Sunday, February 15, 1976
HOLDING PATTERNS
Mark 1:12-13; Galatians 1:15-18; Revelation 6:9-11

Most of us are familiar with the term “holding pattern” in relation to air travel. Many’s the time I have been a passenger on an airplane flying to Chicago or New York, on to have the pilot announce — “There’s a lot of traffic in the area so we’re going to be in a holding pattern. Our arrival” will be delayed. “One time I was in such a holding pattern for almost three hours over Chicago.

These are holding patterns which are not chosen by us, but we are put into them for our safety and the safety of other aircraft and passengers in the area. We may get irritated and yet we know there’s nothing we can do about it and it’s for our own good. Sometimes it’s too foggy to land, or the ceiling’s too low and the pilot has to wait until things canoe seen more clearly. So, the plane circles and circles some more. Then finally it clears, and we come in for a landing and resume our journey.

In addition to air travel, life itself has its holding patterns. All three incidents from the scripture readings earlier describe holding patterns.

In the passage from Mark, we are told that the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

Jesus was about to begin his public ministry. He was certain that God had called him for a special purpose. But before he began, he went into the desert to meditate, to think things out, to find himself, to deal with some of the temptations that his ministry would offer. In other words, he went into a holding pattern. Only after this 40-day holding pattern was he ready to begin his active ministry.

In the second passage from Galatians, the Apostle Paul describes his holding pattern, or rather one of them. He told the Galatians that after his conversion and before he began his active public ministry, he entered a holding pattern. He went into Arabia for three years, then to Damascus and finally to Jerusalem. He had to figure things out, get them straight in his mind.

In the third instance from the book of Revelation, we read about some of the martyrs who are impatient. They were in a holding pattern which they did not like, waiting for God to take action and purge the earth of those who opposed God. To them, God seemed to work too slow. But they are told to rest a little longer, to be patient and wait.

Our lives too have their holding patterns, some of them we do not choose and some we can choose. But we all know the feeling of circling, the feeling that we are making no progress for the time being. These are times of waiting.

An individual who loses his or her job can be put into a kind. of holding pattern. Then it’s a time for taking stock of oneself, our situation. When and where will we land? Such holding patterns can be a time of testing and potential growth, or it can turn into a disaster. It can be a time for self-examination and then when a person comes out of that kind of holding pattern, he or she may start off in an entirely new direction and be the better for it.

Illness or extreme fatigue can put us into a holding pattern. Often illness comes to us because we have not been pacing ourselves but have been running in all directions without much direction and never taking time for rest and relaxation. Finally in desperation our body in effect says to us, “Stop!” “Rest!” and the illness that comes over us put us to bed, puts us into a holding pattern whether we like it or not.

Through the years I’ve talked with dozens of persons who experienced heart attacks and later recovered. Almost all of these persons have said in one or another that the kind of holding pattern their illness put them into, caused them to rethink their whole pattern of living. In other words, the holding pattern of an illness can be the occasion for taking stock of oneself, and for a growing awareness of unresolved problems and for a revision of the values which few of us undertake in full health.

Grief caused by the death of a spouse or some other person very close to us can also put us into a kind of holding pattern. Often in the first stage of grief, there’s nothing we can do but wait like an airplane which is circling round and round over an airport waiting to land. In fact, the experts in grief tell us that we should go into a holding pattern and make no major decisions for at least a year, if possible. The healing process of grief is something that cannot be hurried. It takes time for the fog to lift and the weather to clear. Then when we do land it’s more likely to be a safe landing and we can go on our way.

Young people during the high school years or after high school, or maybe in the second year of college, often go into a holding pattern. We used to talk about the sophomore slump in college. To those who are watching, particularly those of us who are parents, the young people seem to be drifting or circling, making no progress. And it’s true. They are in a kind of holding pattern which is many times necessary so that an appropriate landing can be made. As adults too, we often reach plateaus, where we seem to be making little or no progress but have the feeling that we are only circling.

What then does our Christian faith have to say about such holding patterns as these and others?

1. First, our faith underscores the fact that often holding patterns are necessary and useful. There are times in all of our lives when we have to stop going forward and simply circle for a while. Just as in air travel, there are holding patterns in our lives which are for our protection.

The problem with many of us is that we do not always get the signal in time which tells us to voluntarily go into a holding pattern and so a heart attack comes, or some other illness, and we are forced into a holding pattern which is not as pleasant as one we would’ve chosen.

