Sunday, March 2, 1986
LIFE'S STOPPING PLACES (No. 3 in a Series: On the Road with Jesus)
Luke 13:1-9

Since life is a journey, like all journeys, it has its stopping places. We cannot always be on the move. These stopping places are different in character. Some of them are planned rest stops; others are emergency stops. There's a rhythm to life just as there's a rhythm to traveling. There are planned stopping places, and unplanned ones. In air travel, the unplanned pauses are called "holding patterns."

I can remember too many times when I've been a passenger on an airplane flying to Denver, Chicago, or New York, only to have the pilot announce—"There's a lot of traffic in the area, or bad weather, so we're going to be in a 'holding pattern.' Our arrival will be delayed." All of us know that even though such holding patterns are not chosen by us, 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. 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 clear and we come in for a landing and resume our journey.

Just as our lives have their stopping places and holding patterns, so also did the life of Jesus. Once Jesus had been baptized and had decided on what direction his life's journey would take, he then put himself into a holding pattern. He spent forty days alone in the desert to think things through. Later on in his life, there were other stopping places and he urged his disciples to take time out as well.

In his letter to the church at Galatia, the Apostle Paul describes one of his life's major stopping places. After his conversion and before he began his active public ministry, he went to Arabia for three years, then to Damascus, and finally to Jerusalem. He had to figure things out, get them straight in his mind, and then he continued his journey.

If we don't stop sometimes to find the right direction, we may be like the man who got lost on his trip, and he said to his companion, "I don't know where we are, but we're making great time!"

Nature also has its holding patterns. In the scripture reading for today read earlier, from Luke's Gospel, Jesus told a parable of a fig tree that someone had planted. When it was time for the tree to bear fruit, the owner found that it had none and being an impatient man, he went to the vine dresser and said—"For three years now this fig tree has had no figs. I'm tired of waiting. Cut the tree down. Why should it use up the ground?" And the vine dresser gave him some good advice. He said, "Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can always cut it down." Don't panic! Don't try to force life!

There's a time for stopping and waiting and resting and a time to move on. All journeys are like that and that's the way life is. To put it another way, there's a patience involved in life's journey that is sometimes necessary.

There's a story in the book of Revelation about some of the martyrs of the church who were growing impatient with God. They had suffered and were killed for their faith and were anxious for God to get on with it. They were at a stopping place or in a holding pattern which they did

not like, waiting for God to take action and purge the world of all those opposed to God. To them, God seemed to work too slow. But they are told to rest a while longer.

Like Jesus and other people on life's journey, our lives too have their stopping places and their holding patterns. Some of them we do not choose, and some we can and do choose. We all know the feeling of circling, the feeling that we are on a plateau and that we are making no progress for the time being. An individual who loses his or her job experiences one of life's stopping places. Then it's time for taking stock of oneself. What new direction will our life take? What direction do we want to take? When and where will we land? Such holding patterns can be a time of testing and potential growth, or they can turn into disasters. The loss of a job or even a change of a job can be a time for self-examination.

Another one of life's stopping places is illness. Or to change the metaphor a bit — illness or extreme fatigue can put us into a holding pattern. Frequently illness comes to us because we have not been pacing ourselves — because we have not been paying attention to the rhythm of life — but instead have been trying to run in all directions at once and never taking time out for rest and relaxation. Finally, in desperation, our body and mind together say to us, "Stop! Rest!" and the illness that comes over us puts us to bed, puts us in a holding pattern whether we like it or not.

Through the years I've visited and talked with dozens of people who have experienced heart attacks and later recovered. Almost all of these people have said to me in one way or another that the kind of stopping places that their illness put them into caused them to rethink their whole pattern of living. They re-evaluated what's important in life and what is not. In other words, the holding pattern of an illness can be the occasion for examining one's journey in life and for changing directions on that journey.

Grief caused by the death of a spouse or some other person very close to us can also be one of life's stopping places. 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 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 come out of our holding pattern and land, it's more likely to be a safe landing and we can continue on our life's journey.

A divorce or separation can put us into a holding pattern.

