

THERE IS A RIVER

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NARRATOR: The South Carolina coast: The point of entry for one fifth of all the Africans who were enslaved in North America.

In large part, the record of their individual lives is lost. But there is much to be learned about who these women and men were and what they believed in through the lives that their descendants lead today. On these shores, the roots of the African American spiritual experience. . . run deep.

ART JONES: These were really deeply spiritual people who had centuries of spirituality behind them, and very long established traditions. And even though some of the specific memories of those religious practices were wiped out as families were traded on the auction block and so on, they still had a very deep spiritual consciousness and spiritual sensibility.

NARRATOR: Through the middle passage, sale on the auction block, and endless back breaking labor black people have called upon a spiritual legacy that defiantly proclaims:

“I am a child of God, a servant of Allah, a child of Shango, a child of Oshun no matter what anyone does to me.”

RACHEL HARDING: It's a way of saying that as a human being I have a right to joy, I have a right to music, I have a right to story and I have a right to the tree of life.

NARRATOR: Present in each generation was the faith that a better day would come – that God would send deliverance. But deliverance did not come overnight.

Ordinary women and men across three centuries searched their souls - day by day – to rise above the circumstances of their lives.

Sometimes faith provided the courage for the extraordinary.

In the 19th century, Charleston, South Carolina's black community would muster all of its spiritual forces in an effort to bring down the house of bondage with guns, knives, and fire. While an enslaved woman in New York would declare her

self touched by the breath of God, and use her gifts to help make black people free.

What was the source of their strength? How did black people use their beliefs to transform the world around them?

It is a story of the past. It is a story of today.

MARQUETTA GOODWINE: My name is Marquetta [Larise] Goodwine, and I am a descendent of both Goodwines and Holmes here on St. Helena Island, as we say, St. Helena Island down here in the Sea Islands, which is in Beaufort County, South Carolina. And my family has been here on St. Helena and on Palawana and on Dataw ever since we were enslaved here.

MARQUETTA GOODWINE: Religion was our binding force. It kept us centered with the Creator, and it kept us connected to one another. Since there were so many different ethnicities that came together from the motherland that made up our ancestors, they had to then infuse different things and blend different things, different types of rituals, different types of customs, the order of things and all of that, so that we had our own community cohesiveness as a result. So that you could blend all these things together and—and have them evolve.

NARRATOR: Over the course of 3 centuries, African religions underwent a transformation in the woods and marshes of the New World. As Ibo worshiped alongside Angolan, and Fulani prayed among Ewe Africans began to build a common spirituality based on shared beliefs and practices. In the Goodwine family graveyard - where some of the plots date back two hundred years - sacred African practices are still in evidence.

MARQUETTA GOODWINE: Well, the whole tradition of leaving personal items on graves comes to us from West Africa. It was something that our ancestors brought with them in the belly of the beast, when they came through the Middle Passage. Plates, clocks, jewelry, things that represented the individual who was buried there, things that represent their spirit.

"On my father's grave, I left conch shells, because he passed his final years fishing all the time. And so I said, well, I'm not going to take fish. Fish will smell up the graveyard. But I can take the conch shells, because also in it you can still hear the tone of the Atlantic Ocean all the time. Also a conch is not going to let you pull it out of the shell so easily. And my father was always that kind of person too. You wasn't gonna just pull him out of something so easily.

RACHEL HARDING: In traditional African religion, there is not a sense in which you, umm, separate your quote unquote spiritual life or your religious life into a compartment, and then the other things that you do the rest of the day or the rest of the week are quote unquote secular. Umm. All of life is sacred.

NARRATOR: The majority of the Africans who arrived on American shores believed in a supreme God and a host of lesser gods who oversaw every aspect of life. Africans believed that the very woods that they worshipped in held spiritual powers. They believed in the existence of the soul even before birth. And they believed that when they died their spirits traveled home to Africa. They consulted their ancestors. And they passed what they could on to their children.

