

Sermon for Sunday, December 10, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"CAN YOU BET YOUR LIFE ON BETHLEHEM"

St. Matthew 11:2-15

Text: "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" St. Matthew 11:2 and 3

The birth of both boys had been announced by angels. One was the son of a Jewish priest and he was to become known as John the Baptist. The other was the son of a carpenter and he was to become known as Jesus of Nazareth. Interestingly enough, they were cousins and since they were born only a few months apart, we may assume that as children they often played together, or at least that their families sometimes visited together. But as the boys grew up, it was apparent to everyone that John was different. He must have been quiet and contemplative and perhaps some thought of him as a "loner." Then one day he just walked off into the desert. He needed the quietness of the wilderness to give him time to think. Out there alone the star-studded skies of night must have drawn his thought to God; the solitude and loneliness kept him from being distracted as he struggled inwardly to understand about God, about his purposes, about his plan for mankind. And out there in the desert, living off the locust and wild honey he found and dressing himself in skins of the desert animals when his clothes wore out, he wrestled to understand his own role in God's big plan. As he prayed and contemplated, things must have fallen into a pattern for him. As the kids would say, "He got it all together." It was then that he came back from the desert.

But the man who came back was not the man who had gone out. Now his eyes flashed with certainty, his face reflected surety, his voice rang with authority. The Bible says of him, "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, 'Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Someone has jokingly said, "When the church is on fire for God, the whole world will come to see it burn." John was a man on fire with his message and the Bible says that from all Judea they came to hear him. He must have sounded like a backwoods preacher at a tent meeting preaching hell-fire and brimstone! "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits that befit repentance!" He said, "The axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the Bible says, "(they) were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins."

But, as we read in our scripture this morning, John found himself suddenly cast into prison. He had made the mistake of publically chastising the King for immorality. And after awhile, there in the dark dungeon of Machaerus, John's certainty began to waver. He sent a message to his cousin Jesus with an urgent question, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Evershime, in his classical book, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, writes of John, "terrible questions rose in that dark dungeon. Like serpents they crept out of its walls, they would uncoil and raise their heads with horrible hissings. What if, after all, there had been some terrible mistake on his part." Yes, from the dungeon came that agonizing question, "Can I bet my life on Bethlehem, or do we look for another?"

It was John, you will remember, who had first singled Jesus out as the Messiah. When people, deeply impressed by John, had asked him if he were the Christ he had replied, "I am not." And then he added, "I baptize with water but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." Then, in a sort of dramatic climax, he had pointed his finger at Jesus and announced to the world, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes

away the sin of the world!" But those were different days; he had been a different man; circumstances now were vastly different. So it was that from the dungeon came that agonizing question, "Was I right to bet my life on Bethlehem or do we look for another?"

As we face the Advent season in which we look forward to the celebration of Jesus, each new Christmas forces on us that same question, "Can I bet my life on Bethlehem?" You see, life never stands still. We are not the same people we were a year ago. Life has brought new experiences, new circumstances to us. In a real sense, we are new--or at least different--persons. Is the Christ of last year--is the old faith of a time now past--adequate for today? Maybe Jesus was adequate when we were a child and were naive--or maybe Jesus was adequate for grandmother and granddaddy when life and times were simpler. But because life and circumstances and needs and demands have changed can Jesus meet today's needs and today's problems? Can we still bet our lives on Bethlehem? Let me illustrate. Here is a family for whom Jesus is adequate one year. But, by the passing of another year the husband has announced that he is in love with someone else and is already divorced and remarried. Is Jesus still adequate in these radically changed circumstances? Or take my own family situation. Life for us is by no means the same as it was a year ago as Elizabeth has had to progress to more radical chemotherapy. In our changed situation, is Jesus still adequate, can we still bet our lives on Bethlehem?

