Palm Sunday, April 4, 2004
LIFE DOESN'T STOP
Luke 19:28-40

"STOP THE WORLD, I WANT TO GET OFF" is the title of a hit Broadway musical that opened on October 3, 1962, at the Shubert Theatre and ran for 555 performances. Later, a movie version appeared, which produced a number of Academy Award nominations. In the story, the main character named "Littlechap" rises in the world of business and politics and ends his days ruminating about his misspent life.

Chances are you've wished at times that life could be stopped so that you could start over again, especially when you felt your life was misspent or something was taking place that you didn't agree with, and you wished you had the power to stop it.

The opposite is also true. When your life reached a peak, and everything was as good as you ever imagined it could be, you wanted life to stop so you could hold on to and continue to enjoy your good fortune or the ecstasy. When Peter, James, and John were on the mountaintop with Jesus and had an overwhelming religious experience, Peter wanted to stop the world and remain there forever. But life doesn't stop. Jesus took them back down the mountain into the valley, and they continued on their way.

On that first Palm Sunday, he was welcomed by the people along the way as their hero. Many of them actually believed he would seize power, real power, and throw out the Roman occupiers. They thought he would lead a revolution that would return Israel to the glory of David's and Solomon's grand era. They "began to praise God joyfully," Luke tells us, "for all the deeds of power they had seen."

The religious authorities didn't appreciate what they were witnessing. They didn't want any changes in the status quo. They didn't want to lose their power, so they said to Jesus, "Order your disciples to stop." He replied, "I tell you, if these people were silent, the very stones would shout out."

You can imagine these authorities saying to themselves, "Stop the world and get off." Life in this world is continuous and flowing. You never come to any gaps in life, nor can you create gaps. Life flows on like a river. A wall or a fence can have a gap in it. A river cannot. A liquid flows continuously with no gaps. And so it is with God's creation; there are no gaps. Nowhere does creation stand still. Whether you like it or not, the "life-world" simply is restless and ever-changing. Nowhere can you get off and rest awhile and then go on again from where you left off at your leisure. If you step out of a flowing stream, you cannot step back into the same water. It has continued flowing past you. If you become tired of life and lazy, and allow yourself to drop out for a while, you will very soon be heard complaining, and in death you certainly do so; but life does not stop. It goes on.

Jesus was reminding people then and now that the working of God for the good cannot be stopped. Wise people have always known this. There's a brief story in the book of Acts in the New Testament that illustrates this. Following Easter, when the followers of Jesus continued to experience the power of the Spirit of Jesus working in and among them, some of the religious authorities in Jerusalem decided it was time to stop this new movement. Peter and John were arrested. The religious authorities gave them strict orders not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

Once more they were warned not to proclaim this new message of God's unconditional love. A debate took place in the council of the religious leaders on the issue of what to do with these bold apostles. Some of the council members strongly urged that they be killed. But a wise Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law and widely respected, offered this wise advice:

"Consider carefully what you propose to do with these men. Remember some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody and a number of men, about four hundred joined him; but he was killed and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him, Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him. He also perished and all who followed him were scattered. So in this present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case, you may even be found to be fighting against God." A quick summary of his argument is this: if it is of God, you cannot stop it. If it isn't, it will die anyway.

That's in essence what Jesus was saying with his statement, "I tell you, if these people were silent, the stones would shout out." Life doesn't stop. There are workings of God in the world that cannot be stopped by any of our human schemes and efforts. Jesus was crucified, but that didn't stop the religious reform movement he began.

These movements of God are present not only in religious circles, but in political systems, scientific discoveries, and human relationships. The church and other powers tried to silence Copernicus and Galileo with their new discoveries about the nature of the universe. The church wanted to halt the spread of new knowledge because it challenged many of its basic assumptions about how the universe worked. But it was to no avail. Still today, there are parts of the church that continue to try to stop the teaching of evolution in public education. There are religious groups and individuals who resist new scientific knowledge about the origin of life and how it came to be. Other sincerely religious people continue to try to ban certain kinds of scientific research by passing laws against it.

