

Sermon for Sunday, December 4, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"WHEN YOU BET YOUR LIFE ON JESUS--AND LOSE!"

Text: "Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of 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 11:2,3

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 may have 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 introspective. Some probably thought him 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 sky of night must have drawn his thoughts 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 became tattered, 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 put it, "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 surity, 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?" He thundered, "bear fruits that befit repentance!" He said, "The ax 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 a while, 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?" Edersheim, in his classical book, The Life and Time 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 Jesus, or am I really looking for something else?"

Have you ever felt that way? I know I have. I think there come those times in life for all of us when things don't turn out as we had hoped or prayed. Then we begin to wonder, "Is Jesus really the answer?" Just the other day I had a young person in my office with a desperate problem. "I have prayed and prayed," she said, "but I just don't know if I can even believe in God any more." No, life was not working out as she had hoped or planned and now she was wondering with John, "Is Jesus really the one."

As we face the Advent season in which we once more look forward to the coming of the birth of Jesus, each new Christmas forces on us that same question, "Can I bet my life on Jesus?" You see, life never stands still. We are not the same people we were a year ago, life is not the same as it was 12 months ago. New experiences have come to us, our circumstances are not quite the same as they were a year ago. And in a very real sense, we are different persons with different situations. Is the Jesus of last year--is the faith we had in times past--still adequate for today? Maybe Jesus was adequate when we were children--or maybe Jesus was adequate for grandmother and granddad when life and times were simpler. But as life and times change, is yesterday's faith, yesterday's Jesus, able to meet our needs today? Yesterday things were going well and Jesus was adequate. But today there is a death--or bad news from the doctor--or a child gone wrong--or a marriage breaking up--or a relationship coming apart--and is Jesus still adequate from those dungeons?

Wasn't this John's problem? From the depths of his prison, life was radically different and he was confronted by the same question we face when life, when circumstances, change. "Was I wrong about Jesus? Can I bet my life on him?"

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, "If I bet my life and lose, 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 of Abraham.'" Back then things had been going well and the people had responded to him as he spoke the truth of God. But now he was in a Machærus dungeon because he had called a spade a spade when the king himself had violated the laws of God. And his reward? He was in prison awaiting execution and nobody seemed to care. He had bet and lost. So there--in the long dark hours in which to think and reflect and mediate--he had to ask himself, "If I bet my life on Jesus, is it really worthy the price I am paying?"

That's a good question, isn't it? Is betting your life on Jesus worth it when you lose? You see, Jesus doesn't come into our lives in a vacuum. He comes with all sorts of implications. Jesus says, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me". And is following him worth that cross? Jesus says, "If any man love father or mother more than me, he cannot be my disciple." And is it worth it? Jesus says, "No man can serve two masters." He says, "This I command you that you love another." Yes, Jesus has some strings attached to him. And if you bet your life on him, you have to take the strings too--is it worth it?

Well, surely if you bet your life on Jesus with all those strings, you certainly get rewarded! Isn't that the case? And the answer is no. Jesus makes no promises at all. Instead, he says, "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you." And just because we believe in Jesus and in that sense bet our lives on him, doesn't mean it doesn't cost. No, we don't escape the dungeons of life just because we believe in Jesus.

I wish you could walk with me down the aisles when I follow the choir in. Some of you may have noticed me reach over to touch someone, or to squeeze a hand, or hug somebody as I go by, or lean over to say something. Here is a young couple, both divorced, now trying to make a new marriage work and I touch them and say, "God bless" because I know they are trying. Or here is a man who has had open heart surgery and his even being here is an act of God. His wife standing by him probably never has a waking moment but that in the back of her mind she is thinking about him so I squeeze her hand as I go by and I say, "I love you."

Then comes a distinguished gentleman who is a little older than most people realize and he is standing tall and straight. But his wife is gone and he is terribly lonely, so I touch his arm as I go by. Then comes a lady with discouragement on her face. Her husband has died, she has had to sell her condominium. Her financial problems are intensified by her grieving. Then a couple--I pat them on the shoulder as I go by--I married them some years ago. Then one day we buried her daughter because in a fit of depression at college she took her own life. So it goes--pew after pew--I stop at this pew and hug the small lady standing there and whisper to her. Those around don't know that she is struggling to keep from crying. Her young son died suddenly from a congenital heart problem and she is having trouble getting over it and I say, "I love you. Hang in there." A couple are having marital problems, I touch them as I go by--I reach out and punch a young boy on the shoulder--it says "hey, we are friends, I like you." Not many know he has had a great tragedy in his young life. S

So, does betting your life on Jesus exempt you from trouble? And the answer is no. Is it worth it? I cannot make that decision for you and neither can anyone else. You have to make it for yourself. I can only tell you that those people I mentioned think it is worth it. That's why they are here this morning. I can only tell you that St. Paul thought it was worth it. 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 for me it has been worth it. For whatever tragedies have moved in and out of my life, whatever struggles there have been, it has been 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 Jesus," and, "if I do, is it worth it?" Jesus sent back two answers to John. 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 the good news preached to them." In effect he said, "Tell John that I am reaching out to touch lives at the point of need. Tell him that I am ministering to those who hurt and he can bet his life on me." Second, he said to the messengers, "Tell John this: 'blessed is he who takes no offense at me.'" In other words, "John, you are asking if it is worth the price, if it is worth what it costs to be my disciple when you bet your life on me and lose. I can only tell you that if you follow me to the end, 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 calm assurance and courage. He had bet his life on Jesus and he knew that whatever the price, it was worth it. The words of Jesus are 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..."

As Christmas is coming again, we must ask the same two questions that John asked, "Can I bet my life on Jesus--and if I do and lose is it worth it?" That is, when life changes, when circumstances are different, when our situations seem more difficult, can we bet our lives on Jesus? And even more, is it worth the price? No one can answer that question for you. Each must place his own bet on Jesus. It is a decision you must make in your own heart. How are you deciding? 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."