

2ND SUNDAY - APRIL 12, 2026

Part II: Black History Moment

William Still (1821–1902)

Finding the Lost on the Road to Freedom

“The Shepherd Still Seeks” – John 10:11–16

Church family, today we reflect on Jesus’ words in John 10:11:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

When we hear this scripture, we often imagine comfort. But in the context of oppression, the image of a shepherd is radical. A shepherd does not abandon the vulnerable. A shepherd seeks. A shepherd protects. A shepherd restores.

Today we remember a man who lived out that shepherding spirit in one of the darkest chapters of American history — **William Still**, often called the Father of the Underground Railroad.

William Still was born free in 1821 in New Jersey. But his freedom was fragile. His parents had escaped slavery in Maryland. His father had purchased his own freedom. His mother escaped twice—the first time she was captured and forced back into bondage. The second time, she fled again, leaving behind two sons she would never see again. That wound shaped William Still’s life.

Imagine growing up knowing your brothers were still enslaved.

Imagine knowing that the law of the land protected the system that stole them.

In a nation where Black people were denied the right to read, denied the right to own property in many places, denied the right to legally marry or protect their families, William Still became a seeker.

As a young man in Philadelphia, he began working with the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. There, he became a key organizer in the Underground Railroad network. Over the course of his life, he helped nearly 800 enslaved people escape to freedom.

But here is what made his work extraordinary:

William Still kept records.

At a time when being caught assisting freedom seekers could result in fines, imprisonment, or violent retaliation, he secretly documented names, family connections, places of origin, and

destinations. Why? Because he understood something sacred: slavery did not just steal labor — it stole identity and fractured families.

He believed that someday, mothers might search for sons. Brothers might search for sisters. Families might try to reunite.

And because he kept those records, reunions happened.

In fact, one of the most powerful moments of his life came when a man arrived in his office seeking help on his journey north. Through conversation, William Still realized this man was his long-lost brother — the very brother his mother had been forced to leave behind decades earlier.

The shepherd had found his own.

John 10 tells us that the shepherd knows his sheep and calls them by name. In a slave system that reduced human beings to property, William Still did the holy work of restoring names. He preserved stories. He protected dignity.

After the Civil War, during the era of Black Reconstruction, when newly freed Black citizens briefly gained political power and built schools, churches, and institutions before white supremacist terror groups like the Ku Klux Klan violently pushed back, William Still published his records in a book titled *The Underground Railroad Records*.

He understood that memory is power.

You see, lynching, terror, and racial violence were not just physical acts. They were meant to erase hope. But Still's documentation declared: We were here. We loved. We fought for freedom. We sought one another.

That is shepherd work.

And it echoes forward.

In 2008, the United States elected its first Black President, Barack Obama — a moment made possible by generations who sought freedom at great cost. The arc from the Underground Railroad to the White House runs through people like William Still.

But let us be clear: freedom was not handed over easily. It was pursued. It was protected. It was shepherded.

William Still laid down his safety for others. He used literacy — something enslaved people were once legally forbidden to have — as a weapon for liberation. He turned record-keeping into restoration.

He sought the lost.

And so today, as we hear Jesus say, “*I am the good shepherd*,” we are reminded that shepherding is not passive. It is courageous. It is intentional. It is sacrificial.

William Still teaches us that to follow the Good Shepherd means we do not ignore those trapped by injustice. We seek them. We protect them. We help restore what systems tried to steal.

Because every person deserves freedom.

Every family deserves wholeness.

Every name deserves to be remembered.

And the Good Shepherd is still seeking.

Suggested Books for Deeper Study

- *The Underground Railroad Records* – William Still
- *Bound for the Promised Land* – Kate Clifford Larson (on Harriet Tubman)
- *Black Reconstruction in America* – W.E.B. Du Bois

 **Visit the Black History Moments page to learn more.**