Sunday, September 19, 1993
HOLDING PATTERNS
Mark 1:9-14

On Monday afternoon, August 30, I boarded an airplane at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport for my return flight to Lincoln. The plane left the gate on time at 3:20 p.m., and we began our long taxi toward the runway. I was thankful that we had left the gate on schedule, as I needed to be back in Lincoln early that evening.

Before we got to the runway, we stopped. That didn't appear to be unusual because, in my experience, there's often a short delay in a large airport like O'Hare. I knew we were in a long line of planes waiting for take-off instructions. After about twenty minutes of not moving at all, the captain announced that we would be there awhile. A line of severe thunderstorms had formed from northern Wisconsin all the way south to eastern Texas, and no planes flying west would be able to take off, nor were any planes landing that were coming from the west. We were in a holding pattern on the ground.

After another ten minutes, the captain announced that there was no change, and he had no idea how long we might be delayed. Since we were in a line of planes, there was no way we could taxi back to the terminal. He also said that he would be stopping the engines to conserve fuel. After almost three hours, the captain announced that the aircraft first in line, a kind of "scout" plane, would radio back if it were now possible to fly over the storm or around it. If not, the "scout" plane would return to O'Hare. After another 15 minutes, the "scout" plane gave the control tower the news that it was okay to fly west. We had been delayed in a ground holding pattern for more than three hours. I also remembered other times when I had been in a holding pattern in the air, waiting for the proper time to land.

These are holding patterns not chosen by us, but we are in them for our safety and the safety of other aircraft and passengers. We can become irritated and impatient, yet we know there's nothing we can do about it, and it's for our own good.

As we sat there, while reading a book I had brought along, it occurred to me that being placed into a "holding pattern" is a useful metaphor because life itself brings its holding patterns. Some of them we choose, and others are thrust upon us. And especially if we think of life as a journey, then a holding pattern is a very suggestive metaphor, as are detours. You may recall that I talked about life's detours some weeks back.

Here are several examples of life's holding patterns from the Bible. After Mary had her encounter with God and was told that she would be the mother of the Messiah, the announcement and the pregnancy were such surprises that she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant, and she spent several months there as she pondered what all of this would mean on her life's journey.

Take, as another example, the life of Jesus. Following his baptism by John in the Jordan River, he had a vision of what God wanted him to do with the rest of his life. And then he went into a kind of holding pattern in the wilderness. The Bible says, "The Spirit immediately led Jesus out into the wilderness for 40 days."

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 was led into a holding pattern where he could think things out and consider the challenges his ministry would offer.

Later in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul describes a similar kind of holding pattern. He wrote that following his conversion and before he began his active public ministry, he entered a holding pattern. He went away for a time to figure things out. Paul was starting on an entirely new career, and he knew almost nothing anymore would be the same.

One of my favorite examples of a holding pattern in the Bible is found in the book of Revelation. Some of the Christian martyrs, people who had died for their faith, are now with God and in a holding pattern which they did not like. They are impatient. They thought God was delaying too long in taking action to purge those who opposed God. To them, God worked much too slowly. But God tells them to rest a little longer, to be patient, and wait. As I said last week, “The wheels of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.”

Our lives also have their holding patterns, some of which we choose and others which we do not choose. But we all know the feeling of waiting or circling, the feeling that we are making no progress at all. And we have to be careful so that we do not leave the holding pattern too soon or stay in it too long. Here are some examples of life’s holding patterns.

An individual who loses his or her job can be put into a holding pattern. It can be a time for taking stock of oneself, a time for a period of reassessment. When will we take off, or when or where will we land as we continue on our life’s journey?

Illness or extreme fatigue can put us into a holding pattern. Often illness occurs because we have not been pacing ourselves, but have been running in all directions without much focus and not taking enough time for rest and spiritual renewal. Finally, in desperation, our body in effect says to us, “Stop, rest.” And the illness that comes over us puts us to bed, puts us into a holding pattern whether we like it or not.

Through the years, I’ve talked with dozens of people who have experienced heart attacks and later recovered. Almost all of them have said in one way or another that the holding pattern caused by their illness also made them rethink the direction, pace, and focus of their lives.

