

# FOREWORD

The title of this booklet comes from Dr. Wiley Stephens, my friend and predecessor as chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry. More than once, Wiley stood before our conference and said, “God calls people to ministry, but the church can encourage them.” As the number of ordained United Methodist clergy shrank across the country, and as the average age of seminary graduates rose into the mid-forties, Wiley said, “Either God has stopped calling young men and women to ordained ministry, or we’re failing to do our part. I believe we all know which it is.”

We can rest assured that God is still issuing the call. Whether the rest of us – clergy and laity alike – are doing our part to amplify God’s call and to help others identify it and accept it is another matter altogether.

Finding new ways to encourage those God calls has been one of the Board’s goals for this quadrennium. I want to thank Glenn Ethridge for his initiative and leadership in this area. In a separate publication, you will find information about two retreats that Glenn and Patrick Jansen have designed for those who feel God may be calling them to ordained ministry. The first, for adults, will be held in the fall of 2003. The second, for youth, will be held in the fall of 2004. We encourage you to be intentional about publicizing these events, and to be deliberate in personally identifying and talking with persons you think would benefit from them.

We are also asking that every church and pastor in the conference designate at least one Sunday every year as the day you emphasize God’s call to ordained ministry. This booklet is one of our ways of encouraging you in this conference-wide effort. In the course of putting it together, I’ve been impressed by how many opportunities the Bible gives us throughout the year to include the call to ministry in our teaching and preaching.

This booklet contains one example of a full sermon on the call to ordained ministry. The rest of it is made up of pump-primers, jump-starters, thought-provokers, and illustrations. The contents were gleaned from nearly thirty years of preaching and teaching and are listed by text, theme, and the corresponding Sunday in the lectionary, when there is one. While there probably are some oversights, I’ve tried to be fair in giving credit where credit is due.

David B. Jones  
Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry  
North Georgia Conference

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**“Coming When Called”**  
**Matthew 4:12-23**  
**Third Sunday after Epiphany A**

Gary Wills is the Pulitzer Prize winning author of a book entitled, “Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders.” In the introduction Wills says, “We have thousands of books on leadership, none on followership. I have heard college presidents tell their students that schools are meant to train leaders. I have never heard anyone profess to train followers. The ideal seems to be a world in which everyone is a leader. . . .”<sup>i</sup>

Wills goes on to recite a long list of what a leader needs. Things like determination, power, a sense of priorities. But then he says, “We can’t forget the first and all-encompassing need. A leader most needs followers. When followers are lacking, the best ideas, the strongest will, the most wonderful smile has no effect.” He recalls a scene in one of Shakespeare’s plays in which Owen Glendower boasts that he “can call spirits from the vasty deep.” And Hotspur deflates him with the commonsense answer: “Why, so can I, or so can anyone else. But will they come when you do call them?”<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus must have wondered, “Will they come when I call them?” The answer wasn’t always “Yes.” He called a rich young man once. “Go sell what you have,” Jesus said, “give it to the poor; then come, follow me.” The young man couldn’t bring himself to do it. He turned and walked away sorrowfully. That happens. Some who hear the call reject it. Others accept it.

Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee one day when he saw two brothers: Simon, later called Peter, and Andrew. They were fishing. It was their regular work. Jesus said, “Follow me and I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass.” Simon and Andrew didn’t ask questions. They simply dropped their nets and followed him. A little way down the beach, they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John. The two of them were sitting in a boat, mending their fishing nets. Jesus extended the same invitation, and they were just as quick to follow.

The word that’s used most often in the New Testament for “follow” comes from the Greek word for “road.” To follow is to share the same road. Peter and Andrew, James and John were the first. But Jesus is still looking for people who will share the road with him. You might close the service with an invitation of your own wording, followed by a prayer and the hymn “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.”

**“The Power of Influence”**  
**Matthew 5:13-20**  
**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany A**

A young man came to Georgia Tech from a family that never went to church. The student cared nothing about Christianity and was actually cynical about it. He became friends with some of the students who were members of the Wesley Foundation. They invited him to one of the Friday night meetings. He went out of curiosity and a desire to ridicule what they were doing. Instead, he

became interested in Christian beliefs and started attending worship at nearby St. Mark Church. (My father was the senior pastor at the time and learned this story about “salt and light” from the late Bill Landiss, who for decades was the beloved and highly effective director of the Wesley Foundation at Tech.)

One Sunday, the young man decided to find out once-and-for-all whether the church was a phony institution. He came to St. Mark that morning with a plan. He would give the faith one chance to prove itself. After the benediction, he picked out a layperson, at random, and said, “Sir, do you have a few minutes to talk with me?” The layman could have said, “My family is waiting.” “Lunch is ready.” “This is my day off and I’m tired.” “There’s a ball game on.” Or just plain, “No.” Instead, he said, “When and where?” The young man said, “Right now. Anywhere you choose.” The layman said, “Let’s go to my car.”

They sat in the car and talked for an hour. In his cynical way, the young man began to quiz the layman about his religion. Then, noticing the man’s kindness and sincerity, the student began to ask about what Christ meant to him. After their talk, the student went back to Georgia Tech and started attending Wesley Foundation meetings regularly – and with devotion. From Tech, against the wishes of his family, he went to theology school. To this day, he stands in a pulpit every Sunday and preaches the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The key that unlocked the door to that young man’s heart was a Christian layperson. The hour that layman spent in that car was the seasoning that made all the difference in that student’s life. It was the light that dispelled his darkness. I wonder: Where would that young man be, and what would he be doing today, if that layperson had been you?

**“The Testimony of a Towel”**  
**John 13:1-17**  
**Holy Thursday A, B, C**

It’s the day before the crucifixion. Jesus has been dealing with his opponents all week. He knows that later that night, one of his disciples will betray him, another will deny knowing him, all of them will desert him. Within twenty-four hours, he will be dead. He and the disciples troop into the Upper Room at the end of the day for the Last Supper.

In those days, you wouldn’t think of eating a meal before cleaning the dirt from the day’s travels off of your feet. But none of the disciples reaches for the basin, the towel, and the pitcher of water. Each is waiting for one of the others to make the first move. Each is waiting to be served. Their hesitation sets the stage for one of the most astonishing scenes in the Bible. Jesus gets on his knees, takes the pitcher, the towel, and the basin, and moves from person to person, washing the dirt of the Palestinian roads from between the toes of his disciples.

He comes to Simon Peter. Simon can’t stand it. “No, way! I’ll never let you wash my feet!” Jesus says, “Simon, there’s a reason I’m doing this.” Simon objects, “I won’t let you!” Jesus insists, “I’ve got to.” When he’s done, Jesus says, “I’ve given you an example of how you should love each other. If I’m willing out of love for you to be your servant and to serve you, then

shouldn't you be willing to be servants, too?"