Life doesn't stop. God has built it into creation. It goes on. Take the animal world as an example. Zoologists have long recognized the importance of what they call "appetitive behavior," which is the living animal's busy ferreting about, seeking, exploring, casting around — behavior by which it continuously explores its environment, looks out for food or a mate, and finds the best places to shelter and rest in. Appetitive behavior is found in animals of all kinds, from protozoa to primates, and the advantages are obvious. In order to optimize its environment thoroughly and continuously, discovering and learning which bits are rewarding and which dangerous, life doesn't stop.

It is also a general principle in physiology that a stimulus repeated without change provokes less and less response. The animal becomes numbed. For its senses to remain fresh and alert, and itself keyed-up, an animal needs to seek and to enjoy novel stimuli.

The same is true for human beings. You don't want the same thing every day. To keep yourself and your senses sharp, you need change, and that includes not only changes in fashion, design, or cooking. There is also a continual quest in popular language for clever and appealing new descriptive words and phrases.

Meister Eckhart, the religious mystic, noted the somewhat puzzling and fascinating fact that life lives by and for its own ceaseless, up-welling joy in itself. Life is impelled by the joy of life, the rage for life. In this drive for joy in life, he discovered God's presence.

Life doesn't stop. "If these were silent, the stones would shout out." Because human beings are created in God's image, human minds are by nature curious. New discoveries will continue to be made in all fields of knowledge. You can guide these changes and do your best to see that the results of new research are used for positive improvements, or you can resist the changes, and they will occur anyway but without guidance and direction. The discovery of atomic energy is a good example. There is no way that discovery by scientists all around the world could've been halted.

The same is true of new knowledge in the field of medicine. Historians of medicine have demonstrated that almost every advance in medicine was opposed by many of those in charge. For example, when the theory of the circulation of blood throughout the bodies of animals and human beings was proposed and solid evidence was presented, that theory was not only disputed but made fun of. Fortunately, the researchers persisted, even though persecuted, and the discovery prevailed.

Ignaz Semmelweis, who argued that physicians should wash their hands before attending to women in childbirth, was dismissed from his hospital appointment and ended up in a mental institution. In the long run, there is no way to stop people from thinking new thoughts and making new discoveries, and many of these will call into question your old assumptions.

Also, in the long run, movements that work for greater justice for all will win. Take the field of civil rights, for example. There were many good church people who supported slavery and fought every proposal for equal rights, including the right for former slaves to vote and own property. People who were for civil rights were told to be quiet, to quit meddling, to go home. The words of Jesus fit here—"I tell you if these were silent, the very stones would shout out," and they did.

The same is true in the movements for equal rights for women. Many opposed it. But it happened anyway and is still going on. Every great movement for greater justice throughout human history has had its strong and violent opposition, but in the long run, the movements for justice win. Why? Because, "If these were silent, the very stones would shout out."

It's a difficult lesson to learn in the heat of the moment. Who would have bet on the Christians when they huddled in the middle of Circus Maximus with 100,000 screaming citizens of Rome wanting their martyrdom? Who would have bet on the monks when the Vikings invaded, raped, and killed everyone? Who would've bet on a gentle German pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer instead of the regime that called itself, "The Thousand Year Reich?"

"How many divisions does the Pope have?" the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin asked when he was planning to attack the church. Who would bet on Gandhi and not the British Empire, or Martin Luther King Jr., and not Bull Connor, or Orville Faubus, or the Alabama National Guard?

You can't kill enough Christians in Rome to overcome the strange power of love. You can't execute enough Christian protesters, you can't jail enough Civil Rights demonstrators, to overcome the power of justice, which is a form of love.

This Friday, which we Christians call “Good Friday,” we will once again remember the death of Jesus on the cross. His suffering and death and its ultimate meaning still remain a mystery for me and perhaps for you. But I do know this: for me, Jesus is God’s complete self-giving and self-emptying love. His death on the cross is God’s ultimate identification with us, even in our suffering and dying. Jesus is the demonstration of God’s love and the extent to which God will go to show that love.

I believe that love which gave life away is the best thing that anyone ever did for me and for you. I also know that because of that love, life doesn’t stop. Amen.