Sunday May 21, 1972

"THE BREAKS IN LIFE" Mark 3:31-35

This is the time of year for graduations and in many churches for Confirmation. And since such events are turning points, breaks, junctures in people's lifes, we want to explore this morning what our Christian faith has to say about such breaks or turning points.

1. First of all, from the beginning of time, human lives on this earth have been full of breaks, changes and new starts. The major breaks have been about the same throughout history in in all cultures--birth, maturing, marriage, old age, and death. This can be seen by the fact that in almost all known cultures, human beings have had ceremonies to symbolize, to mark these turning points and changes. The ceremonies and symbols vary to some degree from culture to culture and religion to religion, but in many ways they are the same.

Most cultures and religions, for example, have had some sort of ceremony soon after a child has been born. In the Christian faith we have infant baptism or as some churches call it, infant dedication. Such ceremonies symbolize among other things, that the child who has been born is a distinct, unique individual. The child has made his first break in the world or rather it has been made for him as he is separated physicall from his mother.

2. A second major break in life is when the child or young person matures and is on his way to becoming an adult. In this process he breaks away even more from his parents and family. In most cultures and religions, this maturation process and break has also had with it some kind of ceremony. And because of the nature of the world and society not too many years ago, the ceremony of becoming an adult normally took place at age 12 or 13. At least this was the first step. This was the age that seemed fitting for a number of reasons.

At that age many physical changes were taking place or had taken place in the young person's body. And then too, at age 12 or 13, many of the young people did take on many adult responsibilities. They usually took full time jobs and a number of persons even got married in some cultures.

In our own country, it was not too many years ago that the only graduation, if there was one, was at the end of

the 8th grade and many did not even go that far. Following 4 or 6 or 8 years of schooling, at age 12 or 13, a person started to work and took on many adult responsibilities. Thus it was natural that in many Protestant churches in that kind of world to have Confirmation at about the same time and the same age. Then in truth, Confirmation as an adult member of the church coincided with the fact that the person was also in many ways an adult in his life outside the church.

Thus it was not only the church confirming him, but society in general also was confirming him as an adult in many ways. The young person was recognized as having a new role in life. In those days there was no such thing as a "teenager." You were a child and then you were an adult.

In our time, particularly in our culture, a person does not become an adult in the matter of taking on his life's work until he has finished at least 4 years of high school and more and more 4 years of college or even longer. Thus even though in many of our churches, we still confirm young people at age 13, 14, or 15, the fact is that society or our culture at large has its confirmation ceremony when a person graduates from high school or college. This is the culture's way of confirming a new role or status, a judgment by one's teachers of maturity and adulthood. A kind of confirmation by culture also takes place at age 16, when a person gets a driver's license and now at age 18, when a person can vote.

All of this is to say that even though throughout the history of mankind, there have been the usual breaks and junctures in life; in our time, these same breaks are present but come at different times and in different ways. And more than that, the breaks are often more radical. Particularly the break of a person becoming an adult is more radical because of the vast changes in our whole culture and in our lives. Urbanization, population growth, the constant bombardment of new ideas, new knowledge, new people, our very comprehensions of the nature of the universe--all these factors are changing constantly and continually.

Thus the simple and yet crucial result for the individual is that no longer will any child be able to live in the same kind of world his parents and grandparents inhabited.

For thousands of years, children retraced the steps of their parents, were initiated into stable ways and ritualized routines and ways of doing things. People by and large maintained a basic familiarity with place and family. Some of the Amish people and related groups still do this in our country. But for most young people, not only is there a radical rupture with the past, but a young person must necessarily be trained for an unknow future.

Not only is this one of the defining characteristics of our time, but it is also one of the roots of its disorientations. For as the world becomes more open to us, there is a greater hunger for experience. There is a greater desire for change and novelty and the search for sensation. People want to try everything. We are no longer content with doing things just because they have always been done that way. Out of all of this comes the erosion of old creeds to be replaced by a mingling of all creeds and all styles.

Furthermore even though in our kind of world the break of becoming an adult is made at a later age as far as the culture confirming us because of the amount of education needed, and thus we physically leave home and take on our life's work at a later age than in previous times. . . .

At the same time, the other fact is that we break away from our families in many other ways at an earlier age. This is because in our kind of society, much of a person's value system, his belief system, his action system, his way of looking at the world and at people is formed outside the family beginning at a very early age.

In the traditional home of not too many years ago, work and home life were one and the family was both an economic unit and a social unit. Not only that, but it was the setting for almost all the other social functions as well--welfare, recreation, education and religious instruction. The modern world, however, has witnessed the separation of the family as an institution from most of these functions.

There is a separation of family from occupation, whether it be the breakup of the family farm, the small family business, the family enterprise, or the family tradition such as medicine, law, carpentry or fishing. The fact is that fewer and fewer people follow the vocation of their parents.

And even if they do, they now must receive most of their training for that occupation from somewhere and someone else. It used to be that if a persons wanted to be a farmer like his father, he learned farming from his father. Now he goes to a university. And this is true is almost every occupation.

