

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 8, 2006

Starting Point

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12

When I first moved to Pittsburgh and started my work as pastor of GPC
I learned my way around the city pretty quickly.
I had to learn fast since, when I arrived on the scene
we had people spread out in 8 different hospitals around the city.

The first time I got truly lost wasn't until months later
on my first solo venture into downtown.
I was going to a luncheon hosted by the Presbyterian Foundation,
which was to be held downtown at the Duquesne Club.
I had directions, fairly straightforward,
which told us to park in the garage that backed up to the club.
No problem, I figure.

So I cross the 6th street bridge, plunge into downtown,
and head straight for the garage at 6th and Liberty.
This would have been the easiest thing in the world,
except for the fact that the garage was full.
The directions don't give any other options,
so there's no choice but to drive on into uncharted territory
and look for another parking garage.
I turn left, with a little hesitation, and drive on.
After a minute or two, and a couple of turns,
I get lucky and find another parking deck.
I pull in and begin to wind around and around,
like a blindfolded child being spun around
just before he takes a swing at the piñata.
Level after level I climb, and of course, this garage is full, too.
But when I arrive at the top, a young guy in regular street clothes
hands me a numbered ticket and asks for my key.
As he pulls away in my car and I head toward the stairs,
I wonder if I should have asked him for identification.
So it's down the stairs and out to the street
where I begin to retrace my way back to the Duquesne Club,
only I'm not exactly sure I remember just how I got where I am.
So I walk a few blocks, down a few alleys,
and end up circling one skyscraper what seems like two or three times.
I swallow my manhood and ask for directions.
Finally... I spot the entrance to the Duquesne Club,

slip in, take the elevator up,
and slide into my seat just before the salads are served.
I breathe a sigh of relief, thinking my ordeal is over.

The food was delicious, and the presentation I don't remember at all.

What I do remember is that moment after the luncheon,
when I step out the front door of the Duquesne Club
and realize I have no idea how to get back to the parking garage,
and my car. I'm totally lost!

I recall Mary Ellen's uncle, an old WWII bomber navigator,
telling me that a good navigator always knows two things:
where he is and where he's going.
I know neither.

I look up and spot the skyscraper I circled multiple times
and begin walking toward it hoping something will look familiar.
...20 minutes later, several times around the block,
and down unfamiliar alleys,
I'm thoroughly disgusted with myself
and beginning to get a little panicky.

Then I look across the street and see this little sign.
It's a map of a walking tour for downtown Pittsburgh.
With new hope, I cross the street and begin to study the map.
To my great relief, at the center of the map,
there is one of those little red arrows that reads,
"You are here", and – O Blessed Providence –
the parking garages are marked!

At last, I have my starting point! I know where I am
and the destination is narrowed down to three possibilities.
I say prayer of thanks, pick the closest garage and start walking.
In my first stroke of good luck all day, or perhaps divine intervention,
I happened to pick the right garage.
Of course, I don't know this until I reach the top level
and the guy who had driven off with my car a few hours earlier,
takes my ticket returns my key and shows me to my car.

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The ancient proverb says, "Wherever you go, there you are."
And as far as I know,
there are no documented cases in which that's not true.
It's just that sometimes we don't know where "here" is.

Or, perhaps worse, we know exactly where we are, but we don't like it.
We want to be somewhere else.

In the Christian spiritual life,
it can sometimes be a deep struggle to come to terms with
where you are.

We find ourselves in circumstances and situations and relationships,
some of our own making, and some that are thrust upon us,
and like it or not, it's where we are, and where we must be,
and where we must continue to live our lives.

The sign says "You are here."
This is your family, and your job, or your school, your community, your life.
You are here, and maybe you know where you're going
and maybe you don't,
but wishing you were in another place,
another situation, another relationship, another life,
won't make it so.
This is your starting point for the rest of your journey.

And the journey can be disorienting and confusing.
Like walking the Labyrinth, sometimes close to the center,
then suddenly as far away as it seems possible.
Going one direction, then suddenly turned around and going the other.

And its not only our personal situation, but the world situation,
the culture at large, is disturbing.
We live in a context that is so disorienting, and so quickly changing
that we haven't even figured out what to call it.
We just say the world is not what it used to be; it is "Postmodern."
We can't name it in reference to what it is, just what it isn't anymore.
Postmodern life has been compared to life lived
"in a city in which traffic is daily re-routed
and street names are liable to be changed without notice."ⁱ
(Postmodern life is like trying to drive through Pittsburgh!)
A time in history in which it's hard to know where we are
and where we are going.
We need a starting point. And we need a destination.

