

CELEBRATING AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY MONTH  
THROUGH THE SPIRITUALS



Brief Overview of the  
History of the Spirituals

The Spirituals of the African-American tradition, sometimes called the “Negro spirituals” are songs created by enslaved Africans in the decades prior to the Civil War. They do not have individual composers, but emerged from the whole community. They were passed orally from person to person and improvised as suited the singers. They were crafted in the fields where the slaves would sing to pass the day and ease the often tedious work of planting, tending and harvesting the crops. Some were simple work songs in a call response style. Here is an example:



**Refrain:** *Hoe Emma  
Hoe! You turn around dig a hole in  
the ground.*  
**Call:** *O Emma help me to pull these  
weeds!*  
**Response:** *Hoe Emma Hoe! You  
turn around dig a hole in the  
ground.*  
**Call:** *O Emma worked harder than  
two strong men!*  
**Response:** *Hoe Emma Hoe! You  
turn around dig a hole in the  
ground.*

Over the years, the slaves and their descendants adopted Christianity, the religion of their masters, and they began to include religious themes into their field songs. They re-shaped it into a deeply personal

way of dealing with the oppression of their enslavement. These songs, became known as spirituals and reflected the slaves’ expression of their faith. The songs told stories, from Genesis to Revelation: Adam and Eve in the Garden, Moses and the Red Sea. They sang of the battle of Jericho, Ezekiel seeing a wheel, Mary, Jesus, the blind man seeing,

God troubling the water, and yes, the Devil, as one to avoid!

The songs were also used to communicate with one another in a kind of code, without the knowledge of their masters. This was particularly the case when a slave was planning to escape bondage and to seek freedom via the Underground Railroad. For example the well-known “*Steal Away to Jesus*” was not merely a song about death and the journey to a heavenly homeland; and, “*I ain’t got long to stay here*” in the song didn’t refer simply to death, but also to escaping to the north and out of slavery.

There were thousands of spirituals. However, the oral tradition of the slaves’ ancestors — and the prohibition against slaves learning to read or write—meant that the actual number of songs is unknown.

Some of the best known spirituals include: “*Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*,” “*Nobody Knows The Trouble I’ve Seen*”, “*Steal Away*,” “*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*,” “*Go Down, Moses*,” “*He’s Got the Whole World in His Hand*,” “*Every Time I Feel the Spirit*,” “*Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees*,” and “*Wade in the Water*.”

In a certain sense, the Spirituals have great authority since they were written in the cauldron of great suffering. If any people might be excused from thinking that the Lord had forsaken them or, that they would be exempt from judgment day, it was surely the enslaved in the Deep South. If any people might be excused from crying out for vengeance, it was those enslaved in the South. And yet the spirituals are almost wholly devoid of condemning language. Enslaved blacks sang in ways that looked also to their own sins and need to be prepared. If they were prepared, God, who knew their trouble, would help them to steal away to Jesus. They did not see themselves as exempt from the need to be ready and to persevere in the faith.

## How we are celebrating the ‘Spirituals’ at our Parish this African-American History Month 2022

During the month of February 2022, our parish will focus on the ‘Spirituals’ and the impact they have on our lives and faith. Each week, we will look at a specific theme and provide some history and clarity in relations to scripture. Although we will only focus on four of the themes, take note that the Spirituals have covered many themes:

- biblical stories,
- calls to repentance,
- warnings about judgement,
- sorrow and suffering,
- deliverance,
- liberation,
- readiness,
- heaven

**WEEK 1 – February 6<sup>th</sup>** - We focus on songs of **SORROW**. Frederick Douglas said of these spirituals:

*“Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.”*

These songs were not mere self-pity, they were an exhaling of their souls and a confident expectation of God’s ultimate deliverance. They sang words and themes like:

“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, Nobody but Jesus.”

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home.”

“My soul looks back and wonders, how I got over?”

“I am a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe, but there’s no sickness, toil nor danger, in that bright world to which I go.”

“Trouble don’t last always.”

“Hold on just a little while longer, everything’s gonna be alright.”

“We are climbing Jacob’s ladder, soldiers of the cross, but every round goes higher, higher, Soldiers of the cross.”

“Soon I will be done with the troubles of the world, going home to live with God.”

**NOTE:** You can hear the actual songs listed above by clicking on the song title which contains a link.

In the first years after the Civil War, most former slaves grew distant from the music of their captivity. Many wondered if this musical treasure would be lost.

Thank God, no. The performance of spirituals was revived when a group of students from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, began to tour in an effort to raise money for the school. They performed wonderfully scored choral versions of the spirituals that we are most familiar with now. The Fisk Jubilee Singers carried spirituals to many parts of the United States and also made tours of Europe in the 1870s. Their success encouraged other Black colleges to learn and perform more and more spirituals. Large collections of spirituals were

collected, scored and published to meet the public demand.

The spirituals are wonderfully creative and contain a wisdom that comes from suffering and a hope that comes from faith in God’s promises. The African American Spirituals are a national treasure and gift to the Church of immeasurable value.

