

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

February 6, 2022 | Black History Month

Sorrow Songs, a reflection by Nancy S, Taylor, based on Psalm 137

Allow me to introduce you to some of your ancestors ...early members of this church. A family of four. Juno and Essix were married in Boston in 1708. Juno was enslaved by Old South members Waitstill and Katherine Winthrop. Essix was enslaved by a William Clark ... not of this Church.

A decade after their wedding, in 1718, Juno brought their son, Essex Jr, to Old South, to be baptized. Juno, was also baptized the same day as her son. A year later, she brought their second son, Toby, to be baptized. A year after that, Juno became a member of this church.

Essix and Juno, husband and wife, were likely first generation Africans to this soil. Not by choice of course. These were no eager immigrants yearning to breathe free in a land of liberty. They came from freedom, but were denied it here. They arrived by force...both surviving the Middle Passage. They will have had that shared trauma between them. They will also have had shared memories of another continent, another land, shared memories of freedom and of dear family members, from whom they would be forever separated.

I imagine Essix and Juno met in Boston; finding comfort in each other's arms. Perhaps, away from the earshot of their enslavers, in furtive encounters while running errands, they shared stories of the land and the families from which each had each come. Did they talk together of the Middle Passage ... of its terrors, its indignities and deprivations, of the sufferings they each endured? Maybe not. Survivors of such horrors often do what they can to avoid summoning wincing memories.

Juno and Essex, and their sons Essex Jr and Toby appear in our records for marriage and baptism and membership. Additionally, Juno appears in Samuel Sewell's diary, mentioned in passing as Katherine Winthrop's servant. That's it. That is all we know of these members, this family of four, who, by virtue of their baptisms are kin to us.

How did they manage: this couple who were owned by different, dare I say, "respectable" Bostonians? How did they face each bleak, freedom-less day?

Howard Thurman claims that spirituals – songs born in the misshapen womb of slavery – were nothing less than salvific for a family like this. More than songs, spirituals were the Taste of Freedom...the Wings of Hope... an Open Door. They were everything.

Howard Thurman was a neighbor. A Christian minister, theologian and author – and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.. Indeed, it was Thurman who introduced King to Mahatma Gandhi and to the principles of non-violent resistance. Thurman served as the dean of BU's Marsh

Chapel from 1953 to 1965. He was the first black dean of a chapel at a majority-white university. In addition, he served on the faculty of Boston University School of Theology.

Here is what Howard Thurman writes about spirituals: “The existence of these songs is a monument to one of the most striking instances on record in which a people forged a weapon of offence and defense out of a psychological shackle. By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned...”

Old South Church was party to that profanation. Seven of our twenty-eight founding families were enslavers. Four of our first seven ministers were enslavers.

The authors of the spirituals mined the rich resources of the Judeo-Christian Bible and found in it a hope on which they could depend... a kind of hope their enslavers denied them.

A hope that did not disappoint: hope in the God who once delivered Daniel from the lion’s den, and who could just as well deliver them; hope in a God who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and surely could deliver them from slavery on this soil. Here was a God, who wept over the plight of the enslaved, yes, but who did not stop with tears. Here was a God who wept, and then acted in history, intervening with the powers and principalities, transforming bondage into freedom.

The authors of the spirituals, took these biblical stories, condensed them into poetry and then put the poetry to song.

In singing these songs, Essix & Juno, Essex Jr. and Toby, claimed a God who was personal, intimate and active. They claimed a God who loves and liberates the enslaved; who releases captives; who promises that those who suffer now will be rewarded in heaven, and those who are fat and happy at other’s expense, will get their just punishment.

In the Spirituals, heaven is a place, not some vague idea in the mind. It’s an actual place, a locale where the streets are pearl and the gates are gold; and where you are reunited with long lost loved ones...loved ones separated from you by death, and theft, and sale. Moreover, heaven is a place of rest, rest from harsh, forced, stolen labor; it is a place of peace and security ... absent whips and chains. Not least, heaven is a place of bright mansions with room for all. Indeed, hadn’t Jesus himself gone ahead to prepare a room for each singer of the spirituals?

In singing these songs, this family of four – Essex & Juno, Essex Jr. and Toby – encountered a God who was an intimate companion to them in their miseries; a God who met infinite desperation and matched it with a transcendent hope.

For Juno and Essix and their two boys: the spirituals were a revelation of God’s love, a particular, absolute, complete love for each of them. The spirituals were the divine rejoinder to the love and respect denied them by their oppressors.

To sing spirituals today – the first signature music of this land – to sing these songs born in the misshapen womb of slavery is, of necessity, to revisit and account for the full story of this nation: profanation and redemption, enslaver and enslaved. It is to acknowledge the potent forces of race, caste, and class, and the deadly and devastating sins of greed and pride.

Moreover, it is to confess that some of our Christian ancestors, products of their day, failed miserably at Christian practices: failed at love of neighbor, failed at kindness, failed at faithfulness, failed at gentleness, failed at self-control. Which is to say, these ancestors failed Juno and Essix, Essex Jr. and Toby.

To sing these spirituals today, is to wonder at those who wrested from the Bible, songs of defiant hope, and in the singing of them, redeemed a religion that “respectable” Christians had profaned.

For these ancestors – these theologians and singers of African descent, these biblical scholars and musical artisans – let us render to God our deepest respect and our highest thanksgiving.