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“Hedging Our Bets”

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Acts 17:22-31

It is spring and the welcome April showers have brought us green grass and budding trees. But the real sign of spring in the Triangle, I have come to believe, is the flurry of school assignment letters that come through the mail. We live in Raleigh and our sons attend Wake County Schools, which means that we have just come through the season of school assignments, which began in February. Maybe you have, too. For some of us, this is a season more dreaded than pollen and more anticipated than flowers. Futures dangle in mid-air while the process unfolds. Don't get me wrong: we love our schools and we wholeheartedly support the priorities of our school district, but my heart does beat a little faster when school assignment materials come home in the backpacks. Those papers command the respect usually reserved for tax returns and W-2 forms.

After four years of careful observation I see that there are strategies for getting through this season of school assignments. What they all amount to is called “hedging our bets.” We're trying to spread out the risk, make some commitments but no lasting commitments, until all options are on the table. Then we'll assess the benefits, liabilities and risks. One mother recently explained their highly-developed approach to the middle school assignment: “We've entered the lotteries for three charter schools, applied on-line for two magnet middle schools but not the magnet school that his magnet elementary school feeds into, toured his base school and one private school and then applied for a year-round middle, which we'll only take if he gets track one or track four - but those are the tracks that everyone wants so we'll probably only get offered track two or three - which we wouldn't take.” I am breathless just listening to this roll-out of plans, but I understand every impulse behind every move, because we've done it ourselves.

“Hedging our bets” happens in other arenas. Stock brokers and financial planners know all about minimizing risks for the client. They counsel us on the wisdom of making short-term or long-term obligations. And they teach us how to evaluate investments for the greatest return with the least exposure. Isn’t this really what insurance is all about? At our house we have policies for life, homeowners, auto, disability, dental, medical, travel, malpractice and liability insurance, which may account for the paper cloud that settles in every room of our house. Insurance relies on the notion that we need to secure the future in every way we can, even though experience and scripture tell us that securing the future is neither possible nor desirable, since God’s plan will trump ours every time.

I guess it is human nature to hedge our bets. Maybe we all want to make sure there’s a way out of any commitment we’re unsure of. It happens in small ways: at cocktail parties, where one person talks, all the while scanning the room for someone better to talk with. Some people won’t end a bad relationship until they have a new one on the rise. Whatever happens, we just can’t end up with all of our eggs in one basket.

Hedging our bets goes back a long way. Shakespeare writes about it in the “Merry Wives of Windsor.” John Donne refers to it in one of his letters. And here we see the same strategy at work in Acts 17, when Paul addresses the Greeks at the Areopagus in Athens. Paul knows his audience: they are a high-flying, intellectual crowd. He has wandered their streets and gazed at their temples. And temples abound. But one in particular has caught his attention, and it’s that temple to which he refers in today’s scripture. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way,” he starts. “For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.”

Isn’t this just a little bit odd? An altar. With an inscription “To an unknown god.” Greek culture possesses a long tradition of named deities and spouses of deities and offspring of deities. The gods are very specific and well known. But here stands an altar to an unknown god. Imagine its polished marble. Imagine its prominence in the empire’s most prominent city. Picture the stonemasons at work, the hours of labor, the art and design dedicated to this unnamed, unspecified, inscrutable deity. What could it mean that an altar is built to an unknown god?

I think it means that some rich Athenian in the first century is hedging his bets. Some powerful pagans are hedging their bets. Having spent years attending to Apollo or Zeus or Dionysus, some Athenians are running scared. They’re not quite sure they’ve picked the right gods or sacrificed at the right altars. What if Zeus

isn't in charge after all? What if Apollo isn't listening to my prayers? The sacrifices I've made – were they misplaced? Did I get it all wrong? How will I know? The Athenians are looking for a way out. What they need is some kind of wild card which will lock them in with the right god in case they've guessed wrong in the worship department. When Paul arrives, all of their theological eggs are in one basket, and they're not quite sure of the basket.