In a little book entitled, FATIGUE, Paul Tournier, suggests that many illnesses occur neither abruptly nor by chance, but have been prepared for through years of living habits which are contrary to the basic rules of living. A state of exhaustion or fatigue is almost always a warning signal to go into a holding pattern and if we do not, we are forced into one.

This is not to say that a life directed by God will be free from fatigue. Jesus himself knew fatigue, as did St. Paul, and many other faithful Christians. God may call us to perform tasks which are beyond our strength. But a person who is fatigued needs to ask whether it is because he or she has obeyed God, or because he or she has disobeyed God.

Knowing how to rest in time and to rest properly, to go into a holding pattern, is one of the essential elements in the proper regulation of one's life.

One of the amazing things about the life of Jesus as reported in the New Testament is that he knew when to stop and rest. We too, have to learn to read the signals of our minds and bodies. One reason for the idea of the Sabbath, a day of rest each week was that it was to be a kind of holding pattern, a day of not going forward, a day not filled with the usual round of activities of the other six days. An annual vacation has the same purpose to be a kind of holding pattern.

2. Secondly, our Christian faith reminds us that when in a holding pattern we are not to panic or try to end it prematurely. The pilot of an airplane has to wait for the message that now it is all right to land. If he tries to come out of the holding pattern before it's time, disaster results.

Similarly, we are not to panic when one of our close friends or one of our children is in a holding pattern. It takes time for some things to be worked out. To end the holding pattern prematurely could be disastrous. Sitting by and watching while someone we love is in such a holding pattern can certainly try our patience. But there are some things that cannot be forced — we simply have to wait them out.

Healing in illness cannot be forced. If we have a broken arm, it's going to take a certain amount of time to mend. So, it is with many aspects of our living. In the familiar parable of the prodigal son which Jesus told, there was nothing the father could do to hurry the process of his son returning home. He had to wait it out and then be ready to welcome him back when he made his landing.

There is always the temptation when we are under pressure to want to act too quickly. The baseball pitcher who has just been hit hard by opposing batters feels an overpowering urge to fastball the next man at the plate. "You want to throw it by him as quickly as you can," said a famous relief pitcher, "but that's the time you should pick up the resin bag or talk to the catcher. Delay keeps you from doing something foolish."

In the whole matter of panic and hurrying, Satchel Paige used to say, "If you stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cooling thoughts."

Of course, like an airplane, none of us can stay in a holding pattern forever. We have to land sometime. Thus, there are times when we need to say to someone or have someone say to us — "It's all clear, you can come out of your holding pattern now, land and go about your business again." Sometimes physicians have to say to persons who have been ill — "You are well now, get out of your bed and be on your way." We cannot always see the signals ourselves. Other people sometimes have to give us the message.

3. A third item to note about holding patterns is that they can be used as time for gaining strength and new direction. This is what Jesus did when he went into the desert. He went there to think things out, to find the right direction for his life and work. I mentioned earlier that an illness, when we are confined to a bed or our normal activity is otherwise restricted, can also be a time for taking stock of ourselves and for gaining strength and finding new direction.

It's not always an easy thing to do. When we are ill, we generally submit voluntarily to technical prescriptions and agree to take medicine or a rest-cure, but we are often reluctant when it comes to changing something in our way of living. Yet that may be what is most necessary.

4. In the fourth place, not only can we gain strength and new direction, but in holding patterns we can rediscover God.

In the Bible, the desert or wilderness often represents a kind of place for a holding pattern, a place where people find the temporary retreat they need. When Elijah was discouraged to the point of wishing to die, he went into the desert. There he sought and found personal contact with God. God revived his spirit and invested him with a fresh mission. So, too, the desert can be the prayerful meditation to which God invites us at decisive moments so that we may rediscover his strength and inspiration and new direction. The Bible says, “Be still and know that I am God.”

It was in the desert that John the Baptist called on his contemporaries to come and recognize and confess their faults and repent in preparation for the coming of God’s kingdom. It was into the desert that the Apostle Paul went after his conversion. He knew his faith needed deepening and maturing.

Some holding patterns are thrust upon us and we then have little choice but to make the best use of them. But there are also times when we need to consciously choose holding patterns in our lives. That’s largely what prayer and meditation is all about. A large part of the helpfulness found in such practices as Transcendental Meditation is that the person chooses to set aside two periods of time each day and in those periods puts the whole self into a kind of holding pattern. The mind and body are at rest and gradually come into a new harmony not only within themselves, but with the world round about. Then God can be experienced too in a new way. All the saints knew this and practiced regular prayer and meditation each day.

So, our faith says to us — choose holding patterns for yourself and you will find new strength and direction for your life. Each of our lives needs regular holding patterns.