

Faith and Freedom Across the Waters: Reflections on The Black Atlantic (1500–1800)

Excerpts from a PBS documentary compiled by the Very Rev. Bob Scott

This is the third in my series of articles on racial history and stories. It begins as a powerful journey through the roots of African American history. Hosted by historian Henry Louis Gates Jr., the episode uncovers how the earliest Africans came to the Americas—some free, others enslaved—and how their lives became bound to the economic, political, and spiritual tides of three continents: Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

The story reminds us that the transatlantic slave trade was not just a historical event but a vast moral tragedy that scarred humanity. The first “free” African to arrive in the Americas was Juan Garrido in 1513. In 1619, a pirate ship brought 20 slaves to Jamestown which were traded for food. One of them, Anthony Johnson, was eventually freed and given land. After his death, the colony of Virginia declared him an alien and seized his land. After that, slavery was based solely on race. Basing slavery on race was a European invention. It was a way to create wealth and was basically a main pillar supporting the creation of the United States. Millions were taken from their homes, enduring unimaginable suffering. Two-thirds died within one year of their arrival.

Yet within that suffering, a remarkable story of faith, endurance, and renewal began to unfold. Africans carried with them songs, prayers, and traditions that would help sustain generations. Out of bondage grew communities rooted in hope—communities that found ways to worship, to dream, and to trust in God even when freedom seemed impossible.

The episode also explores the contradictions of the late 18th century. As revolutions in America, France, and Haiti proclaimed liberty and equality, those promises rarely extended to enslaved Africans. And yet, in places like Haiti, enslaved people rose up to claim their own freedom—reminding the world that God's image cannot be chained and that human dignity is not a privilege to be granted but a gift already given by the Creator.

For today's people of faith, "*The Black Atlantic*" invites reflection on how God's presence moves even through the darkest chapters of history. As Scripture reminds us, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The episode challenges us to remember that the work of liberation is not finished and that the church is called to stand alongside all who seek justice, healing, and reconciliation.

This is only one of the many themes and stories explored in the Episcopal Church series called Sacred Ground. If you would like to view the entire PBS documentary, it can be seen using this link: [PBS Documentary - The Black Atlantic \(1500-1800\)](#) You can learn more about Sacred Ground and how to sign up for the entire series of sessions by using this link: [EDNC Beloved Community webpage](#)