

Sunday, May 7, 2006
Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church
Old Testament Lesson – Jonah 3:1-5
New Testament Lesson – Mark 1:14-20
Sermon – "Tapped on the Shoulder"

Mission trips are not just for young people. Time away from our routines can prove to be formative for our faith as disciples. Meaningful work in the service of Christ, study and prayer can be a tonic for "what ails us" Folks on work groups to the gulf region say that they receive much more than they give in their efforts to serve and be of help. The earmarks of the early church were *kerygma* (proclamation), *diakonia* (service) and *koinonia* (fellowship). They are still identifying factors today.

It wasn't on a trip to the gulf region but on a mission trip to Haiti that the evening discussion changed significantly when someone asked the question "How did you get here?" Not here in Haiti on the mission trip but how did you get here as a disciple? What wonderful and varied stories were shared. One woman's husband died after a brief illness and she had to start over. One person just wandered in out of curiosity. Another came as a kid through the effort of committed Christian parents. Somebody else wandered away, experienced ups and down in living and was drawn back in middle age.

As the group talked and shared it was clear that there was no "one" way. There was no single pattern or path to discipleship. Except that each was "tapped on the shoulder," invited, called by God.

Both of our scripture lessons this morning tell of a "call from God," an invitation, a tap on the shoulder. Unlike what we may wish to think they are not all that unique or unusual. Think of Moses (the burning bush), Samuel (sleeping in the temple), Jeremiah (I am just a youth!), any (or all) of the disciples, or the apostle Paul. It is God's practice to tap folks on the shoulder to get their attention, to invite them to follow, to get them on a journey with God and with others.

When applying to seminary I was required to write an essay describing my "call" to ministry. I remember being self-conscious, a little scared, even a little worried. My call wasn't anywhere as dramatic as Paul's road to

Damascus experience, Moses' burning bush, Jonah's great fish, or as in this morning's New Testament Lesson an audible conversation/invitation with Jesus.

As something of a hobby I enjoy reading about baseball. I'm especially drawn to baseball's "golden age" in the early years of the 20th century. In real life as well as in fiction there was a common hope or theme. Before the days of enhanced communication the hope was that like Robert Redford in "The Natural" (Roy Hobbs), or Shoeless Joe Jackson someone from out of nowhere – a backwoods wonder – would come and set the baseball world on its ear.

I think there is something of the same attraction or allure in talent shows: an average person, one of us, can really rise and shine. Before all the primping, preening and hype of American Idol and Star Search there was Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour. Before that there was Major Bowles. I understand that Spokane's own version was Starlit Stairway -6:30 Saturday evenings. "When you need oil...Call Boyle Fairfax 8-1521. (And how are you doing remembering important things!"

God's hope and design is the same. It wasn't the ruler of Nineveh, it wasn't the ruler of Israel during Jesus' ministry, but rather ordinary folk who were "tapped on the shoulder, invited to follow, enlisted to serve and who became partners with God in God's work.

And so it is for us. How did we get here? Think of the stories that could be told. It wasn't because we were renowned. It wasn't because of our great successes. It is our faithfulness, our response, to that tap on the sold that has made the difference for us and through us for others.

William Willamon tells the following story, "One night some years ago, a Duke fraternity invited me to give a talk. The Dean requires them to have a certain number of programs each year in order to give fraternities some semblance of respectability. My assigned topic was 'Character and College.' I thought, 'Lord, thou hast delivered them into my hands.' I can't believe that they are dumb enough to invite an old guy like me to talk to young guys like them on 'character.'

"So I went to their fraternity section and knocked on their door. The door opened and I was greeted by a young boy of about nine or ten, I imagined.

What is a kid doing over here at this time of night? I wondered. Surely we have rules against young children in the dorm this late.

"They're waiting for you in the common room,' he said. 'Follow me, and I'll take you there.'

"We wound our way back into the common room and the fraternity was gathered, glumly waiting for my presentation. As I began my remarks, I noted that the little boy climbed onto the lap of one of the brothers. Shortly, he fell asleep with his head on the shoulder of this college kid.

"Well, I hammered them for the moral failures of their generation for about half an hour. When I finally finished my talk I asked if they had any questions or comments. Dead silence. So, I thinned them for the honor, and made my way out. I heard the college kid say to the little boy, 'You go on and get ready for bed. I'll be in to tuck you in and read you a story.'

"When we stood just outside the door, the fraternity boy lit a cigarette, took a drag on it, and thanked me for coming out.

"Let me ask you,' I said, 'who was the kid there tonight?'

"Oh, that's Darrel,' he said, 'The fraternity is part of the Durham Big Brother program. We met Darrel that way. His mom's on crack and having a tough time. Sometimes it gets so bad that she can't take care for him. So we told Darrell to call us up when he needs us. We go over, pick him up, and he stays with us until it's okay to go home. We take him to school; buy him his clothes, books, and stuff.'

"That's amazing,' I said. 'I take back all that I said about you people being bad and irresponsible.'

"I tell you what's amazing,' he said as he took another drag on his cigarette. 'What's amazing is that God would pick a guy like me to do something this good for somebody else.'

"On my way back to my car that night I said to Jesus, 'It's an odd way to do a revolution. Still, by the grace of God, it works.'"

Tapped on the shoulder. We're invited, you and I, as common and ordinary as we are to do God's work. Today. Everyday.

Amen.