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HERE COMES YOUR GREAT MOMENT!

Today's Text: Lk 3: 1-23

Extracts:

The word of the Lord came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.... So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" [For] the people were in expectation and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not. John answered and said to them, "I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I is coming whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" [Lk 3: 2-3, 10, 15-16]

In the 2009 season, the New York Red Bulls came last in the MLS (Major League Soccer),¹ which has a rapidly expanding fan base. In preparation for the 2010 season, they hired a new coach and general manager and built a \$200 million stadium with a sitting capacity of 25,000 fans. Recently, they acquired from Barcelona (in the Spanish La Liga) a top player, Thierry Henry (33), who is Arsenal (UK) and France's top goal-scorer of all time. Henry made his debut with the Red Bulls in an exhibition match against Tottenham, an English Premier League team, on 22 July 2010. The game was watched by 20,312 fans. Henry scored a spectacular goal but his new team lost 1-2 to the visitors. Yet, Henry was voted the Most Valuable Player (MVP).

Henry's call to the New York Red Bulls is akin to God's call for us to come as labourers into His vineyard. Like Henry, we could be taking a big risk. It could mean jumping from a height into a ditch, from fame into anonymity. Some of us are scared to start while some may jump in too early. When your moment comes, what are you going to do? Today's lesson based on John the Baptist's launching of his earthly ministry will guide you to seize your own moment.

¹ Story based on the following sources: "Thierry Henry," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thierry_Henry Ronald Blum, "Henry scores in 1st game for New York Red Bulls," <http://g.sports.yahoo.com/soccer/world-cup/news/henry-scores-in-1st-game-for-new-york-red-bulls-fbintl-ap-tottenham-redbulls.html> ; Jul 22, 2010; and Andrew Jordan, "Red Bulls Moves for Rafa Marquez and Thierry Henry Mark Change in MLS," <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/429040-red-bulls-moves-for-rafa-marquez-and-thierry-henry-mark-change-in-mls> ; Aug 3, 2010

1. Background: John the Baptist launches his ministry

Most of us are zealous to do God's work, no matter our motives. Some start quite well and with a bang but burn out within a short time. Some others begin tentatively and find their ministry exploding beyond their imagination. Some are scared to start at all! We do not want to refuse God's call as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers [**Eph. 4: 11**]. We may not hesitate to exercise our gifts of healings, helps and administrations [**1 Cor. 13: 28**]. At the same time, we do not want to accept the call when we are not ready. How do you know when to be ready? Who defines success in the matter? John the Baptist's story will assist us to answer those and many other questions.

John's ministry was prophesied by Isaiah. He would be the "voice of one crying in the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight" and "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" [**Is. 40: 3-5; Lk 3: 4-6**]. Remarkably, until the day that John suddenly exploded on the spiritual consciousness of the people of Israel, they had been in total darkness for hundreds of years without a single word from heaven. Let us develop the narrative as follows:

a) *John's preparation*

God called John even before he was conceived. When archangel Gabriel revealed himself to John's father, Zacharias, he told him that God had answered his prayer and that he and his wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son who would be called John. Coming in the spirit and power of prophet Elijah, John's ministry would be to make Israel ready for the coming of the Messiah [**Lk 1: 11-17**]. During his naming ceremony, Zacharias was in spirit and reiterated his son's ministry "as the prophet of the Highest" who would "go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" [**v. 76**]. We are told that John "grew and became strong in spirit, and *was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel*" [**v. 80**].

We learn from that story that John did not jump from baby to baptizer overnight. He grew up (maturation) and lived a hard life in the deserts (wilderness experience) before God called him out to launch his ministry. If Jesus launched His ministry at the age of 30 [**Lk 3: 23**] and John was six months older than He was [**Lk 1: 26**], we can assume that John began his own ministry when he was 30 years and a few months old. Here was a powerful prophet of God, anointed from his mother's womb but he did not show up to the public until he was over 30 years old. We would do a different thing today. A day after we receive a prophetic word that God has called us to be pastors, we are already shopping for a place to rent to start a church! The one called into a prophetic ministry will already begin to give gullible believers messages as an "oracle of God," even when they are seeing nightmares or hallucinations! How can a toddler drive a truck?