This amazing episode in the Upper Room has particular significance for contemporary deacons, who still portray Jesus' example of foot washing in their vestments. During worship services, deacons wear a stole that goes across the left shoulder and is tied at the waist to remind them of the towel Jesus used when he washed the disciples' feet, demonstrating for them – and us – that the Christian life is a life of service to others.<sup>iii</sup>

**“Women in Ministry”**  
**Matthew 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-18**  
**Easter A, B, C**

Amid the multitude of differences in the Gospel accounts of Easter, one aspect of the story remains consistent. This common denominator speaks to the reluctance some still have when it comes to the ordination of women as ministers. All four writers agree that Mary Magdalene, and perhaps some other female followers of Jesus, came to the tomb on Easter morning and found it empty. The significance, Walter Wink reminds us, is that in Jewish society, women were considered to be property and had no standing whatsoever as witnesses.<sup>iv</sup> It's also significant, Wink says, that in all four Gospels, Mary Magdalene is mentioned first among the women.

Mary wasn't a prostitute, as tradition has made her out to be. She was a former demoniac.<sup>v</sup> The Risen Christ made his first appearance to an unfit witness, a member of the oppressed gender, someone outside the inner circle of male disciples, a person he had healed of a mental illness! It was scandalous stuff from the beginning. But read the New Testament with this in mind, and all sorts of interesting things start jumping off the pages.

In the first chapter of Acts, Luke mentions that women were present when the church was founded. In Acts 2, he says women were singled out to receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on an equal basis with men. In Acts 8, 9, and 22, where we read of the persecution of the church, Luke specifically states that the women were dragged off and imprisoned along with the men. In Acts 9, he tells us there “was at Joppa a disciple named Tabitha. . . .She was full of good works and acts of charity.” In Acts 12, we're told that Mary was the leader of a church in her house. In Acts 16, we learn that Lydia led her whole household to be baptized; and that when Paul sailed for Syria, he took with him his co-workers, Priscilla and her husband Aquilla.

In Romans 16, we meet Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae. Paul introduces her as one who has authority over others: “Receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a ruler over many, indeed over me.” In the same chapter, Paul introduces Prisca, “my fellow worker in Christ,” and Mary, “who has worked hard among you.”

In the fourth chapter of Colossians, Paul sends greetings to Nymphia “and the church in her house.” In Philipians 4, he writes of Euodia and Syntyche, “women who have labored side by side with me in the gospel.” In 1 Timothy 3, women are included among those instructed as deacons. In Philemon, Paul sends greetings to “Apphia, our sister . . . and the church in your house.”

These were startling departures for that day and age. They're rooted in a consistent feature of the Easter accounts: the Risen Lord appeared first to Mary Magdalene! So what's the take home point for the church? There should be complete equality between women and men in every area of ministry. Why else would the Risen Lord have appeared first to Mary?

**“A Call from the Church”**  
**Acts 7:55-60**  
**Fifth Sunday of Easter A**

Frederick Buechner says that after Jesus died, it took a while for his followers to settle down and get organized. It was a process that was no easier then than it has been ever since.<sup>vi</sup> Right off the bat there was a heated controversy over how the daily food distributions were being handled. The Greek members of First Church Anywhere said, “Our widows aren’t being looked after as well as the Hebrew widows.” For the trivia buffs among us, that’s the first complaint in church history – and the church has been dealing with one kind of complaint or another ever since!

The problem was solved when the disciples suggested that some men be put in charge of that part of the operation. The congregation thought this was a great idea. Luke says the members of the church “chose” seven men and set them before the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them. Does this mean a church can call someone into ministry, or must a call come directly from God?

Dennis Campbell, former dean of the Duke Divinity School, believes God works through both a personal call to the individual and a public call from the church: “These go together; both are necessary; but they may come separately; and one is not necessarily prior to the other. Certainly we should not ‘recruit’ for ordained ministry as if it were a job among other jobs. But we must let Christians know that God calls people to ordained ministry in and through the church, and that they should be attentive and open to the call.”<sup>vii</sup>

Luke says all seven who were called by the church had good sense and were full of the Holy Spirit. But he singles Stephen out: “He was brimming with God’s grace and energy. . . . He did wonderful things among the people that were unmistakable signs that God was with them. . . .His face was like the face of an angel.”

Stephen’s job was to run the food pantry and make sure the resources of the church were managed fairly. But most of what we’re told about Stephen has nothing to do with church administration. Most of it has to do with the way he healed, preached, and talked about the difference his belief in Jesus Christ was making in his life. Stephen’s combination of preaching and hands-on ministry makes him a powerful example for contemporary deacons – men and women who are ordained to a ministry of both Word and Service.

Stephen was so persuasive, eloquent, and effective that it wasn’t long before the leaders of the old religious establishment called him on the carpet and demanded that he defend his radical views. Eventually they dragged Stephen out of town and stoned him to death. Standing nearby was a fire-breathing young man named Saul, who was there because he thoroughly approved of what

they were doing. Buechner reminds us it was a sight Saul never forgot. Years later, when he was known as Paul, the great missionary of the early church, he wrote about it.<sup>viii</sup>

While Luke doesn't spell this out, you have to believe Paul remembered the two things Stephen said as he was dying. First he said, "Lord, receive my spirit," echoing the prayer Jesus prayed on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." Then he said, "Lord, don't hold this sin against them," echoing the petition of Jesus on the cross: "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing." Stephen, called by the church to be one of the first deacons, also became the first Christian martyr. He died as he had lived – following the example of Jesus.

**“Leave Everything Behind”**  
**Matthew 9:9-13**  
**Ordinary Time 10 A**

Jesus found Matthew sitting at his tax desk and issued the invitation to discipleship. The record says, "Matthew rose and followed him." Have you thought about how difficult that must have been for Matthew? The tracks of habit run deep. How long had Matthew been collecting taxes for the Romans? How would he make a living if he gave it up? How would his family and friends react? What would people say?

But Matthew had heard a voice that was filled with incredible strength and purpose. The voice said, "Follow me," so Matthew rose and followed, leaving everything behind. I suppose that's easy to do if you're no good at anything except ministry. But it must be infinitely harder when you're good at a whole bunch of things, one of which is ministry.

Albert Schweitzer was a brilliant theologian, physician, philosopher, and musician. He served as dean of the seminary in Strasbourg and achieved international fame as a concert organist and the world's greatest interpreter of Bach. In 1913, Schweitzer left Europe to establish the Lambarene Hospital in what was then known as French Equatorial Africa. There he treated thousands of patients, including hundreds of lepers. In 1952, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

When Schweitzer died in September of 1965, Norman Cousins, the longtime editor of "The Saturday Review," wrote a tribute to him. Cousins mentioned all the influences on Schweitzer's life, trying to understand how he became such a marvelous human being. He talked about the culture Schweitzer grew up in, about his family life and his religious beliefs. He concluded his tribute with these words: "Beyond these explanations, it seems to me that there is something else about Schweitzer. The best way I can say it is that somehow or other, he seemed to understand what God wanted from him, and he responded with a glad and willing heart."