Grief, brought on by the death of a spouse, parent, child, or some other person very close to us, can put us into a holding pattern. As we work through our grief, there’s nothing we can do but wait in the same way that an airplane is in a holding pattern before it can finally land.

In fact, the experts in grief therapy tell us that it is necessary for us to be in a holding pattern following the death of a loved one and therefore make no major decisions for at least a year if possible. The healing process of grief is something that cannot be hurried. It takes its own time. 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. Some drop out of college and seem to drift for a time. And for those of us who are observing the young person, it can be difficult. The young person seems to be making no progress. And it’s true. He or she is in a holding pattern which is many times necessary so that an appropriate and safe landing can be made; or in the case of a ground holding pattern, so

that a safe take-off can be made. A holding pattern is preferred to a crash landing. In our adult working life also, we may find ourselves circling with little progress being made.

What guidance does our Christian faith give us as we experience life's holding patterns?

First, our faith, illustrated by the life and ministry of Jesus, underscores the fact that many of life's holding patterns are necessary and useful. There are times in all of our lives when we have to circle for a while with patience. As in air travel, many of life's holding patterns are there for our protection. The problem is that some of us do not always pay attention when necessary to the signal from the control tower which tells us to go into a holding pattern. So a heart attack comes, or some other illness, and we are forced into a holding pattern which is not as pleasant as the signals earlier.
In a remarkable 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 that are contrary to the basic rules of healthy 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 can be forced into one, or worse still, sometimes make a crash landing and die.

This is not to say that a life directed by God will be free from fatigue. Jesus knew fatigue, as have many other faithful people. Fatigue is a strong message that it's time to rest.

Jesus, as revealed in the New Testament, 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 institution of the Sabbath, a day of rest each week, was that it is to be a kind of holding pattern, one of life's resting places. An annual vacation can serve the same purpose. Most of life's holding patterns are our friends, not our enemies.

Secondly, our Christian faith, in the same way as good air traffic control, 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 it's all right to land. If the pilot takes off too soon, disaster can result.
In the same way, we are not to panic when we are in a holding pattern or when one of our close friends or one of our children is in a holding pattern. It takes time for some things to work out. There are some things in life that cannot be forced.

Healing in illness can be encouraged and aided but 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 things in our lives. In the familiar parable of the prodigal son, which Jesus told, there was nothing the father could do to hurry the process of the son coming to his senses. He had to wait it out and then be ready to welcome his son back home 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 player 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."

Of course, like an airplane, none of us can stay in a holding pattern forever. We have to take off or land at some point. We may need to play the part of the person in the control tower and say to ourselves or to someone else, “It’s all clear. You can come out of your holding pattern now and 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 bed and be on your way.” We cannot always see the signals ourselves. Sometimes others have to give us the message.

A third aspect of holding patterns is that they can be used as a time for gaining strength and new direction, and for learning something new. This is what Jesus did when he went into the wilderness. He used the time to think things out, to learn more about himself and about God. When I travel by air, I always have several books with me that I want to read. That way, I can make good use of the holding patterns when they occur. Jesus took with him into his holding pattern a deep knowledge of the scriptures so that when he was tempted, that spiritual resource pulled him through.

In Biblical stories, the desert or wilderness often represents a place for holding patterns to occur. Not only did Jesus go into the wilderness, but when Elijah was discouraged to the point of wanting to die, he went into the wilderness. There he sought and found a renewed sense of the power of God in his life.

In other words, not only can we gain strength in holding patterns, but it is frequently in life’s holding patterns that we become more aware of God, who has been traveling with us all along.

As we have seen, in the journey of life, some holding patterns are thrust upon us, and we have no choice but to be in them. But there are also times when we need to consciously choose to be in a holding pattern.

In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes, there’s that famous passage 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 is planted.”

Andy Rooney gave his own version: Here’s part of what he wrote: “There’s a time to travel and a time to stay home and not go anywhere at all. There’s a time to gather worldly goods and a time to clean out the basement and the garage and throw stuff away. There’s a time for exercise and a time for lying down and taking a little nap. 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 a proper sense of timing is a big help in dealing with life’s holding patterns. Welcome the holding patterns. 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.