Book 6

Sunday April 3, 1977

"LIFE'S FORCED DECISIONS" Luke 19:28-40

A new book just published is entitled "The Age of Uncertainty." In the book, John Galbraith the author, explores the key economic ideas of the last two centuries and their consequences and then he goes on to show how uncertain people are in our time especially as far as economics are concerned. The title of the book, however, could be applied to almost any field of knowledge. There is uncertainty in the sciences, uncertainty in philosophy, and uncertainty is present in religious thought and belief. Many people do not know what they think or believe. In this congregation there must be many among us who when faced with basic matters of religious faith--God, Jesus, the Bible, prayer and immortality--often ask ourselves what our opinion is.

One reason there are so many religious fads, as we noted last Sunday, is because people are uncertain and follow after one fad and then another. Furthermore, in times of uncertainty, religious groups which offer simple answers are very popular.

Ours is a time of many opinions and no opinions. It's common practice when surveys are taken on any question for the person being questioned to have one of three choices, for or against, or no opinion. If we say we have no opinion, it's our way of saying we don't want to decide one way or the other, or that we haven't thought about it or maybe that we don't want to think about it.

In a survey of public opinion that's all right. We may have no opinion. While, however we can avoid answering the question about our opinions in such instances, we cannot avoid answering the question at certain points in our life--What is our decision? We can hold opinions in suspense on a number of issues, but we cannot hold some of our decisions in suspense.

Before a person graduates from high school, that person might have varying opinions as to whether or not he or she should attend college or do something else. But when he or she is eligible for college and the semester starts next week, then a decision has to be made. Do I go to college or not. We are forced to decide one way or the other. If a person decides not to go, he or she can

change the decision. But each time a new quarter or semester begins, one is forced to decide.

Most of the serious questions we face in this life force us to a decision. We have to decide one way or the other and not to decide is to decide. It's like being in a rowboat, going down a powerful river and debating whether or not to stop at a given point. There may be opposing considerations that an open and unprejudiced mind ought to face. And so you continue to debate whether or not you will stop. But in the meantime, the river has not waited the conclusion of your argument and sooner or later, if your debate has not decided the question, the river will have decided it for you. You will not have stopped.

What's all this got to do with Palm Sunday?

1. In the first place, Palm Sunday and the events which followed dramatizes for us in unforgettable fashion the impossibility of neutrality in the great issues of life. When we read in the Bible that Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, it meant the people in the city of Jerusalem had to decide to be for him or against him

To put it another way, Palm Sunday underscores the fact that religion is one of life's forced decisions. Look at it this way--either there is a God who is behind, within and who trancends all of creation as well as working within it, or there is not a God and life is blind chance, purely accidental, meaningless and ultimately worthless.

Now you may have an opinion one way or another or think that you have no opinion, but the fact is that the way in which you live your life each day, the attitude you have toward life and death and other people, will indicate how you have decided. It was George Bernard Shaw who said, "What a man believes may be ascertained not from his creed, but from the assumptions on which he habitually acts."

Watch your own life! Watch any person's life! It will tell you what you or someone else has decided about God. A person may never have said to himself or herself or anyone that he or she has made up his mind about God. But life forces us to a decision each day. We have to live one way or another. Either we live as if there is a God or as if there is no God.

Today in the 11:00 service of worship we will perform the rite of confirmation. Sixteen young people will be confirming the baptismal vows which their parents took on their behalf years ago when they were baptized as infants.

Each year Confirmation is viewed by some as a forced decision, and of course it is one of life's forced decisions. Even if a person is not part of a Confirmation class, he or she is deciding each day whether or not his or her life is committed to God. Confirmation makes the decision a public event. But it's a forced decision like most of the other great issues of life. Either a person commits his or her life to following the Christian way of life or one decides not to follow that way.

Life is filled with forced decisions. If love comes into our life all radiant and beautiful, we can take one attitude toward it or the other. We can live as if love is at the center of the meaning of life, or we can live as if love is nothing but physical attraction. No matter what our opinions are about love or what we say they are, by the way we live and respond we will be making a decision about love and what it is.

Palm Sunday reminds us that life is filled with forced decisions.

2. Secondly, Palm Sunday and the events which followed show us that even though life is filled with forced decisions and religion is one of them, we still try to avoid having to make decisions. And we resent people whose coming into our midst forces us to decide one way or another or forces us to reveal what our real decisions are.