SYLVIANE DIOUF: The fact that people were in the worst possible conditions, did not consider themselves as being cattle. They thought of themselves as being men and women with a past, with their own history and their own story. And that shows that whatever you're trying to do, and whatever you're trying to destroy in the person or in the community, that doesn't work. People are stronger than that.

NARRATOR: Of the nearly half a million Africans who arrived in North America, an estimated 10% were Muslim. These men and woman used Islam to affirm their humanity - in a nation that declared them less than human.

SYLVIANE DIOUF: There is a tradition in Islam, which is, to write parts of the Koran on a piece of paper, or on a wooden tablet. And what you do is then that you kind of rinse the tablet or the paper with water, and you drink that water, because then you really absorb the word of the Koran, you reabsorb God's word. And that was a tradition that continued in the Americas.

NARRATOR: The Sea Islands provided an isolated setting in which Africans could practice their religion with little interference. On Sapelo Island in Georgia a Muslim named Bilali Mohamed wore a fez, read a copy of the Koran, and wrote in Arabic. Bilali Mohamed also took great pains to pass Islamic practices on to his descendants. The old ways persisted for over a century. But over time, the meaning behind the rituals began to fade away.

CORNELIA BAILEY: I didn't know anything at first about our Muslim ancestry until I read Malcolm X. And I read the book, and one day I was reading, I'm saying to myself, "My God, that sound like us," you know, [and] because the practices that they were describing in that book, almost identical to some of the things I grew up doing in this church. Like men and women sitting on separate side of the church womens couldn't come to church with their hair showing.

They had to have it covered all the time. And I discussed it with some of the older people, and they said, “Oh, I guess that’s what it was, because of our great-great-grandparents and what they did.” But then they quit using the—the word “Muslim” or “Islamic,” and they just said something that we always did.

NARRATOR: Documents from across the South tell of enslaved men and women who continued to fast during Ramadan, to pray five times a day whenever possible, and to wear the veils, skullcaps, and turbans that they had worn in West Africa.

SYLVIANE DIOUF: It was a way of showing that they owned their own bodies. Because slaveholders had a dress code for the slaves, to show the difference between slave owners and slaves, and it was meant to accentuate the differences and to show people that they were really nothing. And by maintaining their own dress code, they reclaimed their own body, they would decide what they would wear.

NARRATOR: Islam would all but disappear by the end of slavery in the U.S. And over time, Muslims - like enslaved Africans of other faiths - were forced to contend with the religion of the men who enslaved them.

MINISTER’S VOICE: Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eye service, as men pleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God: And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men. Ephesians, Chapter 6, 5th Verse

NARRATOR: White clergy across the nation sought to convert black people to Christianity by using Bible teachings that emphasized meekness and servitude. It was an approach that produced few converts.

CORNELIA BAILEY: A lot of time, you were made to go to church with the slaveholders and so forth. So you were made to go to church with them, and you sat and listened at the rhetoric of the white minister that tells you, for instance, that if you behave yourself here on earth, you will be able to serve your masters. When you die, when you go to heaven, you can serve them again. And you’re sitting in church and you’re saying to yourself, “Bunch of bull. Why would I want to serve these people twice?” You know. So no matter what, you’re saying, “Oh, I’d rather go, I’d rather die and go to hell first,” you know, “but I’m not going to serve them again in heaven, if that’s the case.”

NARRATOR: The majority of Africans who arrived on American shores went to their graves believing in if not practicing some form of African religion.

But resistance to the Christian message began to soften as more black people were born on American soil.

In the 1750's white Baptist and Methodist preachers traveled through the South and parts of New England. They taught Christian brotherhood and spiritual equality...And delivered their sermons in a fiery Evangelical style that appealed to poor whites and enslaved black people.