For John the Baptist this was the same situation. From the depths of his prison life was radically different and he was confronted by the same question that each of us must answer over and over as life moves on and changes, the question, "Was I wrong about Jesus, can I still bet my life on Bethlehem?" As the Christmas season draws nearer and our attention is brought once again into focus on the manger scene, that old-new question must be answered by each of us again and again, "Can I bet my life on Bethlehem."

But there was a second question in the heart of John when he sent his messengers to Jesus. Incarcerated in some dank and musty cell, with the threat of imminent death hovering over him, John had to ask himself, "Is it worth it?" In happier days he had cried out, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.'" He cried out as he quoted Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And even now he was in the Machaerus dungeon because he had called a spade a spade when the king himself had violated the laws of God. And his reward? He was cast into prison to await execution and there was none who seemed to care. So there--with the long dark hours in which to think and reflect and meditate--he had to ask himself, "If I bet my life on Bethlehem, is it really worth it? Do I dare to pay the price of such a bet when the stakes are my life?"

And isn't this the question Christmas forces on us? You see, Bethlehem doesn't happen in a vacuum. Bethlehem comes with all sorts of implications and strings attached. The bet we place is our lives. Bethlehem comes with the words, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Bethlehem comes with the string attached, "If any man love father or mother more than me, he cannot be my disciple." It comes with, "no man can serve two masters." It comes with, "This I command you, that you love one another." Yes, Bethlehem comes with strings attached. And when you bet your life on Bethlehem, you have to gather up all those strings.

And what sort of rewards are there for betting one's life on Bethlehem? Jesus makes

no promises at all. He only says, "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you." And betting one's life on Bethlehem may often mean only the clang of the metallic door of some dungeon of the soul, locking us in some inner prison of personal suffering and private sorrow with no one to help or who seems to care. Yes, betting one's life on Bethlehem demands sacrifice and self-denial and giving up certain freedoms and experiencing certain suffering for our faith. Like John, it is only natural that we ask ourselves, "Is betting life on Bethlehem worth the cost?"

Yes, is it worth the cost? I cannot make that decision for you nor can anyone else. It is a decision each person must make for himself. I can only tell you that men like St. Paul thought it was worthwhile. He once wrote, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed." I can only tell you that Jesus himself thought it was worthwhile. Out there in the garden of Gethsemane he knelt and prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." And he arose from his knees to go and pay the price of betting his life on Bethlehem. I can only tell you that for my family and me it has been more than worthwhile. Whatever deprivation, whatever sacrifice, whatever suffering our ministry has brought and whatever the future might hold, we have bet our lives on Bethlehem and for us we have discovered that it is more than worthwhile.

When John the Baptist sent his message from prison he had two questions in his heart, "Can I bet my life on Bethlehem and if I do, is it worthwhile?" Jesus could not answer that question for John directly. It was a decision John had to make for himself. He would not open prison doors for John or even stay the sweep of the sword when it fell across John's neck. But he did say two things to John in reply. First, he said: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." In effect he said, "John, if this is what you are looking for, you can bet your life on Bethlehem." And then, perhaps as an after-thought, Jesus said to John's messengers, "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me." In other words, he said to John, "John, if you dare to pay the price, you will find it worth far more than the cost for you will be blessed."

Those words were all that John needed. Whatever doubts or misgivings he had were wiped away. And when the time came, he marched out to die with his head held high. He was betting his life on Bethlehem. The words of Jesus stand as a sort of monument to him, "I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist...."

John's two questions are questions we, too, must ask as Christmas comes again. Can we bet our lives on Bethlehem? That is, Is Jesus still the Son of God for us when life has changed, we have changed, circumstances have changed? And even if he is, is the price worth paying, is the cost worthwhile? No one can answer the question for you--each of us must place his own bet on Bethlehem. The decision to bet your life on Bethlehem is a decision of the heart--a decision each must make for himself. As you make your decision, I can only remind you of the words of Jesus to John, "Blessed is he who takes no offense at me."