

Sermon for Sunday, December 19, 1971 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"LESSONS FROM THE MANGER"

Text: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman,
born under the law." Galatians 4:4

Now there are many lessons that we could learn from Christmas, but this morning I want to share with you three lessons we can learn from Christmas that I think are particularly important to us in the world in which we live today, and I would like to suggest first of all that one of the most important lessons that you and I can learn from the manger at Bethlehem is the lesson of the wisdom of God. Sometimes when we first join the church or even many years after there is one great fact of our religion that we do not always fully understand or appreciate and it is the wisdom of God. You see the mistake we make is in judging God's wisdom by our wisdom. Whatever problems confront us we usually know of some way that we think things could or should be worked out. Hasn't this been your experience? How often when problems have faced us we've gone to God with a ready made solution knowing just exactly what God ought to do and only asking his blessings and enactments of our ideas. Unfortunately for us things have not always worked out that way. And it is at this very point that we sometimes feel that our religion has failed us. But this is the great lesson of Christmas--the lesson that the wisdom of God is sufficient to meet your needs and my needs and the needs of the whole world--sufficient to meet every problem and every tragedy and every problem that life brings to us, God's wisdom is adequate.

See how it works. Here in our own Southern Presbyterian Church for example, the Church is in turmoil. The liberals have control of the denominational apparatus and are leading our denomination off into what they think is God's will for the Church, and in the process we see the whole denomination dispirited and at cross purposes with one another and the program collapsing upon us. At the other end of the spectrum we see the ultra-conservatives saying we're not going to be a part of that, that isn't God's will for the Church and we're going to go over and start an independent church of our own. And we wonder, you know, what ought God to do--and I think I know what to do--he ought to rip the power out of the hands of the liberals, he ought to rip schism out of the minds and hearts of the conservatives and to put his Church back to doing the things that I think the Church ought to be doing. But that is my wisdom and I have to trust God that what he is doing in the world today is wise--that God is still in control, that God has not given over the governorship of His Church to the liberals or the conservatives or the moderates or anybody else and that God is still working in His Church and in spite of human sin within the Church, He is working out his purposes--that is the wisdom of God.

Or see how it works with the Jews. Picture if you will the little nation of the Jews about the time Jesus was born. At one time these people had been a great nation--they had been a mighty empire under King David and King Solomon. But evil days had befallen them. Their nation had fallen into internal strife and through a bloody civil war had been divided into the northern and the southern kingdoms and through those long bitter years we find the northern kingdom being carried off into captivity and being so assimilated by the pagan environment into which they were carried that they disappeared from the face of the earth as a distinctive group of people and even today we speak of the ten lost tribes of Israel. The other two little tribes, Judah & Benjamin persevered for a little while but finally even this remnant is overcome and carried into captivity and Jerusalem is destroyed. Finally when they come back they come back to wreck and ruin and as the curtain raises on the stage of Bethlehem at

the birth of Jesus we find the Jews under the captivity of the Romans. And had you been in their place, would you not have longed for the king God had promised your people? Would you not long for a leader to whom you could give your loyalty and who would lead your nation to greatness again? Suppose you had been in their place. What sort of a leader would you have prayed for under the circumstance. Remember now, they were captive people--their nation under the bondage to Rome. Remember that their resources had been drained off, their wealth taken in taxation. And what sort of leader would you have prayed for?

First of all, he would have to be a dynamic, charismatic type leader who could win the loyalty of the people and pull them together into a cohesive unity. Second, he would have to be a great military strategist, a great warrior, who could lead his people in revolt and rebellion against Rome and break the shackles of their bondage. And then thirdly, having done those two things, he would have to be a fantastic administrator in order to put the shambles of his nation back together into some semblance of order and make it into a working unit. Now as a matter of fact, that was precisely the kind of man that the Jews were praying for. From their standpoint only such a figure as this could possibly solve their desperate national problems. This was the wisdom of man.