When you get right down to it, that's what it means to answer God's call. No matter how many things you're good at, you do what God wants you to do with a glad and willing heart!

**“How Are They To Hear?”**  
**Romans 10:14-15**  
**Ordinary Time 19 A**

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?” Paul asks. “And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?”

Those who are “sent” are first called in all sorts of ways. One of my newer friends in ministry is Bill Ritter, pastor of First United Methodist in Birmingham, Michigan. Bill heard the call through the church. “Sometimes,” he says, “the Spirit of God is like a cat burglar, casing the basement of your soul, having gained entry through the only window you forgot to lock before nightfall. Then the Spirit goes to work, nudging you toward something you need to do, someone you need to see, or some door you need to walk through.

“One of the reasons I am in this line of work is because a bunch of elderly ladies in my boyhood church kept saying to me, ‘I bet you’re going to be a minister someday.’ The reason they kept saying that is because every time they were at the church, I was at the church. They figured the only reason some kid would behave in such a delightful, albeit abnormal, way is because God had fingered him. Early on. Eventually, I figured they knew something I didn’t.

“But the first time I told this to the Board of Ministry examiners – that a bunch of little old ladies had called me to preach – fifty percent of the clergy at the table said, “That can’t be a call to ministry.” While the other fifty percent said, “Oh, yes it can.” So for the next several minutes, I simply sat back and let them go at each other. The bottom line is, I’m here. In part, because that old cat burglar of a Spirit found a weak point in my adolescent resistance – little old ladies.

“I don’t know how it is for you,” Bill says to folks. “But if I get you in my office, and get you talking about what’s really going on in your life, we’ll find the Spirit’s disguise. And we’ll uncover the Spirit’s work. I just know we will. Then I’ll tell you to go with it, move with it, dance and swing with it, ebb and flow with it, anything but deny it or sit on it.”

**“The Chosen One”**  
**Luke 1:26-38**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent B**

“In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer.” In March of 1997, those lines launched a mid-season replacement series based on a wacky little movie called “Buffy, the Vampire Slayer.” The mid-season replacement turned into a surprise hit that ended recently after a seven year run.

As fans know, Buffy is a popular high school senior. She’s busy with cheerleading, dating, and going to dances. Then a messenger appears and tells her that she’s the chosen one who can

defeat the vampires that are planning their final assault. When Buffy hears that, she screams, “Are you crazy?” She knows if she gets involved, it will mean the end of dances and dates and everything else that’s currently important to her.

I wouldn’t try to press the parallels very far. But Buffy’s response might help some of us, especially those in the younger generation, understand why Mary was so thoroughly shaken. Here’s this nice Jewish teenager. She’s engaged to a man with a respectable job. They’re planning to settle down to a quiet, comfortable life in Nazareth. Suddenly she hears this unsettling news: There’s something that God wants done. That usually means trouble for somebody, and Mary’s frightened, because she knows God has her in mind.

God is ready to send the Messiah into the world. While Mary doesn’t understand all the details, she knows the plan depends on her. Will Mary say, “Yes,” or will she say, “Are you crazy?” Her response is one of the most moving expressions of faith in the Bible: “Let it be to me according to your word.” Mary didn’t understand everything God had in mind, but she didn’t disbelieve it, either. In simple trust, she put herself in God’s hands: “However you decide to use me, it’s all right with me.”

Bishop Mel Talbert tells the story of a woman who had a dream in which she wrote down all the things she had decided to do to make the world a better place. When she was finished, she held the paper up toward heaven, offered it to God, and asked that God validate her plans by signing at the bottom of the page. Moments later, the paper floated back down to earth, unsigned. As it landed at her feet, the woman heard God say, “This time, take a blank sheet of paper. Sign *your* name at bottom, then let *me* fill it in.”

God changes the world in God’s own way, on God’s own timetable, using people of God’s own choosing – people like Mary and you and me. Luke says Mary heard God through the voice of an angel. I know people who’ve said the same thing. Others have told me they heard God speaking through their conscience. Or through someone who said something that stuck with them. Or they felt something pulling on them that wouldn’t let them go, like a phone that won’t stop ringing until you answer it. God can speak to us any number of ways.

Take time this week away from all the hurry and hullabaloo of the season to hear the Christmas promise, “God is with you”; to listen for the announcement of what God wants to do in the world through you; to let go of your fears about “how this could be”; and to respond in faith as freely as Mary did: “However you decide to use me, Lord, it’s all right with me.”

**“Take The Leap”**  
**1 Samuel 3:1-20**  
**Second Sunday after Epiphany B**

There must have been days when young Samuel wondered what in the world his mother had gotten him into. She’d dedicated him to a life of service at an early age, which is how he came to spend his childhood in the temple at Shiloh.

One night, as Samuel was sleeping in his usual place near the ark, he heard somebody calling his name. Assuming it was old Eli, the boy ran to his master and said, “Here I am!” Eli said, “I didn’t call you. Go back to sleep.” So Samuel went back to bed. After a while he heard somebody call his name a second time. He raced to the old man’s side again, and again Eli told him to go back to sleep.

The third time, the old priest caught on. God was calling the boy. Eli hadn’t heard the voice himself. But he knew now what was happening, and he told Samuel what to do. First, he said, “Go back and lie down,” because sometimes life doesn’t come into focus until you stop. Eli’s second piece of advice was to “listen up”: “If someone speaks to you again, don’t jump up and run around. Stay still and say, ‘I’m listening.’”

God has a rich variety of voices to choose from. Many of us have known yearnings and leadings that we can’t explain any other way but to attribute them to God. Sometimes God speaks through our hearts. Sometimes God speaks through nature. Sometimes God speaks through the Bible. You read a passage and feel as if God is speaking directly to you. Sometimes God speaks through a friend. Whatever voice God uses, the responsibility for hearing it is always ours. Len Sweet says it’s up to us to “confront outside events and create inside events so that when God’s voice sounds in our own temple late at night, we’re not watching a rerun of ‘Cheers.’”<sup>x</sup>

Eli’s third piece of advice was to take a leap of faith. He tells Samuel, “If someone speaks to you again, say, ‘I’m listening. What do you want me to do?’” When God calls your name, chances are there’s some divine work to be done, and God is recruiting you, enlisting you, to have a hand in it. So lie down. Listen up. Then take the leap!

