

Advent 3 (2025)

The church which sent me off to theological college was steeped in history.

Founded in 1828, it had survived Yellow Flue epidemics, a siege during the calamitous War Between the States, the Great Depression, two world wars and a F5 tornado in 1953 which caused the building to be closed for several years.

“The past is never dead,” William Faulkner wrote, **“it is not even past.”**

This was certainly the case at Christ Church, Vicksburg, Mississippi.

The Rector at the time was a man by the name of Robert Lee Saul.

I shall never forget a sermon Mr. Saul preached on a Sunday near the birthdays of

George Washington and his name sake Robert E. Lee.

Using as his text a verse from the Apocrypha -- **“Let us now praise famous men”** (Ecclesiasticus 44:1) – he proceeded to talk about **two great Americans, two great Southerners and two great Churchmen.**

This morning, I want to take up Mr. Saul’s homiletic device and speak to you about: **two great prophets, two great questioners and two great martyrs.**

The first is Jeremiah . . . the one in today’s Old Testament lesson, not the bullfrog!

Old Testament Jeremiah was the final prophet God sent to the Southern Kingdom of Judah before its fall. He lived roughly between 650 to 570 BC.

He received his calling from God at a young age. He was around 17 at the time.

But, if you were listening to this morning's Old Testament lesson, you know God's plan for his life began much earlier:

“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,” says the Almighty.

Before we go on, there is a word here for each one of us.

The God who knew Jeremiah while he was still in his mother's womb knew you and had a plan for your life.

The question I want to set before you this morning is: **Have you heard God's call?**

If you haven't, ask God what it is and get on with His plan. Don't settle for anything less.

The focus of the Third Sunday in Advent in our Prayer Book tradition is the ordained ministry of the Church, but it is not just they who have a calling from the Lord.

No, all the baptized have been set apart in God's service. No one is excluded. But, again, each one must say yes.

But there is something interesting about Jeremiah's call that we should not miss. That is Jeremiah's hesitation upon receiving it.

The excuse he throws up is his age. He says: **"Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child."**

But God will not let him get away with that excuse:

“Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee.”

Here we find another lesson for us 2,600 years later. It is this: **One is never too young or, for that matter, too old to do God service.**

I am reminded of the story of an older woman who found herself at the age where she was not seeking out any new challenges. Even so, one was dumped in her lap in the oddest of places . . . a laundromat!

She was sitting there minding her own business reading a magazine when a man came in who was clearly inebriated.

He sat down beside her and began recounting his litany of travail. She could have gotten up and moved, but she did not.

Instead, she found herself reaching for his hand and asking him if he would like for her to pray with him. He said yes.

She led him in the Lord's Prayer. After which he seemed very much better and left the laundromat. She never saw him again.

Her calling that day was not to a life-long vocation, but it was real nevertheless.

All of which to say, 'callings' come in all shapes and sizes. And back to my original point: **Don't let youth or age get in the way.** Listen and respond whenever, wherever you receive them.

Returning to Jeremiah, his ministry was a tumultuous one. His preaching fell on deaf ears and heartened hearts. It landed him in prison.

And here we find another lesson jumping off the page at us: **Being faithful does not always**

bring worldly success and adulation. Indeed, the opposite at times happens.

This lesson is especially apt for those in the ordained ministry.

If you are a clergyman and want multiple mansions with swimming pools, interviews on Oprah and a private jet, don't follow Jeremiah's example of deliver God's uncompromising message. Aim at something softer.

Instead of focusing on the cross and its demands, give your people five easy steps to how to have a better life now. You might also want to throw in a rock band and a light show . . . make entertainment centerstage of 'worship'. That will draw a crowd and bring notoriety .

But, if you do want to follow Jesus and receive His "well done" at the end of life's journey, then go Jeremiah's way, but don't

expect automatic worldly success and acclaim. It may or may not come.

But there is something else we can learn from this OT character: He was very human. At times, he grew despondent and even questioned the Almighty. In Jeremiah 15:18, we find him saying:

“Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, which refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, and as waters that fail?”

Notice, the accusation he is lodging against God. He calls him a liar.

But God did not forsake him. Rather, God’s presence surrounded him and summoned him back to faith. Who is to say that questioning did not make him a stronger and better prophet? God, because He is a big God, is able to

overcome our weaknesses and to use them for His greater good and our benefit.

But there is more still we can learn from Jeremiah. While we have no explicit record of the prophet's death in scriptures, there is a strong tradition that suggests he was stoned in Egypt by some angry Judaeans who had brought him there against his will. His "crime" was telling them truths they did not want to hear.

Many believe his death is alluded to in the first sentence of Hebrews 11:37. The author writes concerning the faithful:

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented.

The bottom line is that Jeremiah, though reluctant and even questioning, was God's man

head to foot, faithful to end. Thus, he stands as an example and an encouragement to all of us.

But, what about John the Baptist? He was the last of the Old Covenant prophets and the forerunner of the Messiah.

Well, his story, at many points, parallels that of Jeremiah.

Like Jeremiah, He was chosen of God before he was born. The angel Gabriel told his father, Zacharias, before his birth:

“He shall go before him [the Lord’s Anointed, the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Like Jeremiah, John delivered God’s message without compromise.

Unlike Jeremiah, his preaching met with a modicum of success. A number responded to his call to repentance. But not all. The Jerusalem religious leaders were notably absent from this number.

Something else Jeremiah and John had in common was that John like Jeremiah questioned.

In today's Gospel, we find John sending two of his followers to ask Jesus if He was the real deal, the promised Messiah.

As in the case of Jeremiah, God did not cast him away. Rather, Jesus sent back to him words of reassurance. He pointed him to the scriptures.

The lesson we can learn from this part of John's story is that we need to bring all our doubts and uncertainties to Jesus. He will not cast us away for questioning. He will correct us and point us on and increase our faith.

And finally, John like Jeremiah, suffered martyrdom. Instead of being stoned, however, his head was chopped off and brought to King Herod on a silver charger. If you have to go out, you might as well do with a flourish! ////

How shall I conclude?

Two great prophets, two great questioners, two great martyrs. From them, may we receive wisdom and encouragement for living out our vocation from the Lord in these momentous and tumultuous days of the 21st century.