous, the enslavers and the enslaved, that some of us carry these different sides right within our

own DNA, that we will not be free until all of us is free, until we understand the deeper truth that we are all one flock with all one shepherd.

St Martin's and St Thomas', don't give in to the fear, to the hopelessness, to the idea that we have no power in these times. Those voices are the voice of the hired hand.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. We who are followers of the good shepherd, we need to tune in to the voice of our shepherd right now. We need to connect with the divine, the real, the true. We need to connect with each other, to be shepherds for each other.

Black history is you.

Black history is us.

Black history is truth.

Black history is right now. It cannot be siloed, it cannot be contained, it cannot be erased.

Our good shepherd knows this. And we know it too.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. Amen.