ALONZO JOHNSON: What evangelical religion did was give blacks a right to affirm their bodies, see, because it said that "I exist." Society said, "You're not even fully human." But in evangelical Christianity, not only am I human; I can shout, I can feel, my body mattered, my hands mattered, my-my-my ideas mattered, I felt it. It gave them a religion of feeling. It gave them a religion of-of-of physical identification that I think made it more meaningful. It was- I wasn't just doctrine, creeds that you believed in. It was what you felt.

NARRATOR: The combination of message and presentation was unlike anything that had come before. Thousands flocked to hear the Gospel in what became known as the Great Awakening.

For black people in North America, the Awakening opened a door through which they first took Jesus as their own, and through which they let him - take them. Over Generations, it would become a powerful and lasting bond.

ALONZO JOHNSON: There was something in the message of Christianity. There was something in the religion of the- of the oppressors that they saw, that was deeper than even the oppressors' presentation of that. I mean for example, the slaves had this saying that there must be another Bible within that Bible.

RACHEL HARDING: Black people did not assume the Christianity of their oppressors. The Christianity that black people assumed was a Christianity that they created out of the interaction with the Christianity that was presented to them, and the Christianity that they reevaluated and reconfigured to fit their needs.

NARRATOR: Charleston, South Carolina: In 1815 the enslaved black population outnumbered the free white population by more than 2 to 1. On Sunday mornings black people listened quietly to pro-slavery sermons in the sanctuaries of the city's white churches. On the surface, the Africans seemed to accept these preachments without open confrontation. But on weeknights and Sunday evenings it was a different story.

NARRATOR: During slavery, secret meetings served as the place where black women and men could worship God in the way that they saw fit.

Their songs recalled stories from the Bible -- triumphs of the weak over the mighty. Ceremonially they traveled through time -- casting themselves as God's chosen people of centuries past.

At the heart of this experience was the ring shout – a sacred ritual in which worshippers shift their feet and move their bodies in a circle – to symbolize the connections between past, present and future.

Over time the meeting places came to be known as “Praise Houses.” The praise house family functioned as the secret religious societies had in Africa. Members were initiated in after months of reporting their dreams and going into the woods at night to seek God. It was a bond that was as strong as the bonds of one's birth family.

REVEREND KENNETH C. DOE: These folk Worked from sun-up to sun-down, went to the prayer house, and would stay way up until the night hours. It had to be valuable, not just as a time of release, but as a time of community, as a time of being with people who—who know your everyday burdens and struggles and woes, as a time of being with folk who know what it means to—to know things ought not be as they are, but this is what we got to deal with. Things are going to change, but we—we just have to go through this.

NARRATOR: During slavery the praise house was a place in which black people could nurture their faith that a better day was coming. After slavery the praise house remained at the center of people's lives through the 1960s.

DORIS HOLMES: When I was a little girl, I used to walk to the praise house with my grandmother. And we— when we get there, they start the service. And some of the elders, they lead a hymn. And the ladies, they'll sing spirituals.

ARTHUR ROBINSON: I think singing is the key. That open the heavenly door. And when they start singing, then it look like everything would open up. Where it was dark, it would become light.

ART JONES: There's so many dimensions of the spirituals that you have to talk about. Some songs lean more towards hope; some lean more towards despair. But those dual poles are always there. And it's one of the amazing things about the songs, it makes the hope a real hope. Because hope that comes out of the denial of the reality of suffering is fake. But if you know that you're suffering and if you announce that you're suffering and you feel that suffering, then you can

feel some hope, and the hope is a true hope that comes out of your knowing exactly what it is that you're dealing with. And yet you have that hope.

NARRATOR: Like The Spirituals themselves, black religious gatherings served many purposes. They were for strength as well as for solace. In Charleston enslaved Methodists held meetings to discuss scripture and collect church offerings.

NARRATOR: Secretly, these black South Carolinians pooled their collection money to purchase freedom for one another.

NARRATOR: White church officials became aware of the slave community's secret fund and began to monitor their meetings.

