

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
9th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sabbatical Leave-Taking
June 1st, 2008

"God Imagined"

John 1:1-5; Hebrews 11:1-3

Well, here goes. It's my last sermon for 3 months!
So, I'd better make it a good one, right?
There's a lot to say to make up for three months of preaching –
so how long have you got? (look at watch)

No worries.

As I've said to several of you in the past few weeks,
I feel a bit like I'm about to graduate from high school.
I've even developed a bit of "Senioritis" –
that springtime lackadaisy that plagues 18 year olds
when they're on the home stretch before graduation.

So, please forgive my giddiness, but it's finally sinking in
that my sabbatical has arrived.

What that also means is that you, the congregation,
have a unique summer in store for you,
chock-full of opportunities.

For one, Rev. Allison has the opportunity to preach every week,
and to do a wedding per month.

Let me say to you, I have not the least bit of apprehension
leaving the congregation under Allison's care.

You'll be in good hands, as I'm sure you already know.

So, Allison, thank you for your very large part
in giving the Hoyt family this opportunity – it is a gift.

But you all have opportunities before you.

From working with pottery as a spiritual practice
in the pottery studio at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts
(welcome our resident artist, Stephanie Flom,
whom you'll get to meet at the presentation after the service);
to a congregational mural painting project for children, youth, and adults,
(led by our very own *permanent* resident artist, Joan Milsom);
to a GPC Day at the Zoo, led by Duane McDonough,
including a couple of animal presentations by the zookeepers,
and complete with a scripture and prayer guide

to aid you in contemplating the amazing variety of God's creation.
(I think we're calling that a Zoo-votional, prepared by Emily Mohr.)

You'll have an opportunity to spend an overnight in silent retreat
led by Lynn Holden,
learning to encounter God and your own soul more deeply
through the discipline of abstaining from speaking.

And, finally, a series of congregational speakers:
Dale Allison, speaking on the Religious Imagination;
Emily DeGoey, on Experiencing God in the Natural World;
and Audrey Clifton, on Imagination in poetry.

All of these summertime activities are designed to provide you with
brief but significant experiences that will
Nourish your imagination.

After worship today, in the parlor, I have a little PowerPoint presentation
to help us explore together why I chose the theme of imagination
for this sabbatical.

It is not just that I wanted to find a way to compel Lilly Foundation
to give me \$45,000 to go look at pretty scenery and pretty pictures
and to read a few poems...though it was partly that.

Imagination is a worthy focus for our three-month time of renewal
because Imagination is essential for faith.

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From the letter to the Hebrews we receive this definition of faith:

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for
the conviction of things not seen.
...By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared
by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that
are not visible.*

Every now and then,
I have the wonderful pleasure of being asked
staggering and profound questions
by children – either my own two at home,
or the children that belong to me (and to you)
through baptism in the body of Christ.

There is one question that comes in a variety of forms, like:

*Where did God come from? or Who made God?
or How old is God?
or Does God have a mommy or a daddy?*

What an awesome subject of contemplation!
When you think back to the miracle of creation
(whether you recall the beautiful creation stories in Genesis,
or the mind-boggling and fascinating story of Evolution; I like both.)
you still get back to that point, that question:
what was here before the matter and energy
of the Universe?
Or can we even speak of a "here" or "there" before matter and energy?

People of faith say: God. God was here. God was everywhere. God was.
God is the Alpha and the Omega,
the first and the last, the beginning and the end.
God is before the beginning and after the end.
God is eternal, without beginning or end.

Have you ever tried to picture this for any length of time?
It is a staggering thought to pursue.
If you want a powerful exercise in prayerful meditation:
just try to sit for 10 or 15 minutes, in silence,
in uninterrupted meditation on the eternity of God,
before anything as yet existed.

*...By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared
by the word of God,
so that what is seen was made from things that
are not visible.*

Such contemplation leads us into a sense of utter dependence on God
for our life;
We are trying to picture the unpicturable.
We are trying to make visible in our minds, things that are invisible to us.

The wonderful truth about humanity
is that we do, in fact, have the capacity
to envision things that are invisible,
to picture hidden realities,
to create in our minds an image that represents invisible reality;
that is, we have the capacity to *imagine*.

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The first lines of the Gospel of John are so familiar to us,
in part, because we read them every year at Christmas,
a season pervaded with such mystery.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God...
all things came into being through him.*

The writer of the fourth gospel
was adopting a word from the Greek Philosophers:
the Word, *the Logos*.

It was the central term in Heraclitus's philosophy.
"The Logos is common to all," says Heraclitus
(in other words, there is just one)
"yet men behave as if they each had one of their own!"

This Logos of the Greek philosophers can be taken to mean
sentience, itself;
that is, thought, reason, imagination;
the ability to see the world and make sense of it.

The very fact that we use words,
that we possess the capacity for language,
means that we have symbolic minds.

A word is simply a sound, or a scribble of various lines on a paper.
But a word can also be a name, so that the sound, or the scribble of lines,
represents a living creature, a life history, a face, a soul.

This is symbolic thought.
This is imagination.

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Let's get back now to God, just God
before the beginning of time,
before any visible thing,
before the existence of matter and energy,
(except, perhaps, for that matter and energy
which may constitute God's very self, if that's the case,
and whatever that might be.)

If the things visible to us were made from things invisible,
then the *idea* had to come from somewhere.
That somewhere has to be "the mind of God."
In other words, *God imagined it. God imagined the world.*

And God spoke that imagination,
the first poetry.

And when God spoke the first Word of creation,
goodness and beauty sprang into being,
the first expression of art.

And surely the new creation sang with infant voice,
maybe cried for it's mother,
maybe, satisfied, it cooed and laughed,
however we imagine it,
it was the first music.

And all of this, all of this creative wonder,
emerged from the immense silence
that exists eternally in the presence of God.

Silence, Imagination, Poetry, Art, Music, Creation,
the beauty and goodness of God.

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So, if we say that "faith is imagination"
we don't mean that God is imaginary;
we don't mean that faith is an illusion, or a delusion;
we don't mean that faith deals with unreality.

We mean that it is through the act of imagination
that we, who are visible, living in a visible world,
are brought in touch with the invisible reality of God.

What, after all, is a sacrament?
What is the water of the baptismal font?
What is the bread? What is the cup?
Visible signs of an invisible grace, we say.

So it is because God imagined you, and me, and us together,
that I invite you to this table today.

God imagined a world,
drawn together in the perfect harmony of love,
a humanity, bound together by one living Spirit.

And God enacted this masterpiece of imagination
by coming into the world in Jesus Christ,

the Word made Flesh, Imagination made Art.

So, I invite you, to this table
to participate in this most feast
that is both memory and hope.

And I invite you, this summer,
to open yourself to the Spirit's work in your own imagination.

I pray that the invisible reality of God
may become visible to your opening eyes,
and through God's artistry in your lives,
visible to the world.

Let us keep the feast.