

Honouring the Past, Embracing the Present, Inspiring the Future Black History Month Address

Good morning, church family.

It is truly a blessing to gather together during Black History Month — a time to reflect, remember, and recommit ourselves to faith, justice, and community.

Today's theme is simple, but deeply meaningful:

Honouring the past, embracing the present, and inspiring the future.

These are not just ideas.

They are responsibilities we carry together.

Black history in Canada is not distant. It is not abstract. It is not somewhere else. Black history is Canadian history — and it is Ottawa's history too.

Long before Canada was officially a country, Black people lived here, worked here, and helped shape this land.

Mathieu Da Costa is recognized as the first recorded free Black person to arrive in what is now Canada in the early 1600s. He served as a translator between European explorers and Indigenous peoples.

That tells us that Black history in this country begins not only with survival — but with skill, intelligence, and leadership. So Black Canadians have been multilingual and essential since the very beginning.

In the 1800s, Canada became a place of refuge for freedom seekers escaping slavery in the United States. An estimated 30,000 people travelled north through the Underground Railroad.

These were not just numbers. They were families, young people, and individuals stepping into uncertainty with nothing but faith and hope.

Here in Ottawa — then known as Bytown — Black men and women were among those who helped build early communities. Some Black labourers worked on or around projects like the Rideau Canal, while others found work as tradespeople, domestic workers, and church leaders, quietly laying foundations in a growing city. Black residents in Ottawa formed tight-knit communities rooted in faith, mutual

support, and perseverance — often worshipping together and supporting one another when opportunities were limited.

Across Ontario, settlements like Buxton, Dawn, and Oro became powerful examples of dignity, faith, and self-determination. One remarkable family from this era is the Abbott family.

Wilson Ruffin Abbott settled in Toronto in the 1830s and became a successful businessman and landowner. His son, Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, born in Toronto, became the first Canadian-born Black physician licensed to practise medicine in Canada in 1861. Their story reminds us that Black excellence in Canada has long included leadership, service, and courage.

Hebrews 11 reminds us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. That faith is part of our inheritance.

Today, more than 1.5 million Black people call Canada home — including thousands right here in Ottawa. We are educators. Healthcare professionals. Artists. Entrepreneurs. Public servants. Parents. Students. Faith leaders.

And yes — sometimes conversations start with curiosity about our stories, our accents, or our journeys.

In the present day, Black Canadians continue to reach remarkable milestones.

At the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, Josh Liendo became the first Black Canadian to win an Olympic medal in swimming. That achievement matters — because representation opens doors and reminds young people what is possible.

During the same Olympic Games, Canada's men's 4x100 relay team won gold — a team made up entirely of Black Canadian athletes. That victory was not just about speed. It was about trust, teamwork, discipline, and generations of perseverance coming together in one moment.

Yet, even with progress, many Black young people still ask:

Where do I belong?

Am I enough?

Can I succeed without losing who I am?

This is where the church matters. The church is meant to be a refuge — a place where identity is affirmed and gifts are nurtured. Psalm 139 reminds us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

If you've ever felt unseen or uncertain — you are not behind, you are not forgotten, and God is still writing your story.

Here in Ottawa, we are also witnessing history in our own time. Rawlson King made history as Ottawa's first Black City Councillor — a reminder that progress is not just something we read about, but something we experience in our own community.

Next Sunday, February 8th, we will be especially honoured to welcome Councillor King as a guest speaker. We will have the opportunity to hear directly from a leader who continues to serve our city with dedication and vision.

It is important to remember how this national recognition began. In 1995, the Honourable Jean Augustine — the first Black Canadian woman elected to Parliament — moved the motion that led Canada to officially recognize Black History Month.

Because of that courageous step, Canadians across the country set aside time each year to learn, reflect, and celebrate the enduring contributions of Black communities.

The future does not appear overnight. It is shaped by what we plant today.

Honouring the past teaches gratitude.
Embracing the present teaches compassion.
Inspiring the future requires courage.

It requires us to ask:

Who are we lifting as we rise?
Who are we making space for?
Who are we encouraging to lead?

The next generation is watching us — how we speak, how we love, and how we live out our faith.

Micah 6:8 reminds us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

So what does all of this ask of us — here and now?
It asks us to remember.
To learn.
And to act.

To honour the past, we must tell these stories — in our homes, in our churches, and to our children.

To embrace the present, we must create spaces where people are welcomed, affirmed,

and supported.

And to inspire the future, we must choose courage — standing up when others are pushed aside, making room for new voices, and living out our faith beyond Sunday.

Let us commit to being a church that listens, learns, and loves boldly.
A church that mentors young people.
A church that speaks up for justice.
A church that reflects God's love in action.

The Underground Railroad had many stops. Toronto was one of them. Ottawa was part of that wider journey too.

But the journey toward freedom did not end at the border.

Freedom is something we continue to protect and pass on — through how we raise our children, how we treat our neighbours, and how we show up for one another.

Let us honour the past with gratitude.
Let us embrace the present with love.
And let us inspire the future with faith.

Together.