

The Rev. James Richardson
Proper 28 — Nov. 13, 2022
Church of the Incarnation
Santa Rosa

Good morning busybodies! I am delighted to be back with you.

I bring you greetings from Trinity Cathedral, your cathedral in Sacramento.

For those of you who don't know me — or maybe have forgotten — I am Jim Richardson, and I was the priest-in-charge here at Incarnation for several years before I passed the candle to Pastor Stephen.

Thank you, Stephen, for inviting me. I am very grateful for your kind invitation and especially your friendship.

We sneaked in here at Christmas Eve last year, but this is the first time I've been back in this pulpit since leaving in 2018. I might have been back sooner except the pandemic put a crimp in things.

Today's opening prayer — or "collect" as we call it in Episcopal speak — is the only prayer in the prayer book that specifically mentions the Bible.

We hear this collect once a year just before Advent, probably as a reminder to crack open your Bible before Christmas.

We sometimes hear the Bible as a rule book. But if you hear the Bible only as a rule book, you are missing the richness and depth of the stories of our ancestors that are holy and human in every imaginable dimension.

Our ancestors wanted us to know about challenges they faced, the trials they overcame, the joys that held them up and the tragedies that brought them low.

They especially yearned to tell us about their encounters with the Holy — experiences they could barely describe or explain — but experiences that profoundly changed them and the world around them.

Like Jacob, they often even wrestled with God. They faltered; they fell flat on their faces.

They wanted us to know where they went wrong.

Yet, they found the courage to keep going. They knew to their bones this strength could only come from their creator. The Old Testament Hebrew prophets were especially obsessed with bringing justice to the poor, the lonely, the oppressed, the captives — the brokenhearted.

This morning we hear briefly from one of these prophets, Malachi, who lived about 500 years before the time of Christ.

Malachi lived in a poor country threatened from both within and without.

Nations were rising against nations.

Despots and greedy landowners oppressed and exploited the people.

Even the religious leaders were corrupt, and that outraged Malachi the most.

Life was cheap. Times were bleak.

But even though everything seemed beyond hope, Malachi proclaimed that evil would not prevail.

No matter how long it took, Malachi declared, the goodness and mercy of the Almighty would ultimately heal the world.

“See,” he said, “the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble.”

“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”

There have always been people of faith who stand up to evil; people who are out-of-step with their times; people who somehow find a path for healing and justice.

Sometimes we remember their names, like Malachi, and sometimes we don't.

Some of these people lived long ago, and some have sat in these very pews and are still with us.

Their stories shape us, even when we don't realize it.

And that brings me to why Pastor Stephen invited me to talk today. He asked me today to talk about my new book about my ancestors who shaped me and many others.

My book is titled *The Abolitionist's Journal: Memories of an American Antislavery Family*.

My ancestors were deeply religious and ardent antislavery abolitionists in the years before the Civil War.

I learned about them in midlife from a 300-page handwritten journal kept by my great-great grandfather, George W. Richardson, who was a Methodist pastor.

His life story sat unread on my father's bookshelf for decades until my father gave it to me when I was about to enter seminary.

I resolved then to retrace his footsteps. Since then, Lori and I have been to nine states over the past 20 years.

And it took that long to write the book, including while I was here. I had to retire to finish it.

Thank you for your support and encouragement throughout this long project that has finally come to fruition.

So please let me tell you a bit more of the story:

George Richardson and his wife Caroline used their house on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War.

During the war, George volunteered as the white chaplain to a Black Union Army regiment, posted in Memphis.

He saw bloodshed and carnage in Tennessee and Mississippi.

After the Civil War, he and his oldest son, Owen, and three Black pastors founded a school in Dallas for the previously enslaved. The Ku Klux Klan soon torched the school to the ground.

In act of defiance, the Dallas Black community rebuilt the school in a single weekend.

The city of Dallas then shut it down, and then George, joined by his wife Caroline, and daughter, Emma, rebuilt the school, this time in Austin.

Today the school thrives as Huston-Tillotson University, recognized as HBCU — an historically black college and university.

We were there a couple weeks ago celebrating the 147th anniversary.

Throughout his journal, George Richardson made clear that his deepest passion was the salvation of African Americans from bondage, ignorance, poverty, sickness and racial caste.

“I am willing,” George wrote, “to let the Lord and the colored people of the South have the balance of my life; for this part of my life is so much clear gain.”

His work is still with us.

The truth us, whether we recognize it or not, the legacy of slavery and segregation still shapes us.

But we also carry with us another legacy: The stories of those who fought to end slavery and dismantle segregation.

In every generation, there have been those who have fought against white supremacy, and all the forces of hatred and violence that still infects us.

This is why the Old Testament prophets still matter. This is why remembering them matters.

And what we do matters. We, too, shape those who come after us. Our story matters, for as Saint Paul tells us:

“Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing right.”

And as Jesus tells us:

“By your endurance you will gain your souls,” Jesus tells us.

AMEN