

**Oprah's Call (The Future of Leadership)**

**Isaiah 49: 1-7 & Matthew 3:13-17**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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**"I always knew I was destined for greatness."  
Oprah Winfrey**

There are people – maybe even people in this room – who think Oprah Winfrey should run for President. If Schwarzenegger can be Governor, maybe Oprah could be President.

*She has the inspiring life story:* abandoned by young unmarried parents, abused as an adolescent. But she rose up from the ashes to become one of *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential People in the World.

*She has the money:* one of the top 500 *Richest* People in the World according to *Forbes*. The 6<sup>th</sup> Most Powerful Woman in Business according to *Fortune*.

*She has the name recognition:* 21 million people watch her TV show and millions more of us see her picture on the cover of her own magazine every month as we stand in line at the grocery store.

*She has the impressive record of service:* rivaling only Santa for giving away gifts: 5 million dollars to Morehouse College last year. Another million to a college in Johannesburg. And the list goes on . . .

There are people who *love* Oprah and people who *don't* love her, but we can all generally agree that she is an amazing leader. Having said that though, some people winced when she said to an interviewer last year without blinking an eye:

***I always knew I was destined for greatness.***

We tend to like *humility* in our leaders. We like it when they say, “Oh, it was nothing,” after performing a great service.

We in the Calvinist tradition – especially – have learned that it’s never a good idea to identify ourselves as “great.” And yet our culture lifts up “the great” and those who say they are. This is a town where people thrive on building up how great they are, how important they are, how indispensable they are.

The Bible also speaks of greatness – and not just in referring to God. But the Bible speaks of greatness regarding those whom God calls to serve. *It is their destiny.* Abraham. Moses. David. John the Baptist.

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John the Baptist was not a wealthy man. Perhaps he *could* have been wealthy, being born into a priestly family. (The priests did fairly well in those days.) But instead of preaching in the temple, anointing the respectable men who came in for blessings and confession, John traveled the hills. He ate locusts and wild honey and he anointed people in the river.<sup>1</sup> It’s said that he lived among Essenes, an ascetic tribe along the Dead Sea.

John had a record of service that was – shall we say – *challenging*. He regularly called the righteous of the community a “brood of vipers.” But they came to him because he indeed had some name recognition.

John was a fairly well known character in first century Judea. Like Jesus, the circumstance of John’s birth was the stuff of legend. If you remember, the angel Gabriel announced *John’s* birth, just as he announced *Jesus’* birth.<sup>2</sup>

And do you remember the Slaughter of the Innocents? When Herod the Great realized that a child had been born whom the Jews would call “King” he ordered that all baby boys under the age of two be slaughtered.<sup>3</sup> Joseph took Mary and their son off to Egypt to be safe. But there was *another* child who did not die.

John, the young son of Elizabeth and Zechariah, also lived. In fact, in the village of En Kerem just outside Jerusalem, you can visit The Church of the Visitation built on top of the site where many believe Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth when Elizabeth was expecting John.

The church that stands there today is not very old<sup>4</sup> but over in a corner on one side, there is a boulder that *is* very old sitting along the wall. And a marker states that *it*

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew 3:4-6

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 1:11-21.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 2:16-18

<sup>4</sup> The Church of the Visitation was rebuilt in 1946 over other ruins.

*was behind this boulder* where Elizabeth hid John during the slaughter of the innocents, and this is why he survived.

Maybe that was the rock and maybe it wasn't, but it's true that *like Jesus*, John had survived Herod's wrath.

And one last thing: John the Baptist had disciples. Come back next week, and you'll hear how two of *John's* disciples became followers of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> And they did so at John's prompting.

And *this* is the point: John was destined for greatness, but it was a greatness planned and anointed by God. He could have been touted as the Messiah *himself*. He could have promoted *himself* as he preached from town to town. But instead, John knew that his destiny was not to point to himself. **His destiny was to point the way to Jesus.**

*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*

Years ago, my husband Fred and I were on a planning team for a conference in Montreat, N.C. and we were charged with getting a great preacher to address the conference. A name came to mind for both of us – a middle-aged woman who was rather soft-spoken but with a clear faith and a way with words that quietly burned holes through your stubborn world view.

When we called her about preaching at this conference, she said, "You want me to preach at that conference? That's a conference I would attend as the person wanting to hear a good preacher. I myself am not that preacher." But she was wrong.

When Jesus came to John to be baptized, although John had baptized many others before, John said, "You want *me* to baptize *you*. *You* should be baptizing *me*."

So often when we approach members of this church to serve as deacons and elders, people say, "You want me to be a deacon or elder? But I am not worthy." Those folks tend to be the best officers.

John was baptized for greatness. But it was a greatness that pointed to God.

In Isaiah's prophesy, we hear of someone whom God called before he was *born*. Talk about destiny.

Out of this child's mouth would come words that could cut to the chase. Out of the darkness, this child would bring light.

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<sup>5</sup> See John 1:35-42.

This child is known as “the Suffering Servant” because he would come to serve God’s purposes – bringing restoration to Israel – but he would suffer in this destiny. Like Oprah, *this* child could say:

I always knew I was destined for greatness.

But that greatness involved service to a higher calling. That greatness was not about drawing attention to himself. It was about freeing those who are imprisoned and feeding those who are hungry and leading them to a place where they are able to do what God called *them* to do as well.

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Today, several of our members will stand before you to make mighty promises. They have been chosen – chosen by you through elections. But also chosen by God. **And here’s a wild idea:** they are destined for greatness.

But I have news for you: each person in this room, every woman, every man, every girl, every boy is destined for greatness in the great plan of Almighty God. Maybe we have zero name recognition. Maybe we are living paycheck to paycheck. Maybe we’d *like* to be Santa to friends and strangers, but we just can’t afford it. Maybe our permanent record is not all that impressive, our resume not that stellar.

But God has called us *all* to greatness in that all of us are called to serve. Maybe you are called to sing in the choir or maybe you are called to give somebody a ride to the doctor.

Your calling might be to teach a child how to pray or to preach a sermon. You might be called to fly to Thailand to help with relief efforts. Or you might be called to drive to a school and relieve the misery of one student there who doesn’t yet know how to read.

You can be sure of one thing: God has called us to serve somebody besides ourselves and our own families, and ultimately, it’s all about serving God. Just as the Lord chosen the servant in Isaiah’s prophesy, the Lord has chosen **you**.

Maybe we can’t preach like Peter or pray like Paul, but the Lord has chosen us to serve in some small or great way. We have been called to change the world – not for our *own* glory – but to the glory of God who makes it possible for us to do anything at all.

The future of ministry depends upon being a servant – sometimes even a suffering servant. God doesn’t promise riches or name recognition. But God has promised to bless us in this ministry. (And I’m not talking about heaven.) There are blessings on this earth, blessings of the soul that are actually quite heavenly. My hope is that every one in this room might experience them.

*Let us pray:*

*Many of us do not what we are supposed to do with our lives or where you are leading us. But we know that you are leading us, Lord, and we pray that we might be prepared for whatever it is that you call us to do and be. Through Jesus Christ, your suffering servant who saves us all – Amen.*