The maturation process gives you the time to grow up and develop the spiritual muscles that you need to do your work. The wilderness is not just a lonely uninhabited place; it is an opportunity for you to learn how to depend absolutely on God. It is a place where God can prune you of all human gadgets of comfort (such as power, position or money) to enable you to appreciate that only He can exalt or demote [Ps. 75: 6-7]. It is a place where you are harnessed to hear God's still small voice. Moses grew up in the Pharaoh's palace to learn and understand the ways of royalty before he spent another forty years in exile to learn how to trust God. When he came before Pharaoh to ask for freedom for the children of Israel, royalty feared to harm one of its princes and hardship could not scare him. He was ready for the moment!

b) *John comes out!*

We are told, "the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness; and he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" [Lk 3: 2-3]. It was God who determined *when* John came out, *where* he should go and *what* he should do. Harnessed by God in the wilderness for over 30 years, John was bound to do exactly as commanded. For example, on his baptism of Jesus, John who was in Spirit testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. *I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'*" [Jn 1: 32-33].

To baptize means to "dip" or "immerse." John needed River Jordan for that purpose. The Jews were used to non-Jews converting from pagan worship to Judaism but this water baptism had a spiritual significance. John did not question what he was commanded to do. Today, we would question it, claiming that it was unscriptural, having not found it in the then Bible, the Old Testament. But it was there all along even though it was not called that name. For example, writing about the crossing of the Red Sea by the children of Israel thousands of years earlier, Paul wrote [1 Cor. 10: 1-4]:

Brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

So, as someone has aptly put it, just as a piece of cloth dipped into dyed water comes out in the colour of the dye, so also does a believer dipped into water come out with the dye of Christ. That is why believers are

called Christians! As John's listeners repented of their sins and were baptized in the Jordan, they became believers in the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Note that John came out at the right time and in the right place. The multitudes were there [Lk 3: 7], including tax collectors [v. 12] and soldiers [v. 14]. All of them "were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ, or not" [v. 15]. Only God could have determined such a ripe moment. For example, on the day Peter launched his ministry, God had made it possible for pilgrims from all over the then known world to be in Jerusalem. That was why he was able to get 3,000 new converts in one day to receive water baptism and get saved [Acts 2: 41]. Therefore, if you launch the way God wants it, you will not be starved of a ready audience.

c) *John's ministry ends with the revelation of Jesus!*

When his listeners asked John if he was the expected Messiah, he told them that he was not even worthy to loose the sandal straps on the Christ's feet. Moreover, he John baptized only with water but the Christ would "baptize you with the Holy spirit and fire" [Lk 3: 16]. Following God's command when Jesus was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, as we had earlier noted, John baptized Him² [v. 21]. Soon after, John pointed his own disciples and multitudes to Jesus, saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'after me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me'" [Jn 1: 29-30]. In no time, John's ministry was over and John was glad about it, saying, "This joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease" [Jn 3: 29-30]. John was arrested by Herod for preaching against his adulterous marriage to his brother's wife [Lk 3: 19-20]. Soon after, John was beheaded [Matt. 14:1-12].

John's ministry was short, focussed and completed. In his eulogy, Jesus said, "Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" [Matt, 11: 11]. In other words, only God can determine whether your work for Him is successful or not. The least you can do He will value over the much that John the Baptist did. That is the challenge that you must pick up right now for here comes your moment to launch!

2. So what is holding you back from launching?

The bulk of worshippers in most congregations consist of believers who are mere pew or bench warmers, playing to the gallery of their priests or pastors. If you are

² Jesus did not need baptism because He was without sin but He did it "to fulfill all righteousness" [Matt. 3: 15].

one of them, have you ever asked yourself what God has called you to do for Him in the vineyard? Did He not say that the harvest is ripe but that the labourers are few? Did He not enjoin you to pray the Lord of the harvest to send more labourers into His vineyard [**Matt. 9: 36-38**]? Did He not also say that many are called but only few are chosen [**Matt. 22: 14**]? Why are you not one of the chosen?

