

# About Jarena Lee and The Jarena Lee Appreciation Awards Breakfast

Mrs. Jarena Lee, the first preaching woman in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, was born February 11, 1783 to free parents in Cape May, New Jersey which was then still a slave state. At the age of 7 she was hired out as a servant 60 miles from her home and it was 14 years before she saw her birth family again. She only had 3 months of schooling but learnt to read and write and in her 50's, with the help of an editor, she published two editions of her life, religious experiences and journal of itinerant ministry. She made her living as a manual worker, suffering ill health from the rigors of her labor.

At the age of 21, after being introduced to Christianity by a Presbyterian missionary, she began living in Philadelphia where she attended the A.M.E. Church and was converted after hearing Richard Allen, our founder and first Bishop, preach. At the age of 28 she married Joseph Lee, pastor of Snow Hill (now Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. Church, Lawnside), New Jersey, and after his death 7 years later returned to Philadelphia with her two children ages two years and six months.

From childhood, she had a strong sense of the divine at work in her but struggled with the conviction of her sinfulness until her mid-20's when she experienced sanctification, the "second blessing", and finally felt secure in her salvation. Her call to preach the gospel came with strong visions about 4-5 years later but, when told by Richard Allen that the Methodist Discipline did not allow for women preachers, she suppressed "...the holy energy which burned within me, as a fire..." for over eight years during which time she exhorted and held prayer meetings in private homes.

Her anointing became evident to Richard Allen and others, in particular when at a Bethel service in 1818 the preacher read his text, announced the title of his sermon, began to expound and then faltered. She stood up and completed the sermon, leading Richard Allen to publicly acknowledge her call. She recalled, "My tongue was cut loose, the lip was touched, the stammerer spoke freely; the love of God and of his service, burned with a vehement flame within me." The following year, at the age of 36, Jarena Lee was granted a license to preach.

Though initially reluctant to accept her call, Richard Allen proved to be a genuine and strong ally. Her journal records that during a period when she was tempted to withdraw from the AME Church because of hostile opposition from male clergy, she was sustained by God's love and Allen's support. He gave her preaching appointments in churches in and around Philadelphia, and had her accompany him and other male clergy to Annual Conferences in New York and Baltimore where she had opportunities to preach. After Jarena Lee decided to give up her own residence and devote herself to her preaching ministry, Richard and Sarah Allen often cared for her son, James, in her absence, including a period when she was away for 2½ years.

A true itinerant evangelist, she traveled extensively through the Northeast, Canada and the slave states of Maryland and Delaware preaching to whites, coloreds and Indians – to people of all religious persuasions - to rich and poor – to free and enslaved – to the powerful and the powerless. She preached in homes, meeting houses, school houses, court houses, market houses, camp meetings, grave yards, by the roadside, in barns, in the woods, on slave plantations, at quarterly conferences, and in class meetings. Sometimes she travelled alone, and at other times with female companions, with her children or with male preachers. She went by foot (walking an average of 27 miles a day), by boat, sleigh, stagecoach, and railway. In one 14-month period she traveled about 2,800 miles. She often preached several times a day, sometimes into the early morning. In one year alone she preached 692 sermons.

Ellicot's Mill - Fairfield - Flamburg - Flatbush - Flushing, Long Island - Fort George - Fory's Neck - Frankford - Fredericktown, MD - Frenchtown - Gallopeler - Geneva - Georgetown - Glen Cove - Goshen, NJ - Governor Paynter's Woods - Greenfield - Greensboro - Greensborough - Greenwich - Hagerstown - Hales' Mill - Hambleton - Harrisburg - Harris's Mill

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It was as a preacher that she fulfilled the divine plan for her life. She was tireless and impassioned in proclaiming the message of salvation and in her service to humanity. Undeterred by opposition, inclement weather, ill health, lack of resources, personal sacrifices, and her own mortality, she declared, "...it was better to wear out than rust out".

Jarena Lee stands out in the history of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, being the second Black woman known to preach, and the best known Black woman of her time, second only to Sojourner Truth. She is also a foundational figure in the history of the A.M.E. Church, having made an invaluable contribution to the growth of the Church with the numbers of converts and new members she brought in, the funds she raised, and the churches she was instrumental in establishing.

A.M.E. women in ministry acknowledge Jarena Lee as our spiritual foremother who in the first decades of the church's existence fought for affirmation of her call to preach and serves as an early role model in the ongoing struggle for female autonomy, asserting in the face of antagonism, "*Right is more than might*".

AME/WIM has been blessed to pay tribute to Jarena Lee in several significant ways. We have published an edition of the *Religious Experiences and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*. We have established a Jarena Lee Foundation to assist our sisters in ministry and respond to needs in the global Districts. We have made pilgrimages, held commemorative services, and presented a framed sketch of her as a permanent memorial at Mt. Pisgah A.M.E. Church in Lawnside (formerly Snow Hill), New Jersey, the burial place of Jarena Lee; and we owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. M. Joan Cousins who made the Church at large aware of this herstoric location during her tenure as Episcopal Supervisor of the First Episcopal District.

On June 19, 2001, at the site of the General Board/Bishops Council Meeting in Los Angeles, California, AME/WIM held its First Jarena Lee Appreciation Awards Breakfast. This is on occasion to honor the memory of Mrs. Jarena Lee, as well as an opportunity to recognize Episcopal leadership for providing oversight to the organization, to honor trailblazing sisters in ministry, and to express appreciation to other individuals for their support of the work and objectives of AME-WIM.

Today, we hold our Twelfth Jarena Lee Appreciation Awards Breakfast as part of the celebration of the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the A.M.E. Church. We celebrate the life, ministry and legacy of Mrs. Jarena Lee with the herstoric decision made in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on Wednesday, April 6, 2016 by the A.M.E. Council of Bishops and announced by Bishop John Richard Bryant, Senior Bishop, on Friday, April 8, 2016: **Mrs. Jarena Lee will be posthumously ordained at the 50<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.**

Providentially, here in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where she lived, sacrificed, struggled, and faithfully fulfilled God's call to preach and serve - 208 years after she acknowledged her call; 207 years after her call was denied; 198 years after she was licensed; and 16 years after AME/WIM's unsuccessful attempt to have her call to ordained ministry affirmed at the 2012 General Conference - **Mrs. Jarena Lee will now be rightly and deservedly referred to and known as The Reverend Jarena Lee.**

As she wrote in her spiritual autobiography, "*Glory to God in the highest...for the manifestation of His Spirit.*"