Young people, during the high school years and in college too, are in one of life's stopping places. We used to talk about the sophomore slump in college. All those school years are a time of studying and waiting as we try to decide what direction our life should take.

To those of us who are watching, particularly parents, the young people seem to be drifting or circling, making no progress, or at least not the progress we'd like to see them make. They are in a kind of holding pattern which is many times necessary so that an appropriate landing can be made.

Now of course a holding pattern can't go on too long. The airplane runs out of fuel. And so too with our lives — there's a time to stop and a time to move on.

What then does the life journey of Jesus and its stopping places have to say to us about our own life's stopping places?

First, the life and ministry of Jesus underscore the fact that stopping places or holding patterns in life are necessary and useful. There are times in all of our lives when we have to stop or circle for a while. As in air travel, there are holding patterns in our lives which are for our protection.
The problem with some of us is that we do not always pay attention to the command that tells us to go into a holding pattern or to enter one of life's stopping places. As a result, an illness forces us into a stopping place which is not as pleasant as one we could have 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 to God will be free from fatigue. Jesus himself knew fatigue, as did St. Paul and many other faithful Christians. However, fatigue can be a strong message that it's time to rest.

One of the amazing things about the life of Jesus as reported in the New Testament is that he knew when to stop and when to begin again. We too have to learn to pay attention to the signals of our minds and bodies.

One major reason for the idea of the Sabbath, a day of rest each week, was that it is to be a kind of holding pattern, one of life's stopping places. An annual vacation has the same purpose.

Secondly, Jesus' life journey reminds us that when we are in one of life's stopping places or holding patterns, we are not to panic or try to end it prematurely. The pilot of an airplane has to wait for the message that it's all right to land. If he tries to come out of the holding pattern before it's all clear, disaster can result. Or in the parable Jesus told, when the fig tree did not bear fruit, don't cut it down too quickly.
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. Sitting by and watching while someone we love is in one of life's stopping places can certainly try our patience, but there are some things that cannot be forced — we 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. All he could do was to wait for the young man 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 fast-ball 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."

A little wait or delay can keep you from doing something foolish!

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 to ourselves, or have someone say to us, “It’s all clear — you can come out of your holding pattern now. You can leave life’s stopping place and go about your business again.”

Sometimes physicians have to say to their patients—"You are well now, get out of your bed and be on your way, even though you don’t feel like it!”

Thirdly, Jesus discovered on his life’s journey that a holding pattern or stopping place is very important for gaining strength and new direction. This is what Jesus did when he went apart for a while.
And not only do we gain strength and new direction for our life’s journey — but it is frequently in life’s stopping places that we become more aware of God who has been traveling with us all along. In the Bible stories, the desert or wilderness often represents a kind of place for a holding pattern or stopping place. When Elijah was discouraged to the point of wishing to die, he went into the desert and there he met God. God’s spirit revived him and he came back with a new sense of his mission.

In the journey of life — the stopping places can be very important. What’s most difficult is to know when to stop and when to get moving again. Some stopping places are thrust upon us and we have little choice but to make the best use of them.

However, there are also times when we need to consciously choose stopping places or holding patterns in our lives. In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Ecclesiastes, there’s that famous chapter that tells us—"To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what has been planted.” Jesus certainly was aware of this and it’s behind the parable read as our scripture reading where the man wanted to dig up the fig tree and was told to wait another year.

Andy Rooney, in his inimitable fashion, has given an updated version of this matter of timing. Here’s a part of what he wrote:

“There’s a time to travel and a time to stay home and not go anywhere at all. There is a time to gather worldly goods and a time to clean out the garage and the basement and throw stuff away. There is a time for exercise and a time for laying down and taking a little nap.” The telephone company will like this one: “There’s a time to walk, a time to run, a time to take the train or a plane and a time to let your fingers do the walking.”

To have the proper sense of timing — that’s a big help in our life’s journey. Welcome life’s stopping places. Use them for rest and refreshment and for getting reacquainted with God, and you will have new strength and direction for your life’s journey. Amen.