**“Sacred Journeys”**  
**John 1:43-51**  
**Second Sunday after Epiphany B**

Nathanael was one of the Twelve, but you’ll find him mentioned only in John’s Gospel, where we’re told that Philip brought him to Jesus. Because his name is missing on the roster of disciples in the other Gospels, many scholars have identified Nathanael with one of the others listed, usually Bartholomew.

More than any of the others who became disciples, Nathanael had voiced his objections to Jesus: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” which amounted to saying, “Can anything good come out of Podunk?” But Jesus excused it because he knew Nathanael’s heart was pure. He commended Nathanael for his honesty – “Now here’s an Israelite without a false bone in his body!” – then said, “Long before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig-tree.” Which means Jesus had his eye on Nathanael before Nathanael even heard of Jesus. Which in turn impressed the daylight out of Nathanael, who signed up on the spot: “You’re the Son of God! You’re the King of Israel!”

John’s account of Nathanael’s call brings to mind Frederick Buechner’s account of his own.<sup>x</sup> In 1950, Buechner wrote his first novel, “A Long Day’s Dying.” It was a resounding critical and commercial success. With his picture appearing in “Life,” “Time,” and “Newsweek,” he thought he

was on the brink of fame and fortune. A few years later, he moved to New York City to further his literary career. Things went well at first. Then a relationship broke up and his creativity dried up. The money began to run out, so he began to seek other employment. Door after door was shut in his face.

For the first time in his life he started going to church regularly. His reason for going was simply that on the street where he lived there happened to be a church with a preacher he had heard of, and Buechner had nothing better to do on his lonely Sundays. The church was Madison Avenue Presbyterian. The preacher was George Buttrick. Sunday after Sunday Buechner went to church, hearing sermon after sermon.

Then he heard a sermon that included a phrase that doesn't even appear in a transcript someone sent him more than twenty-five years later. "I can only assume that he ad-libbed it," Buechner says, "and on just such foolish, tenuous, holy threads as that, I suppose, hang the destinies of us all." Buttrick said that Jesus was crowned in the hearts of people who believe in him, a coronation that comes "among confession, and tears, and great laughter." For some reason that phrase "great laughter" touched Buechner and nudged him into the kingdom. In his autobiography, he describes the experience as one of finding Christ and being found by Christ in a profoundly life-changing way. "I was moved to wonderful tears from the deepest part of who I was."

Seminary followed, and then ordination as a Presbyterian minister. Buechner remembers a Long Island dinner party he attended, where his hostess suddenly directed a question at him: "I understand you are planning to enter the ministry. Is this your own idea, or were you poorly advised?" Being both a novelist and an ordained minister has had its drawbacks. But Buechner sees his ordination as a special calling that emerged from God's unfathomable grace.

"Looking back at my past," he says, "I've seen so many moments where I was simply the recipient of undeserved revelation or joy, some gift. I can't imagine that I've come to where I am unaided. Nothing in what I was doing years ago would have led me to become a minister. But little by little, step by step, these moments of grace led me in a direction which I'm terribly glad I took."

### **"First Round Draft Choices"**

**Mark 1:14-20**

### **Third Sunday after Epiphany B**

If you follow the lectionary, you know this text comes up on or around Super Bowl Sunday. Lest you think I'm being irreverent talking about the Super Bowl in the context of God's call, I want to point out that some of the most important terms in football can also apply to Christianity.

For instance, there's "bench warmer" – which is the extent of many people's involvement in the church. There's "blitz" – the rush for the exits after the benediction. A "busted play" is when the organist messes up. An "extra point" is what preachers add when they can't figure out how to end the sermon. A "fumble" is when an usher drops the offering plate. "In the pocket" is where too much of the Lord's money stays. "Sudden death" is what a preacher flirts with if the service goes past noon. And a "draft choice" is picking a seat away from the air-conditioning vents.

Actually, the draft is the system professional football teams use to select new players. But if you look it up in the dictionary, you'll see that the first definition of "draft" is "the act of drawing a fishing net." Which fits very nicely into this text.

Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee when he saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew. They were net-fishing. Jesus said, "Come with me," and they did. Down the shore a ways, he saw another set of brothers, James and John, sitting in a boat, mending their nets. Jesus issued the same invitation, and they, too, followed him. Peter and Andrew, James and John – their names are linked forever. They were Jesus' first draft choices, the foundation of his team.

So just who were these men? What's their story? Why did Jesus choose *them*? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said Mark is "ruthlessly silent" about them except for one detail that he's very careful to point out: they were fishermen. Jesus had come to bring people into the Kingdom of God. One of the first things he did was to "net" these four fishermen. I imagine he watched them for a while, sizing them up, and then he invited them to do what they did best – fish – but in a different way, with a different net, for a different purpose.

"Come with me," Jesus said, "and I'll teach you how to fish for people who are lost." The kind of fishing Jesus calls people to isn't a game. It isn't a nice way to pass the time. It's a life and death endeavor with eternal consequences. It's about saving the least, the lost, the lonely and bringing them into God's kingdom.

The stakes are high, so listen to this advice that Stephen Covey shares in his book "Principle-Centered Leadership": "Successful anglers are not locked into fixed responses to situations. They're flexible. They match their tackle to the type fishing they do, giving careful thought and attention to the leader, the most important link in the tackle system. They constantly read the water to discover the best place from which to cast. In fact, they learn to think like a fish. Often they will approach the water slowly, keeping a low profile, perhaps even casting from a kneeling position."<sup>xi</sup>

That's great advice for anyone who accepts Jesus' invitation to join his fishing expedition: Stay flexible. Learn to think like those you're trying to catch. Give careful thought and attention to your *Leader*. Then keep a low profile . . . and kneel while casting!

### **"Woe Is Me"**

#### **1 Corinthians 9:16-23**

#### **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany B**

"Necessity is laid upon me," Paul says. "Woe to me if I don't preach the Gospel." Bill Ritter apologizes ahead of time for being momentarily crude. But he has a point to make, and he makes it by quoting the Rev. Tex Sample: "The call to the ministry is a lot like the feeling you get when you are about to throw up. You know you can put it off for a while. But sooner or later. . . ."

Bill says, "There are many magnesias that will coat your call, so that it cannot be heard or heeded. Throw them away. Then ask yourself: 'What is it that I have to keep swallowing back, lest

it bubble up to the place where I can no longer ignore it?’ For as crude as that image is memorable, there is one place where it breaks down. The true calls of God, to ministry or to anything else, tend to bubble up as joy.”<sup>xii</sup>

**“Seeking Other Seas”**  
**Mark 8:31-38**  
**Second Sunday in Lent B**

“Forget about yourself. Take up your cross. Follow me.” Those are Jesus’ own terms of discipleship – one, two, three. They’re part of what scholars call the “hard sayings” of Jesus, as opposed to the “comfortable sayings.” The “comfortable sayings” sound like this: “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” The “hard sayings” sound

like this: “I’m headed for Jerusalem to take up a cross. If you’re going to be one of my disciples, you’ll have to forget about yourself, take up your own cross, and follow me.”

