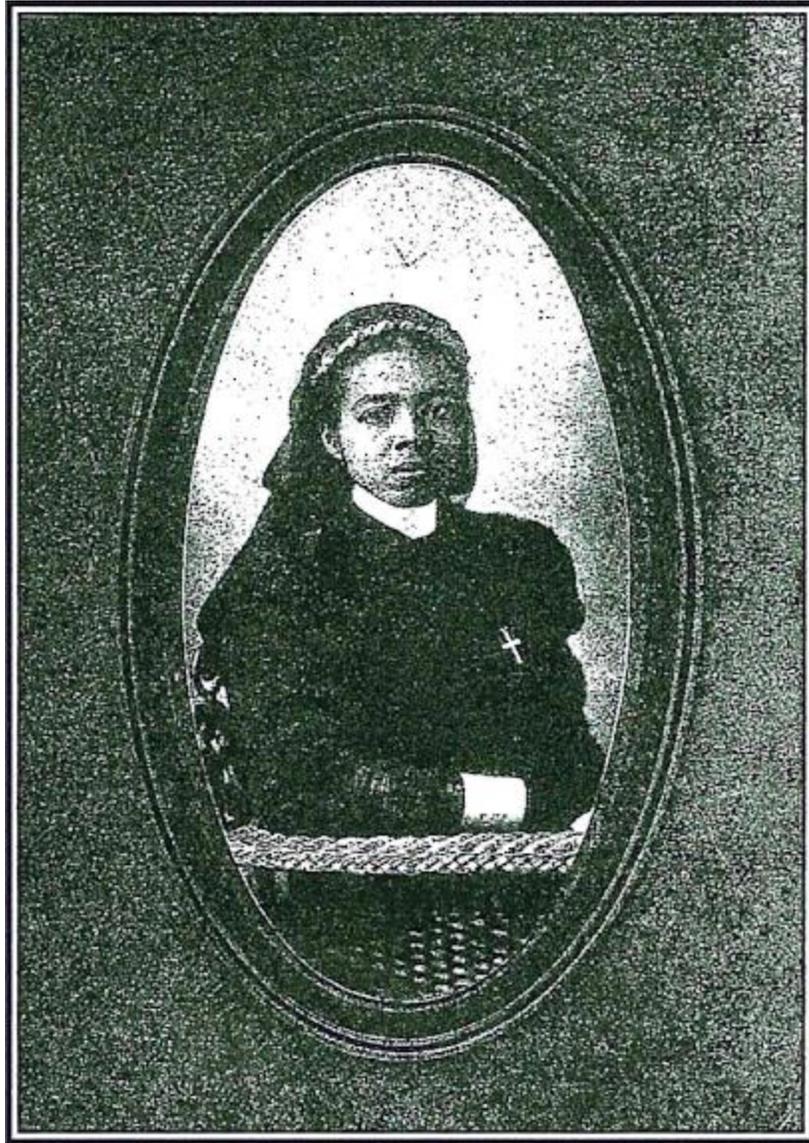


# Deaconess Anna Ellison Butler Alexander

*A Bible Study Guide for Individuals & Groups*



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*To begin this study, read the brief background of her witness and the Collect for her Feast Day below.*

### **Background**

Anna Ellison Butler Alexander (1865-1947) was born to recently emancipated slaves on Butler Plantation in McIntosh County, Georgia. She was the first African-American set aside as a deaconess in the Episcopal Church in 1907. She founded Good Shepherd Church in rural Glynn County's Pennick community where she taught children to read in a one-room schoolhouse using the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible. The school was later expanded to two rooms with a loft where Anna lived. She ministered in Pennick for 53 years, leaving a legacy of love and devotion still felt in Glynn County today. Deaconess Alexander, however, served in the "Jim Crow" south. The Diocese segregated her congregations in 1907 and African-American congregations were not invited to a diocesan convention until 1947. Similarly, it was only in the 1950s that a woman set aside as a deaconess was recognized as being in deacon's orders. And yet, she persevered. Her witness, wearing the distinctive dress of a deaconess, traveling by foot and rowboat from Brunswick through Darien to Pennick, showing care and love for all whom she met, represents the best in Christian witness. The Church now commemorates her Feast Day on September 24.

