

“God is Betting on You!”

The date: December 1983. The place: Phoenix, Arizona. I was visiting a friend of mine with an unhealthy obsession. I didn't want any part of the madness, but he dragged me along. And so I found myself spending the evening at Phoenix Greyhound Park. Yes, we went to the dog track. I must have had a sheltered upbringing, because I had no idea people really went to dog races. The only place I'd ever heard of such a thing was in an old Bugs Bunny Cartoon, and I thought it was just a joke. Yet, the races did exist, and they still do, much to the detriment of the animals involved. At the time, I knew little of such things. What I did know was that my friend liked to think he could pick a winner (I believe the term for it is handicapping) and that he had a system for selecting the dogs on which he'd bet his money. When he thought he'd found a sure winner, he'd place a big bet. When he was less certain, he'd place a smaller bet. Perhaps you can guess what happened. He won a little money. And then he lost a lot of money. The truth is that no matter what system you use, there is no way you can predict with certainty what will happen. This is true for the dog track, for horse races, and for any other form of gambling. It's also true for life itself. We cannot know the future. We make our best guesses, and then invest our lives in those things that seem likely to produce the best results. But we never know for sure how our lives will turn out until we reach the end – at which point, of course, you can't change your bets.

What are you betting your life on? That is, in what things do you invest your time, energy, affection and resources? Is there anything for which you'd risk it all, or do you perhaps prefer a small wager – holding back from completely giving yourself to any one thing? Maybe you've never thought of it in terms of betting, but we all make choices about the things to which we dedicate our lives, and we all do so as a matter of faith. We stake the outcome of our lives on the choices we have made, based not on absolute knowledge of the future, but on the faith that we are making the right decisions. It's kind of sobering to think about, isn't it?

But here we are at worship on Christmas Eve. And you may be wondering what relevance, if any, the story of Jesus' birth has for our daily lives and the important choices we make. Well, here it is, so take note...Write it in your bulletin in capital letters, underline it and put some exclamation points after it; text or twitter it to your friends, post it as your Facebook status...No matter what you bet your life on; no matter how much you succeed or how badly you fail; this much is certain: God is betting on you! God has placed you on this earth, trusting that your life will be a good thing; trusting that you will learn and grow, and become a caring, loving human being who is a blessing to others; trusting that you will discover, in the midst of all your diverse experiences, the presence and reality of the God who made you and who loves you more than words can say; trusting that you will, eventually, chose to accept God's grace and mercy as revealed in Jesus Christ, and that you will invest your life in God's purposes, following the path of Jesus so that you come to truly reflect the image of God in which you have been created. This is God's wager....this is God's bet...that in the end, you will find fulfillment as a child of God and that you will glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Perhaps this makes you feel a little nervous. This is a pretty big expectation for anyone to fulfill. How can we ever hope to justify God's faith in us? How can we do anything but

fail? But be at peace. In contrast to our feeble attempts to guess the future, God knows the end from the beginning. God isn't guessing about what will become of us. God knows...I repeat...KNOWS what will become of you. And God is still betting on you!

How can we know this? How can we be sure? Well, consider how we make our choices. We make our biggest investments in those things we have the most certainty about; we place our biggest bets on those things that we regard as a sure thing. And what has God laid on the line for us? Has God made a small investment? A timid, tiny wager? Hardly. The message of Christmas is this – that God has come to earth to live among us, to live as one of us, to teach us, to die for us, and to be raised from the dead so that we also might have eternal life. The Bible tells us that this is what God has done in Jesus Christ; the one called Emmanuel, God with us. There is no greater sign of God's investment in us than this; that God gave God's only Son that we might not perish, but have everlasting life. If ever you are tempted to doubt God's love, or to question God's resolve to be in eternal fellowship with you, remember this: the God who created the universe became a small, helpless, infant – born to poverty and oppression, destined for a short life and brutal death – all for you. God is betting on you!

How can we respond to such an incredible display of love, affection and trust? It all goes back to the choices we make. I asked you earlier, "What are you betting your life on?" If God has so much faith in us, then perhaps you and I might dare to place our faith more fully in God. If we have been devoted to following Jesus and to emulating his character, then let us hold firmly to that course, reaffirmed in our faith and all the more committed to loving God. If we have been going through life with little thought to God's hopes for us, or if we are distracted by things that take us in a different direction, or if we have a different set of priorities altogether; if we have been wagering our lives on lesser things – then let this be a time to change our bets. There is nothing that can bring us greater long-term fulfillment and happiness than a deep, loving relationship with our creator through Jesus Christ. God longs for intimacy with you, and is waiting for you to respond by loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The gospel invitation to us tonight is to commit our lives – our thoughts, desires, hopes, aspirations, efforts and resources – to God. We don't have to understand all the deep mysteries of God or have all our questions resolved – frankly, that won't happen in this lifetime. But it is enough to respond with hope, and trust that God will lead us on the path, and that we will get where we need to be. We don't need to be afraid. Remember, God is betting on you!