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Today's reading from the book of Hebrews is about starting points.
It is about the starting point for the Christian life and faith.
And, for those who believe, it is about the starting point of the universe,

of the heavens and the earth, of everything that exists.

In what is possibly the most intricately crafted piece of literature
in the New Testament,
the writer of Hebrews proclaims, Jesus as the Son of God
and as the starting point of all things.
It was through the Son that God created the worlds,
and it is through the Son that God now speaks to the world.
*He is the reflection of God's glory
and the exact imprint of God's very being,
and sustains all things by his powerful word.*
He is now exalted at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The language of this passage alludes to the Jewish tradition
of an intermediary in the work of creation
called Sophia (or Lady Wisdom), or the Logos (the Word).
We have heard the testimony of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs today,
*The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first
before the beginnings of the earth.
...When he established the heavens, I was there...
...when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
then I was beside him.*
She is Wisdom, the primal starting point of all creation,
beside God *like a master worker.*

The *Logos*, found in the first verses of the Gospel of John,
is the Word who was in the beginning with God,
and the Word was God.
*All things came into being through him...
in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.*

The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that this whole creation
brought into being by God through the Son who is Wisdom and the Word,
this creation has now been subjected under the feet of humanity,
leaving nothing outside human control.

It is a grand and glorious picture of the world God has made.

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But we have a problem. We look at the map of our lives
and the arrow says "You are here"

but "here" doesn't look nearly as grand and glorious as all that.
It doesn't look so much like the world is subjected to us
as that we are subjected to it.
And to whatever extent we have subjected it, we've made a real mess.
It's easy to look out at human beings,
and wonder why God has crowned the human race
with glory and honor.
Are these the same human beings
who hate others based on the color of their skin,
or the language they speak, or the way they worship,
who take what is not theirs, and betray their friends,
who wage war for profit,
(do almost anything for profit, for that matter)
who contract deadly diseases, and have genetic defects,
and who die prematurely,
who lose their minds and storm into schools with handguns
and take little children as their hostages?

You are here. I am here. And, *as it is*, we just don't see it.
But these three little words have deep theological significance:

As it is...

We don't see this grand and glorious divine scheme at work.

As it is, says the writer of Hebrews,

we do not yet see everything in subjection to them...but...

...but we do see Jesus.

*Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels,
now crowned with glory and honor –*

and here's the good news, the paradox, the mystery of the gospel...

Jesus...

*crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death,
so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

*For it was fitting that God...in bringing many children to glory,
should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect ...
through sufferings.*

If the ugliness of the world has darkened your mind with a cloud of gloom;
If the loss of love, or the betrayal of a friend, or the triumph of an enemy
is weighing you down with grief;
If the circumstances of your life, or of this world,
lead you to wonder if there even is a God,
or if there is, if this God really loves you or anyone;
If you can't look out and find a thing that proves the glory of God;
then at least hear this:

Right where you are *IS* the starting point on the path of life.
From where you are you can see Jesus –
 a real man, flesh and blood and bone,
 whose circumstances led him into conflicts with enemies
 and even his closest family and friends,
 and finally led him to be unjustly accused by corrupt authorities,
 and condemned to death
 by the most horrendous form of capital punishment
 the human race has ever invented.
And yet, to his very last breath, Jesus lived a life of amazing depth,
 integrity, balance, compassion, and profound vision and purpose.
Let Jesus be your Starting Point,
 and he will also be your guide, and in time, you will see
 that he is the pioneer of your salvation.

If the sign says, "You are here,"
and where you are is a place of darkness or fear or loneliness or pain,
Let Jesus, the Man, be the Starting Point of your life
 from this moment forward,
 and in time you may find yourself trusting again,
 and hoping again, and caring again, and loving again.
You may find yourself believing again that Jesus is truly the Son of God,
 the Starting Point of the cosmos, who is now exalted
 and sitting at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Until then, fix your eyes on Jesus.
And start walking in his footsteps, as he goes just ahead of you
 cutting a path through your wilderness,
 and the journey will not end,
 until he leads you home,
 into the embrace of Eternal Love.

ⁱ Zygmunt Bauman in *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, 1996.