

**Message Delivered by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At the Abyssinian Baptist Church
Harlem, New York
Sunday, September 23, 2012**

When we think of the mercy of Jesus, and what he has done for us, our very soul cries out – Halleluiah! Praise God for blessing us.

I want to thank you, Reverend [Calvin] Butts, for the opportunity to be here. I thank some of my compatriots and friends – Thelma Awori, Dorothy Davis, Alice Dear... – all of the them, I believe, strong members of this Church, who've been instrumental in getting me here; more importantly, my AKA Soros who have come out in such large numbers; and today is Africa Day in Harlem – what a better time than now.

I want to use this opportunity to talk about the country I love – my own. It has its deep roots in the American slave trade which brought thousands of young Africans to work in the corn fields and the cane fields of the southern United States and the Caribbean.

The scramble for Africa took place about that time; colonialization was started. That led to the Abolition Movement and the repatriation of Africans back to their homeland. The first example was Sierra Leone with the British Abolitionists, followed by the Abolitionists of the United States through the American Colonization Society – one that Marcus Garvey tried to undermine. It was started here.

It started on a very difficult note because there were inhabitants -- indigenous people -- in the country, who did not understand why they had to give up their land, and that led to tribal wars.

The United States did not colonize Liberia and, indeed, for the first few years hardly gave it any support. The many settlers that got there really had a very difficult time – disease, inability to assimilate. In the midst of the colonialism and the taking of land from Liberia, the Declaration of Independence was declared in 1847.

Our forefathers knew nothing but the American way of life, and so our flag, our Constitution, our laws, our systems and structures are modeled after that of the United States.

Liberia became the second independent country in Africa, Ethiopia being the other one. I know your connection, your relationship – Abyssinia – because the Ethiopians who were here wanted freedom, freedom to worship; and so the motivation of both – Abyssinia, Liberia – the motive for freedom, independence, for self-determination. You did a 2007 pilgrimage to Ethiopia to renew the ties, and today you continue to support all freedom-loving people.

The forefathers and settlers who went back, unable to assimilate in the midst of their encroachment, monopolized power and privilege, leading to the turmoil that we would face many years later.

But Liberia has a long-standing inter-relationship with the U.S.; Firestone started the largest rubber plantation in the world as far back as 1926, finding an alternative source for the production of rubber. Firestone is still there today.

President [William V.S.] Tubman, who visited Abyssinian in 1954, established the Open-Door Policy. Mining operations, the Liberia Mining Company, closed, leaving behind a depressed area. The Maritime Program, still in operations today, being managed and continuing.

We also have a long-standing relationship between Liberia and the African-American community. The first U.S. Embassy in Africa was supported by African-American diplomats, many of them having been trained at Morehouse. I believe one of the grand uncles of Dorothy Davis, was one of those who was instrumental in doing that.

He first African-American Foreign Service Officer, Clifford Walton, Jr., is, I think, a member of this Church. We have a long-standing relationship between Tuskegee Institute and our Booker Washington Institute, named after Booker Washington.

The first African-American Ambassador in the U.S. Foreign Service was Edward Dudley. I don't know if his son is here; there was some effort to get him here today.

We spun into disaster, in our 1980 coup d'état, introducing massive violence and destruction. President [William] Tolbert, who headed the African Baptist Convention, was killed in those events and Abyssinian came to the rescue of his family in providing support for his family. We thank you for that.

Our 14-year war led to massive destruction, dislocation, suffering of a lot of people, but we're proud of our past.

Liberia was instrumental in supporting the liberation movements all over Africa, starting with Kwame Nkrumah, Nelson Mandala – all of those great African liberators who carried Liberian passports because they could not carry passports of their own countries.

One of the two African countries to have been in San Francisco to establish the League of Nations, which later became the United Nations; the Organization of African Unity, now the African Union, one of the founding members; the African Development Bank; the Economic Community of West African States and its affiliate institutions. Dr. Romeo Horton, who has relatives here, was one of the key instruments in the establishment of that. He's also a Morehouse graduate. If I may push that button, my son, a physician, now practicing in this country, is also a Morehouse graduate.

Liberia is in the process of national renewal. We're now going into our tenth year of peace, enabling us to rebuild, reconstruct, to ensure for our children and grandchildren a new nation of promise and hope.

We continue to have a very strong relationship with the U.S., bi-partisan relationship, I might say, in Congress, and in successive administrations. We've enjoyed that since 2006, when I became President of the nation.

We work with the U.S. in so many ways. It is our Number One development partner, having helped us to rebuild our army, to reconstruct our institutions, to fix our infrastructure.

We're proud of Bob Johnson, one of those who, in those early days, showed confidence in our commitment to rebuild by investing in a hotel at the time that many hotels were not functioning. So that's part of the African-American connection with Liberia that continues until today.

We have challenges no doubt; challenges of youth unemployment – 70 percent of our population 35 years and younger – challenges of education, challenges of infrastructure.

Today, Liberia is very much a part of a growing Africa; an Africa that itself is on a rebound. We call ourselves the last frontier for development, and we must protect that frontier from exploitation.

Today, Africa remains one of the fastest growing regions of the world. Democratization has taken hold. There have been setbacks. I'm sure you have heard of the turmoil in Mali; Somalia is on the bend; there's even friction on our own borders with the Ivory Coast. But the future is bright.

Women! Strong women in Liberia; strong women in Africa! Women subject to all the vulnerabilities that come from war, but showing the resilience that has led to peace.

Many of you may have seen the documentary, *Pray the Devil Back to Hell*, in which Leymah Gbowee, a co-Nobel Laureate, was one of the stars for the leadership role that she played in bringing the women together to challenge the status quo.

Today AKA, our formidable Sorority, is helping to ensure that the women of Liberia remain strong; that they play an active role; that they take their place in society. We are very proud of that. The market women are the ones that have been more vibrant; the ones that in the difficult years of war, when the men and sons had gone off, enabled their children to live, many times running with their children to safety.

Our obligation to them today is to lift them up; is to ensure that their working conditions are more conducive; to ensure that the thousands and thousands of them who did not have the opportunity to go to school, would at least do literacy programs – learn to read and write. That's what AKA and the Sirleaf Market Women Fund and all those who work for it

and support it, is trying to achieve. We believe that the women of Liberia will continue to play this role in our country.

What can African Americans do for Liberia? You can be our ambassadors; you can be our advocates. The Jews in this country do it for Israel. Why can't you do it for us? We invite you to a partnership with Liberia, a partnership with Liberian women, to join hands with Sorors of Alpha Kappa Alpha to bring relief and development to those women.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here with you. I remain one proud Liberian woman; one proud African woman who can stand tall and say: It can be done, and I did it!