### **The Collect for Deaconess Alexander's Feast Day**

O God, you called Anna Alexander as a deaconess in your Church, and sent her as teacher and evangelist to the people of Georgia: Grant us the humility to go wherever you send, and the wisdom to teach the word of Christ to whoever we meet, that all may come to the enlightenment which you intend for your people; through Jesus Christ, our Teacher and Savior. Amen.

*After each Scripture Lesson appointed for her Feast Day, study and discussion questions are offered for use.*

### **Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25**

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'

1. *Moses writes: "The Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the*

*Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.” In the “Jim Crow” south, many black and white people interpreted differently what it meant to “diligently observe” God’s commands so that they would be “in the right.” How might we today avoid interpreting God’s word to satisfy our pre-existing prejudices about other people? What aids us in that?*

- 2. In Deuteronomy, Moses is concerned about what the Hebrew people will pass on to their children, how they will instruct them in following God’s commandments. Deaconess Alexander was committed to instructing children in this sacred story, because it was their story as well. Just like the Hebrew people who were slaves in Egypt, African-Americans were slaves in the U.S. How are we instructing our children and future generations about these two sacred stories? What more might we do?*

## **Psalm 78**

1 Hear my teaching, O my people; \*  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
2 I will open my mouth in a parable; \*  
I will declare the mysteries of ancient times.  
3 That which we have heard and known, and what our forefathers have told us, \*  
we will not hide from their children.  
4 We will recount to generations to come the praiseworthy deeds and the power of the Lord, \*  
and the wonderful works he has done.  
5 He gave his decrees to Jacob and established a law for Israel, \*  
which he commanded them to teach their children;  
6 That the generations to come might know, and the children yet unborn; \*  
that they in their turn might tell it to their children;  
7 So that they might put their trust in God, \*  
and not forget the deeds of God, but keep his commandments;

- 1. The Psalmist is intent on not hiding the truth of God’s Word from future generations, but sometimes the truth is hard for people to accept, especially when it is shameful or exposes us as sinners. We would just as soon not dwell on it. Why is it important for us to dwell on and tell the truth, especially when it is embarrassing or appalling?*
- 2. The Psalmist appeals to the reader to “put their trust in God” and then connects such trust to not forgetting “the deeds of God.” How is trust and remembering connected in your experience? Why are they necessarily connected? Jesus, at the Eucharist, says, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Our act of remembrance literally put us back together. Our dismemberment is made whole. We are “re-membered,” if you will. How is our wholeness in God connected to our capacity to remember?*

## **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people

will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

1. *Deaconess Alexander profoundly believed in learning and instruction as a way to greater faithfulness. Like St. Paul, she believed in Christian Proficiency, in that it equips us for Gospel work. How might we create an environment in the Church where Christian Proficiency is expected and welcomed?*
2. *St. Paul's phrase "itching ears" is a wonderful image for how we react when we hear something that runs counter to what we want to hear. The Good News of God's Grace in Jesus runs counter to many of our cultural "myths" that demand earning what we receive and deserving what we get. How have the cultural "myths" you grew up with caused you to have "itching ears" when you hear the Word of Grace? How might we as a Church "do the work of an evangelist in sharing Jesus' Good News with people like us who have "itching ears?"*

### **Matthew 11:25-30**

At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

- 1 *In this Gospel, Jesus is not referring to literal "infants," but to people who make no claim to be wiser of more intelligent than others, to people who are humbled enough to acknowledge a child-like (not childish) faith in God. Jesus says that his Gospel will remain "hidden" from those who cannot bring themselves to approach God in such a humble manner. How did Deaconess Alexander model such humility? How might we learn to wear such humility ourselves?*
- 2 *Jesus is about giving us "rest for our souls." We are weary from the heavy burden of trying to be right all the time and not make any mistakes, not to sin. The "yoke" of grace liberates us, if we learn from it. The heavy burden we bear becomes light as Jesus transfers it from our back to his on the cross. And yet, we can misapply this to our lives and turn this costly gift of grace into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." He wrote: "Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner." Following the example of Deaconess Alexander how might we both "find rest for our souls" while being restless in our work of justice and mercy in this world?*