NARRATOR: Tensions mounted between black and white Christians.

In the spring of 1817 those tensions came to a boil. White officials at Bethel Methodist Church voted to construct a building on top of a black burial ground. This desecration was a defining moment. Black Charlestonians - slave and free - were outraged by this display of disrespect.

In a mass exodus, more than four thousand black Methodists left the city's churches.

NARRATOR: They built a church of their own— an African Methodist Episcopal church—in the heart of slaveholding Charleston. It was a bold act of defiance. As one black citizen put it, “The African Church was the people.”

DOUGLAS EDGERTON: The African Church was everything. It was not merely a place of worship on Sunday morning. It was the focal point for black culture and black community. It was a place to go to learn how to read. It was a place to go to find help, to find a job at a time when blacks were not allowed to achieve any other kinds of autonomy in a slave society. The AME Church was the one place that gave their community a center point.

NARRATOR: Within months the African church had revitalized the black population in Charleston. Soon, secret meetings flourished at night in the privacy of people's homes.

Among the leaders -- a carpenter -- Denmark Vesey. He was a former slave who saw in the Bible a means to free his people.

DOUGLASS EGERTON: What he found in the Old Testament was a God of wrath, a God of justice. The book of Exodus taught that the people of the book could be held as slaves for only six years and in the seventh year, they would have to go out free, and therefore, Vesey taught his congregates that anybody who was held for more than six years in Charleston as a slave and who was a disciple of the book was being not merely illegally held, but was being held in violation of God's will.

NARRATOR: Denmark Vesey would not live to see emancipation. But at the age of fifty-one, he was about to awaken the aspirations of people who had been waiting all of their lives for a sign of God's deliverance.

Black Charlestonians would whisper his name for generations to come. And for a century and a half white Charleston would try to extinguish all memory of him.

WHITE PETITIONER: We have seen with anxious concern another existing evil...a spacious building has...been erected...for the exclusive worship of Negroes and colored people. This establishment is as unnecessary as it is impolitic. Accommodation has always been provided and afforded to the Negroes in the numerous churches and places of public worship in the city. Citizens of Charleston to the house of Representatives

NARRATOR: Throughout the spring and summer of 1818, Charleston officials disrupted services at the African Church. In June, free black ministers from Philadelphia visited Charleston's black congregation.

White Charleston set out to close the church down.

DOUGLAS EGERTON: For white authorities, that was the final straw. The whites moved in, arrested about 170 black congregates, probably one of them was Denmark Vesey, shut the church down briefly, beat some of the congregates, kept them in jail for a few days, and for Denmark Vesey that was, that was the moment of truth.

NARRATOR: The assault on the church demoralized many but ignited a deeper resolve towards resistance in the bellies of Vesey and a small group of enslaved men. It was a fire that would not die.

NARRATOR: There were other fires that would not die among North America's slave population. In Ulster County, New York, where slavery was practiced until the 1840's, black people lived scattered across the countryside – isolated on their owners' farms.

Cut off from the ties of kin that shaped black life in the South, Northern slaves struggled to make sense of their lives in a largely white world.

A record of one such life survives today - kept in the Surrogate Court Office building at Kingston, New York.

NARRATOR: Her name was Isabella. She was born into slavery in 1797. By the time she was twelve years old she had been sold four times.

NARRATOR: From humble beginnings she rose to preach, protest, and sing her way to the front of a movement that would help bring slavery to an end.

Her faith led her to walk away from her owner, her husband, and her children to show a slaveholding nation its sins.

NARRATOR: Isabella's spiritual journey began in the woods at her African mother's side. There she learned of a distant God who was all seeing and all-powerful. And there she learned to say his prayer.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: Those meetings that Mama Bett had with her children were meant to instill spirituality. Because she understood that, like her other children, these were probably going to be separated from her. So she wanted to leave them with something.

