

***Sermon preached on the occasion of the ordination and consecration of the Rt. Rev. Deon K. Johnson
as bishop of the Diocese of Missouri
The Rt. Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows
13 June 2020
Christ Church Cathedral, St. Louis, MO***

In the name of the one, holy, and living God. Amen

Good morning Saints.

As we gather for this service, a few of us here at Christ Church Cathedral and all of you watching at home from across the Diocese of Missouri and across the church to ordain and consecrate Deon Kevin Johnson as your new bishop, I want you to take note of this moment. You'll want to be able to tell the story of this day. You may not have been able to gather together in one place but so many other things came together just right to make this day. On the ancestral lands of the Osage Indians on the lands that became a slave-holding state we come together in Pride Month to consecrate the first Black, Bajan-American gay man as your next bishop, using the readings set for the commemoration of Blessed Bishop Barbara C. Harris. And while the world has erupted chanting the words, Black Lives Matter calling for an end systemic racism and police brutality let it not be forgotten that these contemporary protest movements have their root on the streets of Ferguson, MO a few miles from here. So take note of this moment, there are no accidents, Church. Remember because someday, we're going to need you to tell the whole story.

I want to go back to the fall of 2005, during what was the then the triennial Episcopal Black Clergy Conference, Bishop Barbara Harris was holding court. The black clergy conference like most conference was typical—the days were filled with workshops, plenary speakers, and uplifting, inspiring, soul-nourishing worship in the Afro-Anglican tradition. But if you ever attended one of these gatherings, or a meeting of the Union of Black Episcopalians, you quickly learned that it was the story telling that made it worth the trip. At these gatherings young and old alike would gather around and listen to the elders tell the whole story of what it was to work for transformation and inclusion in the Episcopal church. What it was just to be black in the Episcopal Church. These stories were not just about the church but they were about the people, many who would never find themselves in the historical record. The stories, as they always do drew us in, broadened our view, made us a family, knit us together, helped us understand who we are.

On this night, Bishop Harris had us rapt as she dropped knowledge, and wisdom and guidance to those of us still young in the ministry. And you know, she didn't hold back. She didn't just tell the funny and happy stories but the painful ones too—the whole story. Though Bishop Harris might have laced in some jokes as she told it, she would tell the whole story and in so doing, help us imagine a new story for the future. Bishop Elect Deon was at that conference, just two years out of seminary and already demonstrating good humor, humility, and a gift for liturgy that demonstrated that it was possible to take the familiar forms of worship and make them come alive with prayers that spoke to the current moment. Honestly, those of us who had been ordained just a little longer were saying, who IS this guy? He was leading already. And he has been leading, building up the faithful, inspiring and building bridges in this church ever since.

Bishop Harris, who would have turned 90 yesterday now rests with the saints but make no mistake, her spirit is here and she is blessing this day. Deon, I imagine she would agree that you being consecrated Bishop of Missouri makes the story of the Episcopal Church a little more whole. I can also imagine her saying, And its about dang time!

In the gospel lesson we heard the familiar account of the women at the tomb from Luke. Why do you look for the living among the dead? Well to be fair, they weren't looking for the living—they went to tend to the dead. Perhaps they were too tired and traumatized from the events that had taken place—Jesus had really died on the cross. The body of Jesus needed to be anointed and they were going to do what needed to be done. But the stone had been rolled away and the two men in the snazzy robes remind them of the whole story—He is risen, he is not here, remember how he told you? Remember what he said in Galilee? He was to be handed over sinners, crucified, and then would rise on the third day. Remember the whole story?

And when the women remembered Jesus words and put it together with the empty tomb, they held the story and carried it back to share with the other disciples. Now, as we know, their story was taken as an idle tale. And Peter had to go and see for himself. But had the women not held that story, told that story, we would not be here. The news of the resurrection is not an old story retold as history—it is the story that brings us into God's future. And we tell it and retell it to remember who we are—people who find life in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ that we might learn over and over again how to die and rise.

Jesus burst out of the tomb and calls us to live out of the story that proclaims that when things look utterly desolate and defeated, God changes the ending and makes all things new. A story that reveals that especially when it looks like darkness will triumph over the light, or when it looks like wickedness and death will prevail, or when it looks like having hope is pointless that God can transform anything—anyone—and we are now different. That is our story!

Diocese of Missouri, you know our God is an on time God, right? This is your time. You are beginning a new ministry with your new bishop just as the world is shouting and crying out for the whole story. What we are seeing all around us is the death of the false narrative that status, money, and privilege at any cost matters above anything else including people. Voices from unexpected places are beginning to speak out and act on the matters of systemic racism, police brutality, transphobia, and economic injustice. We are at this point where we are despairing and grieving so much suffering and loss one minute and bearing hope the next as we see hearts softened and more and more people joining the effort to chip away at some of the death-dealing, dehumanizing ways of this world. In between the election of Deon as your bishop and today, the entire world has changed. The stone has been rolled away from the tomb, and there is no going back. God needs this new church you are becoming. Diocese of Missouri, you are called to rise, to rise and find your liberation in telling the whole story.

Telling the whole story will help heal this country and strengthen our witness as followers of Jesus. In this diocese you can tell the story of Henry Shaw's generosity that helped make possible the Botanical Garden, Flower Fund and even this beautiful cathedral. But you have to tell the whole story and include the enslaved people who made it possible for him to amass his wealth. And then write a new story about shedding wealth and status for the sake of those on the margins.

You can tell the story of missionary bishop Jackson Kemper, sent to plant a new diocese in Missouri and how he had especially good relationships with the indigenous peoples who were already here—okay.

But you have to tell the whole story of the galleries added to the church buildings so that the enslaved black folks could worship at a respectable social distance away from white folks. And then write a new story that witnesses to the beautiful diversity of the people of God united in the love of Christ.

And there are many more stories to be told and by listening to those on the margins, by drawing the circle wider to embrace the people and the stories that the world wants to forget, you help others find their place in story that is not just about dying, but about rising up and when you know the whole story, you can never be the same.

Your new bishop knows that on the other side of this pandemic, it will be oh so tempting to try to go back to the familiar—the buildings, the traditions, the things that worked just fine before and try to make things just the way they used to be. But we can't go back to the way things were and do we really want to? Our God is a God who moves us forward into the future—sometimes kicking and screaming but always forward. We have learned that we can worship and be the church without our buildings and that while some of the traditions were comforting, many of them just kept us struck, and while some things worked fine for some, they didn't work for everyone. We are being propelled into the future and you can't stay here. So I just want to be clear that you know what you have done. In calling Deon to be your bishop you will be pastored and loved by someone who is consumed with a passion for Jesus who has no patience for hate and exclusion. He will gently, clearly, prayerfully—deeply prayerfully, boldly and faithfully walk with you into the God's full future.

When Bishop Barbara Harris was elected suffragan bishop of Massachusetts she made a speech in accepting the call—it seems so right and fitting for this moment. She said, "I accept the invitation in the hope that the church will affirm it. Our work together must begin by venturing out on that broad platform of faith. Though we may not see clearly the full pathway that lies before us, we know that God, the God who chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, has brought us safe thus far and we trust our God for the next step of the journey."

Diocese of Missouri, I am asking you, because we are giving you one of the best we have to offer, to trust God as you go forth.

Church, the stone has long been rolled away from the tomb. You don't have to put it back. Let the whole story set you free and may God bless you on every step of the journey together. Amen.