We hear a lot of “comfortable sayings” these days. Toyota says, “I love what you do for me.” McDonald’s says, “You deserve a break today.” L’Oreal says, “You’re worth it.” No wonder so many of us are more preoccupied with our selves than our souls. We keep filling our cups with what someone has called “decaffeinated Christianity.” It won’t keep you awake at night. No need to worry about losing sleep over our troubled world. Just tailor your religion and customize your beliefs to meet your own needs.

Calvin Miller calls folks who do that “Christaholics.” They’ll follow Jesus – as long as it suits their needs and serves their purposes.<sup>xiii</sup> But the world doesn’t need Christaholics. It needs disciples – people who are willing to deny themselves and move from a self-centered existence to a Christ-centered existence.

Disciples are also “cross-bearers.” A survey of hymnals being used in churches across the country revealed that only 1% of the songs contained any reference to the cross. It’s time to bring the church back to what my friend Len Sweet calls “a cross frame of reference.” It’s time to remind ourselves that every Christian has a cross. Someone once said your cross is the place where the world’s needs and your ability to respond meet.” For every Christian there is a special need he or she is equipped to meet. Count on it. There is something that needs doing that God has prepared you to do. When you become a Christian, you assume the responsibility to do it.

The third part of the call is that you follow Jesus. The proper place for a disciple is the one assigned to Peter in this text – behind the Master as a follower! In order to assume that position, you have to be willing to leave some things behind, endure some hardships, accept some changes, and take some risks. But it’s a more than fair exchange. “If you want to save your life, you will lose it,” Jesus says. “But if you give up your life for me, you will find it.”

Cesareo Gabarain captured the essence of this text in the words to a beautiful hymn:

Lord, you have come to the lakeshore,

Looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones;  
You only asked me to follow humbly.

O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,  
And while smiling have spoken my name;  
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;  
By your side I will seek other seas.<sup>xiv</sup>

**“No Wasted Wings”**  
**Isaiah 6:1-6**  
**Fifth Sunday after Epiphany C**

Everything nailed down seemed to be coming loose. Uzziah had ruled the nation for fifty-two years, presiding over half a century of prosperity and security. Now Uzziah was dead, and ominous clouds were darkening the skies. Enemies were gathering around the shaken nation. Chaos was on the horizon as young, inexperienced Prince Jotham assumed the throne. That's what Isaiah saw when he looked out over the nation.

But he saw something else as well when he went to worship. Suddenly all the earthly objects and activities of the temple were transformed into a heavenly vision of God. You can almost hear Isaiah singing, “I saw you high and lifted up, shining in the light of your glory,” surrounded by heavenly creatures singing, “Holy, holy, holy!”

The heavenly creatures were seraphim. The ancient Hebrews believed seraphim were the highest order of angels, distinguished by having three pairs of wings. “Home Improvement” fans might think that was like moving up from a four-cylinder engine to a six or even an eight. The more wings, the more power – the faster you fly! But Isaiah tells us the seraphim used only two of their wings for flight.

“With two,” he says, “they covered their faces.” That was for reverence. Remember how God spoke to Moses out of a burning bush near Mount Horeb, telling him to take his shoes off because he was standing on holy ground? The record says, “Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.” Even though the seraphim were the highest of heavenly beings, it was as impossible for them to look at the full glory of God as it is for us to look into the burning glory of the sun. So sacrificing speed and power for reverence, they used two of their wings to cover their faces. The loss of reverence is an ever-present danger. Remember, when the seraphim finished their version of “Our God Is An Awesome God,” their singing was followed by an earthquake!

“With two they covered their feet.” In Old Testament days, the word “feet” is sometimes used as a euphemism for “genitals.” So when Isaiah says, “With two wings they covered their feet,” he means, “they covered their nakedness.” That was for propriety. You don't hear much

about propriety these days. Propriety means “knowing what’s acceptable in conduct or in speech.” As evidence of the loss of propriety we may point our fingers at the scoundrels behind the Wall Street scandals, or at shows like “Married By America” and “Temptation Island.” But the truth is, at one time or another every one of us loses sight of the boundaries God has set for acceptable behavior.

As Isaiah gazed upon the glory of God and listened to the seraph’s ceaseless song of praise, he became keenly aware of his own out-of-bounds behavior: “I’m doomed! Everything I say is sinful!” In response to Isaiah’s confession, God sent one of the seraphim to touch Isaiah’s mouth with a burning coal taken from the altar of heaven. It was a sign that his guilt had been taken away and his sins were all forgiven.

“With two wings the seraphim covered their faces.” That demonstrated their reverence. “With two they covered their feet.” That demonstrated their propriety. “With two they flew.” That demonstrated their readiness to serve. There’s nothing in the text to give us the impression Isaiah was expecting anything special to happen that day. But as he worships, he begins to sense the purpose of his life. He envisions himself at a meeting of the heavenly council. The decision has already been made to send a messenger to the Children of Israel. God is asking, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Equipped with a sense of reverence, and empowered by forgiveness, Isaiah signs on to serve: “Here I am, send me!” It’s what he was called to do.

**“Careers and Callings”**  
**2 Corinthians 5:14-21**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent C**

Sometimes we forget that the Apostle Paul was once the church’s most dangerous enemy. He was an Old Testament “hatchet man,” obsessed with protecting the Jewish faith from the followers of Jesus. But there was no love in what he was doing, no joy in how he was living.

Then, on the Damascus road, Paul experienced first-hand the love of Jesus Christ, and his life was never the same again. He wasn’t just reformed or improved. He was remade, so that he was better than he had been at his best! From that day on, everything he did, he did in response to the love of God he’d received through Jesus. Can Christ really change people? Paul says, “You bet he can. I know, because he changed me!”

In our text, Paul says one sign of this change that Christ makes is that we “stop living for ourselves.” Peter Storey is right on target when he says most of us are involved in a longstanding love affair with ourselves. It’s the worst affair we can ever get into, the most immoral affair any human being can have. Even after we discover that our self-centeredness is destroying us and hurting people around us, it’s hard for us to break out of it. There’s only one power big enough and strong enough to do it. That power is the love of Christ. And it does happen.

Chuck Colson held one of the most powerful positions in the world – Special Counsel to the President of the United States. Full of hubris and a love for hardball politics, he’d joined the White House staff in 1969 as an aide to President Nixon. He quickly earned the reputation of being Nixon’s “hatchet man,” the “go-to” guy when it came to dirty tactics. Three years later, he resigned

in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Colson had been visiting the home of a friend and colleague, Tom Phillips, who had been converted at a Billy Graham crusade. Phillips had confronted Colson with the gospel. On a summer night in 1972, he asked Colson if they could pray together. Colson awkwardly agreed.