NARRATOR: When the family's owner died in 1807, most of his estate including furnishings, livestock, and slaves, was sold at auction.

Isabella – fluent only in Dutch - was sold to an English-speaking family in another county. Of this time she would later say in her narrative, "Now the war begun."

NARRATOR: After having three owners in two years Isabella was sold to a man named John Dumont.

On the Dumont farm young Isabella entered into a set of complicated relationships that would test her in body and spirit.

NELL PAINTER: We are talking about a place in which there were perhaps two, or three other enslaved people. And so she made the fire, did the milking, she did her chores, she made them breakfast, she cleaned up after breakfast, she went out, she did more farm work. She did everything.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: Dumont brags about her and says that his “wench” (and that’s his word for her) is better to me than a man.

NARRATOR: The more John Dumont praised Isabella, the more she wanted his praise. She often stayed awake several nights in a row performing extra chores to please him. Historical accounts suggest that John Dumont began a sexual relationship with adolescent Isabella.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: Her frame of reference on a daily basis is in whatever slaveholding family that she finds herself. So this is her reality. And it’s a very, very lonely, very, very alienating reality. Where does she get her protection? Where does she get her sense of self? Where does she get her sense of identity?

NARRATOR: Dumont taught Isabella that slavery was part of God’s natural order. Young and vulnerable, she did not question his claims.

When anyone spoke to her about the injustices of slavery, she scolded them and immediately told her master.

Isabella continued to dutifully labor on the Dumont farm -- through a marriage and the births of five children.

It would be years before God opened her eyes.

NARRATOR: Nearly nine hundred miles away - Denmark Vesey was in the process of answering his own call from God. By 1820 he was exploring the mysteries of the Old Testament, particularly Exodus. In his late night meetings he taught that black people in America were the new Israelites – in need of deliverance. And when he was alone, he considered leading an armed rebellion against the white citizens of the city.

DOUGLAS EGERTON: I think he came to believe that a Theology of brotherly love was just wrongheaded or certainly, impossible. He turned his back on a God that would have him love his fellow man, that would have him turn his cheek, and instead embraced the Old Testament God of wrath and justice, a God who believed that there were a chosen people who God had singled out for some kind of special mission.

NARRATOR: Envisioning himself as a latter-day Moses, Denmark Vesey began to devise a plan of insurrection and mass escape - exodus - for the slave population of Charleston.

To aid him in his fight, Vesey selected recognized leaders within the slave community, men who could quickly raise large numbers of recruits when the time to strike was at hand. His chief lieutenant was "Gullah" Jack Pritchard, an African mystic whose spirituality and powers of conjure held great respect throughout Charleston and the Carolina low country. Together Vesey and Gullah Jack used the Old Testament, African mysticism, and prophecy to create an environment that was ripe for rebellion.

DOUGLAS EGERTON: It's easy to see how Christianity fused together with African rituals, but in many ways, the Old Testament allowed for an even more efficient melding of elements. And certainly to the extent that The Old Testament is full of magic and therefore, power, bushes that burn, but don't burn up, a holy man who can part the water and carry his people to freedom in another place, were ideas that obvious attraction for people like Jack Pritchard and African notions of conjure and changing the natural world.

MARQUETTA GOODWINE: And people believed. They respected his knowledge and his wisdom. It's just like, if we go to church, people believe in the power that the cross has. So with his amulets and even certain bones that he had put together to give to the different men to say you all will be the warriors in this battle and this is going to give you the power to be able to walk straight on even if they start shooting at you or trying to cut you or stop any of this because you have the power to go on because this is for the freedom of your people.

NARRATOR: Deep in the woods Gullah Jack used sacred charms and ceremony to fuse a collective consciousness, a warrior's consciousness among the men. Music and song bound them together as nothing else could.

