Palm Sunday, March 20, 2005
A CITY IN TURMOIL
Matthew 21:1-11

The story of the first Palm Sunday, according to the gospel named Matthew, contains this revealing statement: “When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil.” Why? Because he had become a controversial individual. What a relief it would have been if they had not had to confront him. The religious and secular leaders of the city did not want to accept him. On the other hand, they did not want to crucify him. If only they could have avoided the issue and done nothing. What a relief that would have been.

I remember vividly, as do many of you, those times in the 1960s when the civil rights movement was at its height. Whenever Martin Luther King Jr. would be leading a non-violent protest against segregated lunch counters, schools, or the right to register to vote, that town or city would be in turmoil. The people who lived there would have preferred to avoid the issue. No one likes to be forced into making a decision or choosing sides. It’s easier to keep things as they are. So it is that people resent life’s forced decisions and the people who force them.

I served my first parish on the south side of Chicago in the late 1950s and 1960s. These were the times of the movement for civil rights, as I mentioned. Many people in our little congregation were, in theory, in favor of equal rights for all people. They believed any minority group ought to have the right to buy a house and live where they wanted. But when Black families began moving in next door, some people decided otherwise. Life had forced a decision that demanded more than theory or opinion. Then they discovered what they truly believed. Like Jesus entering Jerusalem, some people said, “Why don’t these people stay away? Why do they want to move into my neighborhood? The timing is bad. It would be better if they waited until attitudes changed.”

People who force our decisions are often branded as troublemakers or outsiders who don’t understand. If there had been a daily newspaper in Jerusalem, you can imagine what the editorials or columnists might have written when they discovered Jesus’ plan to enter Jerusalem.

“We consider the visit of Jesus of Nazareth to Jerusalem at this time of the year to be unfortunate at best. These are tense times, and feelings are running high on the left and on the right. The appearance in a tense and crowded city of his kind of self-styled leader 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 rethink the timing of his visit.”

Or you might read something like this: “This newspaper joins with leaders and law enforcement personnel in looking with grave concern at the spectacle which we were 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 city is on edge, and there seems to be an over-reaction to everything. We hope the authorities will be working out some plan for effectively dealing with this troublemaker.”

The city was in turmoil. If only it could be avoided. Whether or not the timing is right is not the issue. There are always decisions that cannot be avoided, no matter what time they are

presented. When you resent the person forcing the issue, you are really resenting the wrong person. What you don't like is that your true self is being revealed.

Most people have the tendency to be escapists. You want to stay away from difficult decisions. That's understandable because decision-making is the hardest work in the world. Neutrality is easier. Do you suppose that's one reason so many young people live together and put off getting married? Marriage, in the best sense, involves a decision, which is a lifetime public commitment.

Most of the serious questions you face in life demand a decision. You have to decide one way or another. Imagine you are in a rowboat going down a powerful stream and debating whether or not to stop at a certain point. There could 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 for your decision. It will have decided for you. You will continue downstream.

Here's an example for the young people who are hearing this sermon. Before you graduate from high school or sometime after that, you will need to decide what you are going to do with the next segment of your life. Will you attend college or not? If you decide you want more education, which college will you attend? Even the decision not to make a decision is still a decision. You cannot be neutral. You can change your mind, but you need to decide.

So the city was in turmoil because Palm Sunday and the events that followed dramatize in unforgettable fashion the impossibility of neutrality in the crucial issues of life. When you read in the Bible that Jesus steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, you generally think of what it meant for him, but you also have to consider what it meant for the people in that city. If only he had stayed away. What a relief. Why did they have to face a decision that split the people of the city into two camps? To many people, Jesus was a disturbing nuisance. It was hard to decide to be for him or against him.

Even today, he can be a disturbing figure. His teachings can call into question many of your values and your behavior. He said, "Love your enemies. Blessed are the poor. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Do not be anxious about tomorrow." Would not life be easier if he had never come to challenge you with his teachings?