He says that as they prayed, he felt the stirring of God's Spirit, but he couldn't bring himself to surrender to it. Later that night, "outside in the dark [sitting in the car], the iron grip I'd kept on my emotions began to relax. Tears welled up in my eyes . . . and suddenly I knew I

had to go back into the house and pray with Tom." But Tom had already gone to bed. Colson parked his car along the roadside and hoped his friend couldn't hear him sobbing.

Chuck Colson was converted that summer. But he'd made so many enemies and had done so many nasty things that even Christian Republicans didn't believe it. He went to prison in July 1974 and served eight months of a one-to-three year sentence for obstruction of justice. When he was released, he founded Prison Fellowship, a ministry which now extends to 600 prisons in 88 countries.

Thirty years after his conversion, Chuck Colson has earned the respect of Christians and non-Christians, Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. He's won numerous awards including the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion and the Canterbury Medal for the defense of religious liberty. He has been called "one of the most important social reformers in a generation."<sup>xv</sup> Colson literally went from the White House to "the big house." He thought his career was over, and in a way he was right. His career was over, but his calling was just getting started.

### **"Fire on the Mountain"**

#### **1 Kings 19:9-16**

#### **Ordinary Time 12 C Sundays between June 19-25**

Queen Jezebel had put a price on Elijah's head for what he'd done to her spiritual advisors during their showdown on Mount Carmel. When Elijah heard the bad news, he ran for his life and didn't stop running until he reached the wilderness his ancestors had crossed during the Exodus. Collapsing under a juniper tree, he curled up like a frightened child and whimpered, "I've had enough, Lord! Just let me die!" Then he fell asleep. Twice he woke up to find that food and water had miraculously been provided for him. When he was fed and rested, God told him to go to Mount Horeb.

When Elijah reached his destination, he crawled into a cave in the side of the mountain and got another good night's sleep. The next day, as he stood at the mouth of the cave, a gale-force wind ripped through the mountains, shattering the rocks. But God was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a blinding electrical storm, with streaks of lightning so swift and fierce, the whole sky seemed to be on fire. But God was not in the lightning.

When the pyrotechnics were done, a hush fell over the mountain. In the silence, Elijah heard the voice of God whispering, “Elijah, what are you doing here? Go anoint Hazael to be king of Syria. Anoint Jehu to be the next king of Israel. Find Elisha and anoint him to be a prophet.” So what’s the significance of these three assignments? Just this: Under King Hazael, Syria would bring haughty, idolatrous Israel to its knees. Despite some problems of his own, King Jehu would bring down the corrupt house of Ahab and Jezebel. Elisha would become Elijah’s successor and continue his ministry for the next fifty-five years.

The lesson appears to be that if God calls you, there’s something that desperately needs to be done. But if you’re waiting to be blown off your feet, shaken like a rag doll, or struck by lightning, you could wait forever. It probably won’t happen that way.

**“Excuses, Excuses!”**  
**Jeremiah 1:4-10**  
**Ordinary Time 21 C**

The book of Jeremiah is the longest in the Bible. One reason is that it takes an entire chapter to deal with Jeremiah’s objection to being called by God in the first place. As soon as Jeremiah establishes his address and ancestry he says, “The word of the Lord came to me.” That Jeremiah wasn’t expecting a call is clear. The initiative was on God’s side of the exchange from the very beginning. Notice the nouns and verbs: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you to be a prophet to the nations.”

If the word “before” sends you into paroxysms of worry about “predestinarianism,” think of it instead in terms of “purposefulness” – as in, something that God hard-wires into certain people. Can you imagine Greg Maddox *not* pitching a baseball? Stephen Spielberg *not* making movies? Maya Angelou *not* writing poetry? Some people do in fact appear to have been “born” to be and do certain things. As far as God was concerned, Jeremiah was born to be a prophet.

Like many of the others God called in the Old Testament, Jeremiah dreaded the responsibility God was laying on him. God called Amos, and Amos said he shook like a person trembling at the roar of a lion. God called Moses, and in so many words Moses said, “Here I am, Lord; send Aaron!” God called Gideon, and Gideon protested that his family was the weakest link in the tribe of Manasseh, and that he was the runt of the litter.

With Jeremiah, it was his age. God says, “I’m appointing you to be a prophet to the nations. Your job will be to pull up and tear down; to take apart and overthrow; and then to build and plant.” Jeremiah says, “Look at me, Lord. I don’t know anything about anything. I’m not a good speaker. I’m entirely too young for this!”

Ministering in God’s name is a huge responsibility. Patrick Miller says any sensible person might well resist it for fear of being unable to fulfill the calling – or fear of the consequences if you do!<sup>xvi</sup> God’s response is always the same: those who receive a call will be empowered to fulfill it. In Jeremiah’s case, God says, “You can’t get out of this by telling me you’re too young for it. I’ll tell you where to go, and I’ll tell you what to say. Don’t be afraid of anyone. I’ll be right there, looking after you.” That’s a powerful word of assurance from the God who accepts no excuses, but

promises to be with and support anyone who is open to the call.

### **“Opponents in Your Own Home”**

**Luke 14:25-33**

**Ordinary Time 23 C**

Years ago when St. Patrick was converting people in Ireland, he would wade into a river with the converts he was going to baptize. Patrick carried a long staff with a cross at the top and a sharp point at the bottom so that the staff could be stuck in the ground. On one occasion Patrick waded into the water and stuck the staff in the river bottom to free both hands for the baptism. Then he noticed that blood was beginning to appear in the water. Upon investigation, he discovered that he had stabbed the foot of one of the converts. Patrick turned to the man and said, “Why didn’t you cry out?” The convert replied, “I thought it was part of the baptism.”

Sometimes we make following Christ seem easy. But that’s hardly what Jesus has in mind. For instance, he says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate their own family, they cannot be my disciple.” That’s a harsh word. Matthew softens it up a bit: “Those who love father or mother more than me are not worthy of me.” That’s a little easier on the ears, but still strong. I don’t like hearing it, much less preaching it. George Buttrick said, “The word ‘hate’ repels. It is a staggering word, but it was intended to stagger. The word means that we are to act ‘as if’ we hate our loved ones whenever the claims of home come into conflict with the claims of Jesus.”

Tony Campolo tells of a memorable night at the Urbana Conference when Billy Graham stepped aside and let him be the one to give the invitation for missionary service. They only do it once during that weekend, and Graham said, “I want you to do it.” The response was incredible – thousands and thousands of young people committing themselves to missionary service. Afterward Billy Graham said, “That was wonderful. I bet we come away with at least a couple of hundred missionaries out of this meeting.” Tony said, “There were thousands.” Graham said, “Yes, there were thousands. But they’ll go home and they’ll be talked out of it. And you know who will talk them out of it? Their parents.”