I think that hedging our bets has, at its core, a deep-rooted fear. Fear of being left alone in a future that we cannot know and cannot control. Because we are too cautious to make one definitive choice, we offer up tentative commitments to many choices. Every age is a fearful age, though we are tempted to think that our own times are more precarious than others. But countless stories from scripture show us how individuals and nations in every age tried to hedge their bets to save their skins. The Israelites declare their loyalty to Yahweh and build altars to Baal. Abraham passes his wife off as his sister – twice – out of fear for his life. Moses is busy on Mt. Sinai learning “You shall have no other gods before me,” while his brother Aaron builds the golden calf down below. Gospel parables warn against trusting in storehouses of food instead of in God. Fear makes us do all kinds of desperate, regrettable things. Fear makes us build all kinds of idols. Paul knows what the Athenians do not: that in matters of commitment to God, we are – each and all of us -- shoulder to shoulder with the stonemasons, piecing together a patched-up job.

And yet, the good news is we are not left alone with our fears. We are not left kneeling at the altar to an unknown god. For as surely as we stumble in our faith, grasping and groping for God, the God “who made the world and everything in it, the one who is Lord of heaven and earth” surely reaches out to grasp us in Jesus Christ. “We ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone,” writes Paul. “The one who is Lord of heaven and earth does not live in shrines made by human hands...” // Gods of stone remain unattached to their worshipers. Such a god cannot comfort at bedside or grave. Such a god cannot understand the great yearnings of the human heart. Such a god cannot calm the haunting fears of the human heart. Such a god cannot soothe the great sorrows of the human heart. Groping for god, the Athenians feel only the impenetrable coldness of marble or stone.

Writer John Garvey speaks of the unique power of Christ's sacrifice in an article from Commonweal Magazine: “I know of a Greek woman who, as a girl, was imprisoned with other Greeks by the Nazis. When an order to kill a specific number of prisoners was given, [this young girl] was chosen for death. On more than one occasion other prisoners, older women, asked the authorities to allow

them to die in her place, so that this child might have a chance at life. ...she is alive because she was, in fact, died for. Someone had enough compassion, someone was able to empty herself enough for the love of someone else, to die for her. Christianity has insisted that his happened for all of us – and for each of us.”

At its heart, the Christian witness is about commitment and sacrifice. When God sent Christ, the purpose was sacrifice. Jesus’ death and resurrection are not evidence of God quaintly dabbling for a time in the affairs of the world. Instead, they are singular acts of divine intention and consequence. The Greek women in the Nazi concentration camp seized on the power of Christ’s sacrifice, grasped the freedom that it promised, and were inspired to sacrifice for another. This, I believe, is where we are most likely to encounter God. Not in the splendor of idol or temple, but in the rough, raw exchange of one life for another. The God you and I seek will be seen most clearly in the organic grit of our life together, where faithful commitment lifts our human effort to sacred consequence.

Cynthia Jarvis writes “...the life we are given to live - no matter how good or brave or bold – is still a human life. The dark angel of regret would have us live cowering in the corner lest we offend or fall or fail...but it is the forgiveness of sins which offers us, if we but accept it, the little courage we need to live the life we were given to live, to do something brave for God’s sake.”

For the pagans of first century Athens, sacrifices to the gods meant grasping and groping for yet another vague god in the darkness of a fearful world. What was unknown, remained unknown. But we preach Christ crucified, raised from the dead by the one God, ruler of all, who reaches out to us in our darkness and lifts us to a better, fearless world. The same God, who throughout history has bound God’s omnipotent self to us. From Eden forward, the Biblical story is a fairy tale of commitment. While we wander in our faith and hedge our bets every step of the way, God remains faithful still. Unequivocally. Unconditionally. Unreservedly ours. Through Jesus Christ, our grasping and groping is finished, for at last we have been found. Eternally. Amen.