The city was in turmoil because the people in it had to decide whether to follow the way of Jesus or not. Jesus offered a new way of defining God. He taught the priority of love of God and love of neighbor. Everything else was secondary. He claimed that God loves every individual unconditionally. God loves those people you cannot stand. God accepts people that you find unacceptable.

Watch your own life. Watch any person's life. It will tell you what you or someone else has decided about God.

What is true of Jesus entering Jerusalem and the city being in turmoil because of having to decide for or against him is true in every part of life. There are always new discoveries and personalities that cause turmoil. When Copernicus and then Galileo revealed new truth about the solar system, human beings faced an issue where neutrality was not possible; either the earth circled around the sun with other planets, or the earth was the center of the universe. I am told that in the orthodox Muslim University in Cairo years ago, a professor was asked

which type of astronomy they taught there, Copernican or pre-Copernican, and he answered, “We teach both.” In vain, however, they tried to sit undecided on the fence. It is one or the other — you have to decide. And if you’ve always believed one way, then it can cause you turmoil to consider new evidence.

Jesus revealed eternal truth about God and about human beings. You know this is true because other spirit people before him said some of the same things he did. What is called the “golden rule” was taught by Confucius, the Buddha, and many other spirit people. This fact does not detract from Jesus’ uniqueness and originality. Whenever eternal truth is discovered, the fact that it has been welcomed by many spirit people confirms the revelation.

The city was in turmoil because, in the deepest sense, you cannot be neutral about God. You can be neutral about God in theory but not in practice. As a self-conscious human being, you have an ultimate concern. Everyone does, and whatever you give your life to, that is your God. In other words, every person has his or her God. You can give your life to money, to lust, to alcohol, to drugs, whatever you choose, and that is your God. Human beings are born worshipers. You are always giving your life to something.

Recently a woman wrote to her minister, “First let me tell you I am an atheist. I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, but that no longer has any meaning for me. Yet I continue to search for meaning and purpose in my life. Not too long ago this search for meaning led me to a kind of secular materialism, but now I’ve found that to be empty. What are your suggestions?”

I don’t see being an atheist as anything different from a religious claim. An atheist seems to me to be saying, “The God I meet in organized religion is simply not big enough to be God in the world I now inhabit.” Since you have yet to find a different understanding of God, you have rejected the only God who has been presented to you. No one fully knows who God is or what God is. All any of us know is how we believe we have experienced God. I hope you will continue your search for meaning as a journey without end, a walk into the mystery of God. Because the God you have encountered in some forms of Christianity is too small does not mean there is no God.

Hitler said, “We want no god but Germany.” What a dangerous statement. Human beings are tempted to serve destructive deities whose worship is the menace of the world. No one can be neutral on the God-question. You can choose the God Jesus revealed or some other. That’s why the city of Jerusalem was in turmoil. Not to choose is to choose.

This Palm Sunday theme is especially for young people. You will discover, as many of you already have, that your life is filled with crucial decisions. You’ve got to make choices. As you mature, there are more and more decisions to make. Trying not to choose is the biggest mistake of all. You will always be tempted to find some safe neutrality to which you might escape, but in the end, you will either accept the way of Jesus or not. Even though you will not always use his name in making your decision, you are having to choose whether you are for or against the kind of life he stood for and lived. Every day you will be choosing whether or not to love your neighbor as yourself and whether or not to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

The city was in turmoil. The turmoil is repeated regularly in every person’s life. Difficult decisions are not once-and-for-all events. They have to be made over and over again on the major issues of life. On that Palm Sunday, many in the crowd made a decision to follow the

way of Jesus. They hailed him as their Lord. However, for many of those people, that decision didn't last very long. After several days passed, everything changed. People who decided for him now decided against him. What a difference between that Palm Sunday crowd and the Good Friday crowd. People who had welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem were now shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" The big decisions in life need to be reaffirmed over and over again.

The city was in turmoil. Jesus can be a troublesome person as well as a gentle Savior. If you make the decision to follow the way of Jesus and keep reaffirming it even when it is troublesome, you will have made the right decision. Then you will know that life is good, and you will be happy now. Amen.