If the kingdom had already come, then what Jesus wants and what our families want would always be compatible. But it hasn’t, and they aren’t, so sometimes you have to make a choice that’s as painful as having a spike driven through your foot.

### **“The Lure of Grace”**

**1 Timothy 1:12-14**

**Ordinary Time 24 C**

Paul uses his own life as an example of God’s ability to reclaim and redeem people – and to appoint them to serve in the cause of Christ. He writes about the divine mercy he has received in spite of the fact that he formerly “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” God. “The saying is

sure and worthy of acceptance,” Paul says, “that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners, but I have received mercy.”

Mark Trotter says this a fish story. God, the patient fisherman, who had been casting day after day, week after week, finally landed Paul with the lure of grace. Paul never got over it. Neither did John Newton. Newton was the captain of an English slave ship during the most terrible years of the slave trade. He let his life sink lower and lower until he was thoroughly depraved. People who knew him said it was incredible that an Englishman could sink so low.

On May 10, 1748, as his ship was being tossed about by the angry waves of a violent storm, Newton looked toward the heavens and begged God to save him. His deliverance from the storm changed him, completely and forever. He decided to let God shape his life at the deepest levels. He left the slave trade and became a preacher, as well as a friend of John and Charles Wesley. He had a tremendous influence on William Wilberforce, who led the successful fight in Parliament to abolish slavery. He also became a hymn writer. Among the words he wrote were these: “Amazing grace (how sweet the sound!) that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Newton knew there was nothing capricious about this, as if God couldn't have cared less about his sins. “‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,” he says in one verse. Grace *is* God's way of dealing with sin!<sup>xvii</sup> Newton understood that. He also knew that same grace – demonstrated in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus – “his fears relieved.” At the age of 82, Newton said, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and that Christ in a great Savior.”

On his tombstone you'll find the epitaph he wrote for himself: “John Newton, once an infidel and libertine, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had labored so long to destroy.”

**“Help My Unbelief”**  
**Mark 9:14-24**  
**Not in the lectionary**

During the summer of 1972, I worked at Lake Junaluska, taxiing people to and from the Asheville Airport. The long drive gave me an opportunity to get to know some fascinating people, including one of the great preachers of our time, Dr. Ernest Campbell of the Riverside Church in New York City.

Several years before, I'd committed my life to some form of ministry. But during my junior year at college, I struggled not only with what form of ministry God was calling me to, but also with whether I had the faith I needed to be a minister at all. When I dropped Dr. Campbell off at Lambuth Inn, I swallowed hard and asked if he had time to talk with me later that week. He graciously agreed. Several months later, this passage appeared in a transcript of one of Dr. Campbell's sermons. The final two sentences may be the very words someone near you needs to hear as they deal with a call to ministry:

“I had an interesting conversation with a young man this summer around the shore of Lake Junaluska in North Carolina. This young man has finished three years of college. He comes from a solid home where he is much loved and well supported. He is flirting with the ministry but going through what he described as a mild crisis of faith. As we walked together, he confessed to this void in his life. ‘I’m not sure that I have faith,’ he said. ‘I’m not sure that I believe.’

“Suddenly it occurred to me to ask this young man one question. Speaking in love and out of genuine concern I said, ‘What would you do with more faith now if you had it?’ I went on to suggest that he really had few needs at present that required faith. His father and mother are financing his college life. He has a faculty that cares about him. He has a home to go back to. All things are being provided for him. ‘What would you do with more faith now if you had it?’ I asked. ‘What do you need more faith for anyway?’

“If I understand the Bible correctly, there is an economy with God regarding the gift of faith. It is only as we attempt great things for God that we can expect great things from God. If we are content to play the ‘money game’ or the ‘status game’ or the ‘pleasure game,’ we don’t need faith for that! If we are only playing ‘nine to five till 65 and then away,’ we don’t need faith for that! But if we are trying to move some mountain of unbelief, apathy, prejudice, injustice, or hatred, it is then that God will give us faith. We know as we go. If we will not go we will not know. Faith is tied to life.”<sup>xviii</sup>

**“Once Upon A Very Present Time”**  
**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**  
**Third Sunday after Epiphany B**

*[This is the transcript of a sermon preached on the call to ministry at the Ordination Service for the Western North Carolina Conference in 1989.]*

There are times in every life when God wants us to get up and go somewhere, and we’d rather not. Where God wanted Jonah to go was Nineveh. The Ninevites were notoriously cruel and evil people. They had sins they hadn’t even begun to use. But God cared about Nineveh. So God looked around for someone to go speak to the Ninevites and decided on Jonah. Now Jonah was an able, God-fearing man, but he didn’t want any part of the project God had in mind. So Jonah “fled from the presence of the Lord.” He went to the harbor at Joppa and boarded a boat bound for Tarshish, which was as far away from Nineveh as you could get.

God, of course, had other plans for Jonah. You know the story. First a violent storm erupted. Jonah couldn’t face it, so he tried to sleep through it. But that didn’t work. Next he got dumped into the stormy sea, where he disappeared into the belly of a great fish. The fish, as it turns out, was God’s ocean-going taxi. It fished Jonah out of the sea, if you’ll pardon the pun, carried him back home, and belched him up on the beach, intact. Before Jonah could dry off, God spoke to him again: “Go to Nineveh and speak to the people for me.”

This time, Jonah gave in. His heart wasn’t in it, and he didn’t really expect the Ninevites to listen. But he went to the city and preached a hellfire and brimstone sermon that ended with a blast: “In forty days, Nineveh will be destroyed!” Then he found a comfortable spot on a hill overlooking

the city and started the countdown.

To his complete surprise, an amazing thing happened: his sermon started a citywide revival. You can't attribute that to any enthusiasm or homiletical excellence on Jonah's part. You'd be better off chalking it up to what John Wesley called "prevenient grace," which I think I can explain by telling you about a pioneer in Colorado who built a cabin out of rocks. When the cabin was finished, the pioneer started a fire in the hearth. In a matter of minutes, the whole place was in flames. It seems the rocks he'd used for the cabin were oil shale. They were impregnated with oil that had survived inside the rocks for centuries. When the oil was touched by fire, it ignited, releasing its untapped energy.

God had been at work in Nineveh long before Jonah arrived and long before the Ninevites knew it, which is what prevenient grace is all about. What God needed now was an agent, a messenger – someone to go there and strike a match, so to speak. Jonah's presence, as reluctant as it was, and his sermon, as poor as it was, ignited resources of spiritual energy that had been building up for years. The Ninevites exploded with signs of repentance. They fasted, they prayed, they promised to change the way they were living. So God spared the city.