What a relief it would have been on that first Palm Sunday if the people in Jerusalem had not had to confront Jesus. If only they could have dodged the issue and done nothing about him.

Later in the week, Pontius Pilate tried to avoid the issue and decision. Accepting Christ was preposterous, yet crucifying him was distasteful. Why did he have to have anything to do with Christ. But it was one of life's forced decisions. Washing his hands of it publicly after letting the authorities take Jesus to be crucified did not alter the fact that he had to decide one way or the other.

There are people who try to avoid the commitment and decision to one person in marriage. Some forgo the marriage service which is a public declaration of their decision and commitment and simply live together. But as they live together day in and day out either they are commiting themselves to each other or they are not. It cannot be avoided, public ceremony or no public ceremony.

Sometimes we resent life's forced decisions and the people who force them, because we are forced to reveal what our real decisions are.

I served my first parish on the south side of Chicago in the late 1950's and early 60's. These were the years when the civil rights issue as far as black people were concerned was at its height. Many people in our little congregation were in theory in favor of civil rights. They had the opinion that black people ought to have the right to buy a house and live wherever they wanted. But when black families began moving in next door, some people decided otherwise. Life had forced a decision that was more than theory or opinion. They then discovered what they really believed. No wonder some people said, "Why don't the blacks stay away. The timing is bad. It would be better to wait until attitudes change. The didn't want to have to decide for or against.

People who force our decisions are often branded as trouble-makers or outsiders who don't understand. If there had been a daily newspaper in Jerusalem at the time of the first Palm Sunday, we can imagine what the editorials might have said. Listen!

"We consider the visit of Jesus of Nazareth to Jerusalem to be unfortunate at best. These are tense times and feelings are running high both on the left and on the right. The appearance in a tense and crowded city of these self-styled leaders can only result in further polarization and intensification of feelings and some are likely to get hurt before the week is out. If this Jesus is a responsible person, we can hope he will re-think the timing of this Jerusalem visit."

Another editorial after the Palm Sunday event would go something like this: "This newspaper joins with leaders and law enforcement personnel in looking with grave concern at the spectacle which we were all forced to witness

when the Galilean teacher, Jesus of Nazareth entered the city. This was an exceedingly poor time to bring his cause or message to Jerusalem. The town is on edge and there seems to be over-reaction to everything. We hope the authorities will be working out some plan for effectively dealing with this trouble-maker."

Life's forced decisions, if only we could avoid them, but none of us can. And whether or not the timing suits us is not the issue. There are always decisions which cannot be avoided. When we resent the persons who force the decision, we are really resenting the wrong person. What we really don't like is that it often forces our true self to be revealed.

3. Thirdly Palm Sunday and the events which followed show us that decisions, even forced decisions are not simply once for all events. Decisions have to be made over and over again on the major issues which confront us.

On Palm Sunday many in the crowd made a decision for Jesus Christ. They hailed him as their king. Undoubtedly many were convinced they would follow Jesus wherever he led them. Certainly his closest disciples were sure of this.

But for almost all of those people that decision didn't last very long. In fact after a few days passed, it changed radically. People who had decided for him, now decided against him. What a difference between the decisions on Palm Sunday and on Good Friday.

It's easy to follow the Christian way when things are going well for us, just as it was not difficult for the disciples to follow Jesus as he healed people, preached good news and was gaining popularity. It's easy to join the Palm Sunday crowd. Everybody loves a parade.

But when Jesus was put on trial, when his life was threatened and then when he was finally crucified, we find like the disciples, it's not so easy to follow him to the cross. Whenever today our Christian faith leads us into controversial situations so that we are rejected like Christ was rejected, then it's more difficult to keep to our decision of following the Christian way. Then our decision has to be affirmed and reaffirmed.

The good news is that if we can make that decision and make it again so that we follow Christ even in the most controversial situations, even when we are rejected and suffer, after this comes the Easter experience and through it all we come to new life. Easter cannot be had without also knowing Good Friday.

Jesus Christ can be a troublesome person as well as a gentle Saviour. When we meet, like those in old Jerusalem, we are forced to make decisions. But if we stay with those decisions to follow him, we already have eternal life here and now and nothing can destroy us.