ART JONES: Well, you know, all of those songs that call on those Old Testament freedom fighters are songs that are not just about the hope of freedom. They're songs about the knowledge of freedom. Joshua took a band of people and circled around the city with some trumpets and the walls came down. That's a story, you know, about the power of people who shouldn't be able to do that -- he shouldn't be able to bring down the walls of a temple with a bunch of trumpets -- yet he did it. And he did it because God was in charge, and God's in charge of us. And we're invoking that story, and we're going to do it. So I think that's what it takes for people who are in those situations. It's not like, well let's go risk our lives because maybe we'll be free. Let's go risk our lives, 'cause we know we will be. And even if we die, we'll be free that way too.

NARRATOR: The plan was that men organized by Vesey's lieutenants were to begin setting fires. In the ensuing confusion, the rebels were to kill every white man, woman, and child who crossed their path. The town arsenal, powder house, and bank were to be raided. Vesey believed that as the rebellion rose, slaves from the surrounding area would join the insurrection.

But it would never be.

NARRATOR: In May of 1822, the plot began to unravel as a slave named George Wilson learned of Vesey's plans and began to struggle with his conscience.

DOUG EGERTON: As slaves became Christians, it tied them together in a bond of brotherhood, in a universal communion essentially with the master class and so, you did have people like George Wilson, who is a member of the African Church, but turns on the conspirators and informs his master, because he has come to believe that God's will is that he love his fellow man even if that fellow man is his master.

NARRATOR: By the time George Wilson told his master what he knew, another Charleston slave had already come forward. Arrests, interrogations, and torture followed.

The trail led to Vesey. He was taken by city authorities.

Vesey did not utter a word of information that could help his captors. The trial was brief. On the morning of July 2, 1822 Denmark Vesey, and five other men were taken to a location outside the city and hanged.

Gullah Jack was hung days later.

NARRATOR: In the aftermath, Charleston authorities tore down the African Church.

But the church was the people. And its power had come from much more than four walls and a roof. So as the walls came down, black religion in Charleston went underground.

DOUGLAS EGERTON: What the destruction of the African Church did was simply to disperse its congregants back across Charleston, back across the River. Therefore, far from destroying it, they essentially kind of spread it up and down the Coast.

NARRATOR: Denmark Vesey was gone. But his name inspired the writings and speeches of anti-slavery crusaders such as Henry Highland Garnett, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass. In them his spirit lived on.

NARRATOR: Four years after Vesey's death, gradual emancipation plans were on the books in New York state. John Dumont promised to free Isabella a full year ahead of time.

But he broke his promise. And Isabella decided that it was time to free herself.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: But then there was the whole dynamic of how to get away, which of course she had to talk to God about. She couldn't leave in the daytime because everyone would see her, and of course they wouldn't let her leave. She couldn't leave at night because it was dangerous. I mean, there's still wild animals in the Hudson Valley at this time. And of course she wasn't really sure where she was going.

NARRATOR: To quiet her fears, Isabella went into the woods – where she had first met God at her mother's side.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: So she builds, out on this little island, she builds a kind of a temple for herself. And it's there she goes and talks to God. It's there she prays. And she tells God about what's happening. It's probably there where she explained to God what Dumont had done, and said, "Now, do you think that's right?" And then of course God would answer her.

RACHEL HARDING: there is this idea of having a real closeness, an intimacy with God to such a degree that you actually bring divinity into your body. And that experience I think gives you another level of resource to draw on in these very traumatic experiences.

NARRATOR: After a period of prayer and reflection Isabella knew what she had to do.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: She spun all of the wool that it was her responsibility to spin. And that was the last thing she did. So God told her when to leave. The best time to leave is at dawn.

NELL PAINTER: We kind of take for granted that you are enslaved and then you are free. And we think, well, people just step into freedom full-fledged. But if you spend your first thirty years enslaved it doesn't give you a very clear sense of what freedom actually means. So for Isabella, she had to free herself in many different ways. And it was a psychological as well as a physical process.

