

Jarena Lee

A preachin' woman of the ame church

During a time in America's history when it was considered unseemly for a woman to speak in public and blacks were thought not to have souls, Jarena Lee stands as a spiritual and social pioneer. Lee was born to a free African-American family in Cape May, New Jersey, on Feb. 11, 1783. At age 7, she was sent to work for a family located about 60 miles from her birthplace.

While living with this family, Lee experienced a dramatic conversion at the age of 21. But after having received Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, she often battled with thoughts of suicide and doubted her salvation.

Nonetheless, Lee cultivated spiritual intimacy with the Lord. In times of distress, she agonized in prayer until she received the answer to her heart's cries.

Lee learned about sanctification from a young black Methodist named William Scott. In seeking this blessing from the Lord, she received deliverance from demonic oppression and the full assurance of her salvation.

The call to preach came in 1809. At that time, Lee went to the Rev. Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, and requested permission to preach under the church's covering.

Allen had fought the Methodists' discrimination against blacks, but he upheld their nonrecognition of women preachers. He suggested that Lee hold home prayer meetings instead of preaching.

In 1811, Jarena married Joseph Lee, the pastor of a black Methodist congregation in Snow Hill, Pennsylvania, located six

miles from Philadelphia. Their family included two sons.

In 1817, following her husband's death, Lee returned to Philadelphia and asked Allen if she could hold meetings in her home. He agreed. Her prayer meetings and ministerial visits were marked by many salvations. Eventually Allen confessed that he believed she was called just as the male preachers were.

With Allen's sanction, Lee began her traveling ministry. However, she was never officially recognized as a preacher by the all-male AME governing body.

The zeal to call others to the saving knowledge of Christ led her to preach to whites as well as blacks and to men as well as women. In pursuing God's call, she often left her sons with family and friends.

In her memoirs, *The Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*, Lee stated that she was fully persuaded God had called her to preach. She wrote, "If a man preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing He died for her also?"

By her example, Jarena Lee left a powerful legacy. She sought to be obedient to the leading of God's Spirit rather than being deterred by the attitudes of man.

Jonette O'Kelley Miller is a freelance writer.