Thus in our kind of world, the break of growing up and maturing and taking on a life's work is made in many ways and is usually much more of a radical break than in times past. Whereas in a world gone by, the major break in growing up was simply that the person became an adult and was recognized and accepted as an adult--in almost everything else he followed in the ways of his ancestors. He did what they had always done and did it in the same way.

In our times, we not only find new ways of doing all kinds of things, but we find new vocations, have new kinds of training and then one day often move far away from the sphere of the family and surroundings in which we grew up. And we find ourselves influenced by all kinds of factors, the family being only one among them.

What then does our Christian Faith have to say to us about such breaks in our lives, particularly in our kind of world?

1. First of all, the Christian faith does not see all radical breaks as necessarily bad. In fact our faith underscores the need for breaks in life, particularly the break of growing up and maturing and taking on adult responsibility.

One of the few things we know about the life of Jesus is that at the age of 12, he stayed back at the temple and was asking questions on his own. He was beginning to question his religion, the religion of his ancestors. And he was seeking answers from people other than his parents.

Our faith has always held that because each human being is unique, he often needs to break away and in so doing be becomes an individual. The first time a child says "no" to his parents, he is saying "yes" to himself. All of us need to learn to think for ourselves, to make decisions, to consult others.

In some cultures not too many years ago, such as that of the American Indians, there often was a regular method for

a young person to prove himself and in a sense earn his right to be treated as an adult. He often went off into the wilderness by himself and then supposedly if he survived, he came back an adult. In our society we have no regular structured method for doing this. Thus we often rebel and try to prove ourselves in irregular, sometimes strange ways.

But secondly and on a deeper level, our faith calls us to make breaks so that we can give ourselves to larger loyalties. Part of growing up is the recognizing that we are responsible to and for many people. This was the case with Jesus in our scripture lesson for this morning. There came the time when he knew he had to leave the family that raised him. This didn't mean that he no longer cared for them, or that he didn't love them. It meant that he now saw his life and work in larger terms than just loyalty to the family from which he came. Jesus now had a larger family and a larger loyalty and vocation--a new vision to which he had given his commitment.

Some of his hometown friends thought he was crazy, out of his mind. Perhaps even his family had their doubts about him. But he knew he must pursue that vision. He saw his larger family as those who pursued the will of God. He had hinted at this much earlier in his life when his parents found him in the temple at Jerusalem. All of this is also to say that the breaks in life are never without their tensions. Many times it's hard to say "no" to those who raised us. Often like Jesus we hear many voices calling to us.

A recent editorial gave this advice to young people in our kind of world. "The young person must find his vision about life and the future, he must nourish that vision and have fidelity to it, despite the sacrifices. But one of the things that makes these sacrifices difficult is that a lot of people are going to tell you that they are absurd. These are the foes of your vision, the enemies of your fidelity. They are the naysayers, the pessimists who either were afraid to scale the heights, or lost their nerve part way up. They will make fun of you. They will warn you of what you are missing, pity your youthful illusions. In the worst temptation of all, they will tell you, you are normal--that you are no different from everyone else, that you are ordinary and that you ought to be content with the ordinary happiness of life.

Instead of the words normal and ordinary, you should hear the words mediocre and dull if you want to know what they are really saying. If you listen to them, they will destroy you. They are not telling you the truth. You are not ordinary!"

Another way of saying it can be found in the book "THE PROPHET" by Gibran. He warns parents in this way about their children. . ."You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies, but not their spirits, for their spirits dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday."

3. Thirdly, our faith reminds us that as we make our breaks and form new loyalties and have new visions; human nature is such that no earthly loyalty or relationship can finally content us. Patriotism is not enough, nor nationalism, nor humanity, nor college, nor a particular love affair, nor revolt against the past, tearing down old barns and building new ones. Every earthly loyalty if it is made central becomes idolatry and all idolatries finally destroy their worshippers. Only God himself will suffice.

4. In the fourth place, the world in which we live today, as we described earlier, is a world in which many of our traditional securities have disappeared. In that sense we face more insecurity and need to live by risk. We often have to set out without knowing where we are going in certainty. About the only thing for which we can be certain is that we will often have to change goals and direction s along the way. But if our ultimate faith is in God, this shouldn't upset us.

Such risks and journeys are as old as one ofthe oldest characters in the Bible, a person who name was Abraham. In the Biblical story, Abraham is the prototype, the supreme example of the person of faith. He is the one, who though advanced in years, was called by God to pull up his roots in a civilized world and become a nomad--called by God to go to a new place. He went out in faith not being sure where God would lead him. And later, the one event which overshadows the entire Old Testament is the Exodus, God leading an entire people out of slavery. It is the beginning of a movement toward the promised land

that takes place only as old ways of life are left behind.'

In this sense, you see, nothing could be more Biblical than much of our modern world. If we are to get to any kind of promised land in our lives, we too, often have to leave old ways behind. Our pilgrim forefathers discovered the same thing as they left their homeland and came to this country.

In the New Testament also, we see this kind of God on the move..,as God himself moves to the center of history by emptying himself to take human form. Thus it is that the movement toward human fulfillment within history most often occurs as established securities are given up, old insights re-examined and some old patterns of thought and order allowed to die. Life is composed of breaks and new starts. This is the faith of the Bible--it is the faith of the Christian and it is the only kind of faith with which we can confidently face the future.