NARRATOR: On the day she took her first steps towards freedom Isabella found her way to the farmhouse of Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen. The Van Wagenens believed that slavery was wrong. Isabella told them her story. They took her in and agreed to buy her freedom from Dumont.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: And this is not only a legal liberation. This represents, I think, a very important spiritual liberation, because I believe it makes Bell focus for the first time—really focus—on the fact that no human being has a right to own another human being.

NARRATOR: Across much of the North the seeds of an anti-slavery movement were being sown amidst a wave of religious revivalism.

Abolitionist newspapers and lectures would soon enflame the moral passions of the nation.

NARRATOR: 1827 brought legal emancipation to the adult slave population of New York state. Just out of slavery herself Isabella planned to join a weeklong celebration of newly freed slaves eleven miles away.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: She loves to drink. She loves to dance. So she's ready to go back and frolic.

NARRATOR: But as she prepared to go, she was struck by a force that she would later describe as "God's breath." It was a moment of profound transformation – the end of her old identity and the beginning of a new life.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: And it's like a mighty fire that's burning all around her but instead of it being flame, it's wind. And it consumes her. And she doesn't know how long she's in this state, this very fearful, very frightening state. But when she comes to herself, she's standing out there in the yard, and all she can say is, "God! I didn't know you were so big!"

NARRATOR: In the moments after she regained consciousness, Isabella had a vision of shimmering light. It appeared to her as an ally and stood between her and God's fury. Isabella was filled with joy as she identified the vision as the embodiment of Jesus.

MARGARET WASHINGTON: It's at this point that she becomes aware of, in her mind, the fact that Jesus is the intermediary that will always protect her; and that to her is a spiritual conversion. It is baptism for her.

ALONZO JOHNSON: Jesus is central because He understands the—the depths of suffering. He paid the ultimate price of suffering. Jesus gives you a whole narrative from birth, ministry, suffering, death, but resurrection. From victim to victor.

NARRATOR: Victory over earthly suffering. The idea that through belief in Jesus there can be the never-ending possibility of renewal. These have been two of Christianity's attractions for enslaved African-Americans and their descendents throughout time.

REVEREND BEN WILLIAMS: Jesus, Himself was baptized by John in the River of Jordan. The water then symbolizes the liquid grave, because the Bible also teaches us, that when you go down to be baptized, meaning that old person now has died, because through your faith in Jesus Christ, you now become a new creature and really – that's the way it is.

NARRATOR: Sixteen years after her baptism by fire and wind Isabella took on a new identity in recognition of her spiritual rebirth.

SOJOURNER TRUTH: When I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I went to the Lord and asked Him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up and down the land, showin' the people their sins, an bein' a sign unto them. I told the Lord I wanted another name and the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare the truth to the people.

NARRATOR: As Sojourner Truth, she traveled thousands of miles speaking about her extraordinary life, women's rights, and the evils of slavery.

Her anti-slavery speeches placed her at the center of the most volatile civil debate that the nation would ever know. She joined those of her generation who forged the issue of slavery into a moral argument that tore the country in two.

NARRATOR: In 1860, South Carolina was the first state to leave the Union.

Less than four months later Confederate guns in the Charleston harbor fired on U.S. troops at Fort Sumter.

The Civil War had begun. And black people all over the nation saw it as a sign that God's judgment had come – that deliverance was finally at hand.

MARQUETTA GOODWINE: I was always taught, "Honna hafta take da bitter wit da sweet." You have to have the bitter and the sweet. And what was important then was even knowing that there was a power that was higher than everybody else, no matter who it was that had the chains on and who might have had the whip in hand, that there was a power that was greater than all of those. If you can believe that there is something that created you, then you have to believe that the something that created you can sustain you. That's the thing that you have to claw onto, is that this spirit is there.

NARRATOR: U.S. President Abraham Lincoln called it a war to save the union. The Confederate government called it a war for states' rights. But for black Americans this would be a holy war.