Then it was Jonah's turn to explode: "Lord, I knew you wouldn't destroy the city! That's why I didn't want to come here in the first place. I knew you were a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." Which just goes to show you there's a difference between knowing what you believe and knowing what to do with it. Jonah was a believer. He knew about God's love and mercy. But when God said, "Go to Nineveh and speak to the people," Jonah said, "I'd rather die first!" And he caught the next boat to Tarshish.

Do you know where Tarshish is? Tarshish is where people spend hour after hour reading the Bible, talking about the subtleties of theology, writing resolutions about social issues, and then just sit there. Tarshish is where people care more about their church buildings and budgets than they do about the neighbors next door. Tarshish is where people spend most of their time inside the church and forget they're called to be ambassadors who help reconcile the world to God.

The Jonah story says people like that run the risk of being swallowed up and spit out. It also says God can work on people like that and bring them to the point where they're ready to go to Nineveh. You know where Nineveh is? Nineveh is any place where people have no faith in God and no real knowledge of the Gospel. It's any place where people are hurting, and hopeless, and need help. It's any place where people are dealing with broken dreams or rejection, with harassment or persecution. It's any place where people are lost or lonely.

I know what the two cities are like because I reenact the Jonah story so often myself. Book passage for me to Tarshish, where the living is easy! Simon Peter wanted it that way, too.

You remember him – Simon, son of John. Only in some places the gospel writers call him "Simon, son of Jonah."

Jesus said, "Follow me," and Simon gave it his best shot. Then at Caesarea Philippi Jesus said he was leaving the safety and security of Galilee and going to Jerusalem. Simon said, "You

must be crazy! Don't go there!" Jesus was determined, so Simon went with. But when Jesus needed him most one night in the courtyard of the high priest, Simon pulled a "Jonah" and "fled from the presence of the Lord."

A few days later, Simon was back in Galilee, near Gath-hepher, Jonah's hometown, where he met the Risen Lord on the bank of a lake. True to form, Jesus was "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." There was no anger, no recrimination. Just the threefold question, "Do you love me?" And then, like his namesake, Simon bar Jonah was given a second chance to answer the call. Only this time these words were added: "You will be led where you do not want to go."

Some of you have experienced that. Some of you wouldn't be here tonight to be ordained if it had been left up to you. But the same voice that spoke to Jonah and to Simon Peter said, "Follow me." And you said, "Where you lead me, I will follow."

That's the response Jesus had in mind when he talked about "the sign of Jonah." One day the authorities asked him for a sign that would validate his ministry. Jesus said, "The only sign that will be given is the sign of Jonah." The sign of Jonah was Jonah himself, a minister making a difference in a place he'd never have been in if he'd listened to his own voice instead of the voice of God.

In our own day, people are asking again for some sign that authenticates what the Church of Jesus Christ is and says and does. You may be the only sign they see. You become the sign every time you go to some modern day Nineveh at God's bidding. If you're not willing to do that, it doesn't matter that you have a certificate that says you joined the church on a certain date, or even a parchment that says you were ordained at Annual Conference.

If you *are* willing to do it, you will discover that extraordinary things can happen when you cooperate with a power at work beyond your own power. You will experience first-hand the grace and mercy and salvation of God that are beyond measure or understanding. And you will know what Jesus meant when he talked about finding your life by being willing to lose it.

Davie Napier wrote a poem about Jonah that begins like this:

Once upon a very present time  
Maybe today, tomorrow, yesterday,  
The word of God comes to Johnny [and Joanie] Jonah:  
"Arise – this is to say, get off your duff,  
Your cozy status in Jerusalem –  
And get yourself to Nineveh."<sup>xix</sup>

It keeps happening. That's his point. God calls us to do something that God needs done, and we have to make a choice: we go where God wants us to go and do

what God wants us to do, or we slip out the back door. We set sail for Nineveh, or we sneak off to Tarshish. I can't tell you where your Nineveh is. I can pray that when you hear the call, you will remember that God is already at work there – and that you'll catch the right boat!

**Endnotes:**

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<sup>i</sup> Gary Wills, "Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders," New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 13.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Wills citing from "Henry IV, Part One" Act 3 scene 1.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ben Hartley and Paul Van Buren, "The Deacon: Ministry Through Words of Faith and Acts of Love," Nashville: Section of Deacons and Diaconal Ministries, General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2000, p. 21.
- <sup>iv</sup> Much of this comes directly from Walter Wink's article, "Sexual Politics in the Resurrection Witness." I regret that I have lost track of where that article can be found.
- <sup>v</sup> Luke 8:2, Mark 16:9.
- <sup>vi</sup> I'm indebted to Buechner for some of the characterization of Stephen found in "Peculiar Treasures," New York: Harper & Row, 1979, pp. 161-162.
- <sup>vii</sup> Dennis M. Campbell, "Who Will Go For Us? An Invitation to Ordained Ministry," Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, pp. 30, 31.
- <sup>viii</sup> Acts 22:20.
- <sup>ix</sup> "Homily Service," 1/91, p. 44.
- <sup>x</sup> This account is taken from Frederick Buechner's autobiography, "The Sacred Journey," San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982, pp. 107-110; and from Timothy K. Jones' article, "Frederick Buechner's Sacred Journey," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/109/51.0/html>. The article originally appeared in the October 8, 1990 issue of "Christianity Today."
- <sup>xi</sup> Fishing expert Gene Hill cited by Stephen Covey in "Principle-Centered Leadership," New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990, pp. 313-314. I rearranged Hill's words slightly.
- <sup>xii</sup> William A. Ritter, "Is There Life After High School?" First United Methodist Church, Birmingham, Michigan, 6/13/99.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Calvin Miller, "The Taste of Joy," Downer's Grove: Illinois, InterVarsity Press: 1983.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Cesareo Gabarain; translated by Gertrude C. Suppe, George Lockwood, and Raquel Gutierrez-Achon; "The United Methodist Hymnal," Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, no. 344.
- <sup>xv</sup> The details of Colson's story come from Wendy Murray Zoba's article, "The Legacy of Prisoner 23226," which originally appeared in the July 9, 2001 edition of "Christianity Today." The article is currently posted at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/009/1.28.html>.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Patrick Miller, "The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 6," Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 581.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Leander Keck, "Paul and His Letters," Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, p.32ff.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Dr. Ernest T. Campbell, "No Faith, No Church," The Riverside Church in New York City, 9/24/72.
- <sup>xix</sup> Davie Napier was the Holmes Professor of Old Testament Criticism and Interpretation at Yale Divinity School. He later became President of Pacific School of Religion. Years ago I ran across his poem on Jonah entitled "Once Upon A Very Present Time." Unfortunately I cannot remember now where I found it.