Here are some of the reasons:

a) *You are running away from it!*

Some of us have heard the call loud and clear but for one reason or the other, we have ignored it. For example, we may claim to be too young or too old; we may be too busy or too lazy. We love pleasure and hate pain. The bottom line may be fear of the unknown. In the words of Jesus, those who desire to come after Him must first deny themselves, take up their *crosses* [not crowns!] and follow Him, for “what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” [**Matt. 16: 24, 26**].

See what price Jonah almost paid for running away from God’s call to launch a ministry of repentance in the city of Nineveh [**Jon. Chaps 1-4**]. Instead of accepting the privilege and willingly going there, he bought a one-way ticket in the wrong direction to escape to Joppa (on the west coast of Israel) on the way to Tarshish in Spain so as to escape “from the presence of the Lord” [**1:3**]! God sent a tempest that rocked the ship to near destruction until its owners used lots to identify Jonah as the source of their problems. At his request, they tossed him overboard and a big fish swallowed him and vomitted him alive on dry land after spending three days and three nights in its belly! Thereafter, Jonah sprinted to Nineveh and the city’s 120,000 inhabitants repented and were saved [**4:11**]. Fear of failure made him run away but his repentance and God’s mercy restored him. God will do the same to you if you decide this moment to give up your flight and accept His call to launch your ministry, no matter how small it may be.

b) *Or you have launched it too prematurely!*

Sometimes, zeal or the love of money may push us to launch prematurely, that is, before the time that God has set for us. In another context concerning the Jews, Paul has spoken of people who have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge, “for they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God” [**Rom. 10: 1-3**]. Righteousness before God is by faith through Christ, and faith comes by hearing the word of God [**v. 4, 17**]. Therefore, if your great moment to launch was not in accordance with God’s word (in

terms of when, where, what and how), you are on your own. You have merely launched a business or charity, not a ministry. You may need to complete your spiritual maturation (from the food of the Spirit) and apprenticeship in the wilderness of discipline before you launch. Elisha's servant, Gehazi, was in a hurry to launch his own prophetic ministry, instead of waiting for the end of his master's who had taken over Elijah's mantle. Consequently, Gehazi received leprosy instead of a double portion of his master's power [2 Kgs 5:20-27]!

3. Conclusion: Remember that God called you!

From the forgoing analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

- *It was God that called you as a labourer into His vineyard.* He determines your job description and the terms of your 'employment.' Jesus has said, "Without Me you can do nothing" [Jn 15:5]
- *That God has called you does not mean that you should launch right away.* You need a maturation period to grow your spiritual wings and a preparation time to acquire spiritual discipline so that you can hear distinctly when God is speaking to you.
- *Only God can determine when you are to launch, what you are to launch and where you are to begin or reach.* If you follow earthly wisdom, you will fail and be frustrated. Jesus told His disciples just before He ascended to heaven not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father, when they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit "not many days from [then]" [Acts 1: 4-5]. The waiting took ten days and after receiving the Holy Spirit, they launched their ministry on Pentecost Sunday. The rest is history!
- Just as it was the New York Red Bulls management that declared Thierry Henry the MVP in a match that his team lost, *only God can define what constitutes your ministry's success.* Jesus rated John above everyone before his birth; yet, He ranked him less than the least in the kingdom of heaven. That means that God will reward the little you can *joyfully and cheerfully* do. Your job is to plant or water but only He can give the increase [1 Cor. 3: 6]. As long as you have obeyed His voice, leave its evaluation to Him.

In the Lord's vineyard, there are vacancies in the choir, child care, horticulture, record keeping, administration, advice and guidance, teaching and preaching, etc, where your natural talents and professional skills are in high demand. Here comes your great moment!