POINT OF DEPARTURE

Pilgrim Church, Duluth March 24, 1974 Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

Philippians 3:12: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Like me you may not know much about space travel, and you may not be a reader of science fiction. But like me you may have wondered what would happen if one of those astronauts got started just a little bit wrong, missed his target, failed to go into orbit around the moon and went sailing into the wide, not so blue yonder. Suppose the controls and communications from earth broke down. There is our astronaut in a confinement more solitary than that of any earthly prison, doomed to go on and on until either he dies of starvation or takes that little green pill secretly provided for cases just like this.

What a fate that would be! Yet it could be worse. Let us suppose, - since we are now living in the realm of fancy - let us suppose that under the conditions of outer space, no food is required to sustain life. So our man goes on and on forever unless he is so fortunate as to bump into a meteor or collide with a star.

Perhaps the thought has occurred to you that this is precisely what immortality might mean. If life is pointless now, there is no reason to suppose that it would not continue to be pointless after death. It would just be a going on and on for ever. And contrary to what many people believe, a lot of us fear a life after death for just this reason. People think that any conception of such a life is wishful thinking. But that is not so. Wishful thinking may prefer sheer oblivion. For there is no thought in all the world quite as agonizing as the thought of just going on and on and on like a lost astronaut into nowhere.

So much depends on the point of departure. A rocket launched in the wrong place at the wrong time will never get where it is meant to go. In life it is the same. And in religion.

All misguided religion starts from the same place. It starts from ourselves. It begins from people's frenzied efforts to justify themselves in the sight of the universe, to prove they have a right to a place in the Lord's favor. The trouble with Paul's Judaism was not so much with Judaism, as with Paul. He was, he said later, a very excellent Jew according to a certain external set of standards:

> "Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless."

We may feel that even now, long after his conversion to Christ, he takes a little too much pride in his past.

That may be a weakness with Paul. If so, it is a common one. People who truly have found a better way of life often do show an excessive delight in speaking of how it was with them in former days. The woman who has slimmed down is proud to inform us that she once weighed two hundred and

seventy pounds. The recovered alcoholic revels in describing some colossal bender in his past. There may be some of that tendency in Paul. But Paul's main purpose is to warn those who want to impose a false, self-centered legalism on the Christian life. He wants to say, "It didn't work for me, and it will not work for you. You can't get right with God so long as your point of departure is pride in your own achievements."

As I said, the problem was not so much with Judaism as with Paul. Religion for him had been an endless series of commendable acts by which he sought to justify his own life. I say commendable acts, because much of his behavior probably was commendable. His persecution of the church was not commendable. But even that grew out of his zeal for righteousness, and his abhorrence of what he and the people he respected regarded as a monstrous blasphemy.

In our day, too, people may lead lives that are outwardly commendable. They do the right things. And yet like that hapless rocket ship they go on and on and on with no hope of meaningful destination. They go very fast and very efficiently, but somehow they go nowhere. Their lives are a frantic effort to justify themselves, to prove their worth by a ceaseless round of commendable activity. As Paul would put it, and Luther would put it, they seek salvation by works. But that does not work. It is self-defeating, not because the works are bad in themselves, but because they come out of people's self-centeredness. They do not begin with God's love, but with people's anxious need to prove themselves. And so even the most commendable act is only an act of desperation. It is just one more push by the jet motors into outer darkness.

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So much depends on the point of departure. Part of the message in this passage in Philippians is that we get nowhere so long as the point of our departure in religion is in the claims we make for ourselves.

If we want to get right with God, Paul tells us, the first thing we need to do is to give up all claims. That is partly because, as he sees it, before the righteousness of God we really don't have any claims to make. In the holy place of the most high no one living is justified. But beyond that, it is only when we give up our frantic striving for self-justification that we can receive the peace of God's gracious acceptance into our lives.

To be sure, you have done a thing or two in your life that was worth doing. You worked very hard on some community project for the Junior League. You raised up six kids in the way they should go, and one or two of them still seem to be going there - which is not a bad batting average these days. You marched from Selma to Montgomery and got hit in the head with a rock along the way. You pointed out a suspicious error in the books at the price of losing your job. You've done a thing or two that was all right. As a result you may even have taken up your own cross and carried it a few feet past the jeering mob.

But despite all that you still don't have what our forefather's called the assurance of salvation. Admittedly there are times when you feel satisfied with yourself, even smug about yourself. But in the small hours of the night you know that those good works of yours are not much to stand on. What you really need is to believe that your space ship will make it not because of your good works, but despite the bad ones.

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Religion is only a curse and a burden so long as it is a matter of making claims for ourselves. All such gains as we seem to make that way are better counted as loss, Paul tells us. If you want to find the right point of departure it's just as well to take all those claims to virtue out the back door and put them in the trash can. We need to begin at a completely different place, not with ourselves and our frantic striving for self-justification, but where God begins with us. We need to begin with God's gracious love reaching out to us accepting us in spite of everything that stands in the way, and claiming us for himself. We need "the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

Here we see how different is the point of view of the Bible from so many other points of view. The story the Bible has to tell is not, as many people mistakenly take it to be, the story of man's search for God. No, it is rather the story of God's search for man. The Bible is not an argument for how we can get from where we are to where God is. No, rather it is a testimony to how God actually does come from where he is to where we are. From beginning to end, from Genesis 1:1 "In the beginning God..." to Revelation 22:21, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."... From beginning to end, the movement is just the reverse of what the world expects. The initiative and the point of departure are from God's side.

If the movement were any other way, if the point of departure were anywhere else, how could we trust it, how could we believe in it?

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The point of departure for true faith is not in our claims for ourselves but in that gracious love that comes from beyond ourselves and offers us a new beginning. But that is all very vague and abstract, isn't it, unless we see it in action, unless we find it coming down to earth, unless it really comes home to us in a very particular kind of way?

But, you see, this is why Paul is writing this letter, why in fact any and all the writings we call the New Testament were written. They were written because this great thing did happen. The gracious love of God did go into action and come home to people in a very particular way. It went into action in Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us, "When I stopped making claims for myself and realized that in Jesus Christ God was reaching out and claiming me for himself, everything changed. I found a new point of departure, or better, a new point of departure found me. My guidance system switched over so that now I can even look beyond the horizon of death with the confidence that wherever Christ is going, I am going too. I don't claim perfection. But now that I have this new point of departure I can go out and live my religion even more strenuously than before. My faith is not passive. But it is not frantic either. It labors with confidence."

> "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect: but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

Because Christ Jesus has made me his own. You see where the starting point is? The starting point is from beyond ourselves. And yet we have to accept it. We have to trust it. We are saved through faith.

No doubt Edmund Steimle is right when he says, "The simplest and, I suppose, still the best analogy"to such a faith, "is the young child who is blessed with wise and loving parents; the child who, regardless of whether he

is dull-witted or bright, homely or handsome, devilish or well-behaved, knows that he is accepted, loved and constantly forgiven by his parents. And it is that child, who with an assurance he does not consciously recognize, bounds out of the house to play in the sun or hops off to school in the rain, not even aware that the reason why his life has daily joy and purpose and direction is just because he is accepted, forgiven, and loved."

A Christian faith <u>is</u> like that. Only the assurance that it possesses comes from conscious recognition. It is the grateful awareness that God's gracious love does reach out to us in a particular way, that in Christ he has made us his own.