

## Advent 3 (MP-1) (2018)

It is always a bit risky to begin a sermon with a joke. There just maybe someone in the congregation with some rotten tomatoes! Nevertheless, I am going to take that risk this morning. Here it is:

A little girl was asked what she would be if she weren't a Baptist. She thought about it a few seconds, hung her head and finally answered:  
**“Ashamed.”**

Well, if you grew up in the South you know that there is more than a little truth in her words. In much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century being Baptist was a part of the landscape.

Question: “Mr. Jones, what church do you all go to?”

Answer: “Oh, we go to the *First Church*.”  
*First*, being the First Baptist.

With that said, I want to introduce you to the most famous Baptist of them all: **John the Baptist**.

He didn't go to the First Church, though. He is called Baptist because of what he did: He baptised people. He did so in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Our focus today, however, is not on John's remarkable ministry, but on his remarkable birth and more specifically on the remarkable prophecy that came from the lips of his father Zacharias in the song we have come to know as the *Benedictus*:

**“And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways.”**

God's call on John's life came eight days after his birth. ///

But, there is someone else we should consider this morning: Jeramiah, whom we meet in today's Old Testament lesson.

Like John, Jeremiah had an early calling from the Lord. In today's passage we hear God say to the future prophet:

**“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations.”**

If you think about it, both John and Jeremiah were “fore-called”. That is ‘called ahead’ for a specific ministry.

But, God did something else in their lives. Not only did He fore-call them, He fore-equipped them.

For John the Baptist that equipping came growing up in the house of a priest and having a Godly mother. No doubt he sucked in Godliness along with his mother’s milk.

For Jeremiah, we have to read in between the lines, but I think we can say with some degree of certainty that he too grew up in a God-fearing home, a home where the Bible was believed and taught. After all, when God’s call came to him, he was able to respond to it quickly and with understanding.

And, if we look closer at today’s OT reading, we shall discover something else. Jeremiah had, as it were, an *on-the-spot* equipping for his future ministry. It’s right there in Verse 9:

**“Then the Lord put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth.”**

What God did in the lives of John the Baptist and Jeremiah, I want to suggest, He is still doing today. He is still calling and equipping people for ministry.

I think most everyone involved in ministry of any kind – lay and ordained -- can look back and see how God prepared him or her in advance.

Indeed, as I look back on my own life, I can see this strange operation going on. Allow me to give some examples:

Example No. 1: My mother would read me the Bible before I could read myself. This she would do as we sat on the swing on the front porch waiting for my father to come home from work.

*I want to think God was preparing me for work in the Gospel ministry.*

Example No. 2: In the seventh grade I was allowed to enrol in a class technically reserved for Juniors and Seniors The title of the course was **The**

**Content of the English Bible.** The teacher introduced me to the concept of looking at the Bible as a grand narrative and not as a miscellaneous assortment of little stories.

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Example No. 3: During high school, I had a part-time job in a grocery store. This experience gave me the ability to relate to and communicate with “all sorts and conditions of men and woman”.

*I want to think God was preparing me for work in the Gospel ministry.*

God is still in the business of calling and equipping people.

And, it’s not just those in the ordained ministry who are called and equipped for service.

Today, we have witnessed a baptism. After the essential bit of having water poured over the candidate’s head and the formula Jesus Himself ordained spoken – “I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost -- Jim received this charge:

**To continue Christ’s faithful soldier and *servant* unto his life’s end.**

Notice in particular that word “servant”. It could just as easily be rendered “minister”, as the words are virtually interchangeable.

So, let’s be on our guard against defining “ministry” too narrowly. The ordained ministry indeed has a part to play, but so does the ministry of the Christian lawyer, statesman, police person, musician, doctor, nurse, grounds keeper, father, mother and so on.

But there is one more thing. Whatever our calling, we must say yes to God’s call. It’s not automatic.

Take a few minutes and think about what new ‘ministries’ God may be calling you to take on in 2019. It may be some great one thing, or it may be a series of smaller things.

To augment the words of an old Negro spiritual:

**If you can't sing like Richard Lumpkin or play the organ like Eileen Kerr, or preach like Peter or pray like Paul, you can tell [show] the love of Jesus and say he died for all.**

In conclusion, what made Jeremiah a great prophet? What made John a great Baptist?

In a word it was that they said 'yes' to God's call. Neither had anything about which to be ashamed. No reason to hang their heads. May you and I follow their lead.