Let's "suppose" for a moment. Suppose they had gotten their wish and had become a great nation? What would have been the result--where would they be today? Well, at the time of Jesus there was a country in that sort of condition, Rome for they ruled the world and if we look at Rome we can get an idea of what might have happened to Israel. Rome had the finest government in history. They ruled the known world and we speak of the pax roma or the peace of Rome. It had the finest armies, the best means of communication but in 300 years after the death of Christ the empire that was Rome was in historical shambles. Has any great nation, any great culture, lived very long? No--not long in terms of the history of the world. That's why it is foolish I suppose for you and me to suppose that our great nation of America and our form of government will last indefinitely. This has not been the history of things. There are those periods of coming to power and prestige and greatness that even at the height of our greatness the seeds for disaster have been planted. This is the wisdom of man.

But see how the wisdom of God deals with the problem of the Jews, with the problem of God's people. It begins in a little town in a remote rural area called Bethlehem with a man called Joseph and a woman called Mary, peasant people, and with a little baby whose name was Jesus. Now that was the wisdom of God. Twenty centuries have come and gone and no other individual and no other event has affected the history of mankind as much as that little babe--that is the wisdom of God. Do you remember how Paul put it in the first chapter of 1st Corinthians? "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debator of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach--and that's Jesus--the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." Or, as one of our hymn writers puts it, "Crowns and thrones may perish, Kingdoms rise and wane, but the Church of Jesus, constant will remain."

Here then, is a great lesson that we can learn from the manger of the Baby Jesus--the lesson of the wisdom of God. As Paul puts it, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom..." When the great cathedral in Rome, St. Peter's, was being built, the architect was Michelangelo. The priests and the work-

men criticized him severely as the building was going up because somehow to them the work that he was doing didn't make any sense. To his critics Michelangelo replied, "I am not able to make my plans and ideas clear to you. I must ask you to do your best to help me, and when the work is done you will understand." It is impossible for God to make his plans clear to you and me. But at Christmas he teaches us the lesson of his wisdom--the lesson that if we will only do our best to help Him, when the work is done, we will understand. Back as a child in rural Mississippi, we used to sing a hymn at church that puts it very well, "We'll understand it all by and by."

The second great lesson that we learn from the manger is the other side of this same coin and it is the lesson of patience. You see, once you put your faith in God and in his wisdom--once you trust God's wisdom to do what is best and right for you, then you must learn the lesson of patience. Most of you remember the parable that Jesus told of the sower who went out to sow. You remember how some of the seeds fell on the path, some on the rocks, some among the thorns and some in the good ground, but what you probably don't remember is how Jesus finished explaining the parable. He said, "As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience." Isn't that remarkable? . . . "to bring forth fruit with patience!"

To accept God's wisdom, to wait patiently on him is our responsibility. As the writer of the 37th psalm sums it up, "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for him. . . for those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth."

When Dr. Jonathan Goforth went to China as a Christian missionary, he had chosen Changte as his field of labor feeling that that was where God had called him. During all those years he never once lost sight of God's promise to him, nor failed to believe. When they tried to visit the city the people would mob them and showed the utmost hostility. At last, when the word came that they could enter, Dr. Goforth was there by the next morning. On the way he prayed for God to make the hearts of the people receptive to him and to give him the land he needed for his mission. Within three days after his arrival he had 35 offers of land, one of them offering the very site he had personally chosen as the best place to begin his work. Yes, the lesson of patience. As one of our poets has put it:

God's plans like lilies pure and white, unfold;
We must not tear the close-shut leaves apart;
Time will reveal the calyxes of gold.

This was the great sin of Judas. Now Judas apparently belonged to an underground revolutionary group who were out to overthrow the power of Rome with arms and Judas apparently thought that Jesus was going to be their leader. But Jesus wasn't moving fast enough for Judas. Jesus wasn't doing things like Judas wanted them done and many biblical historians feel that Judas betrayed Jesus in order to force his hand, to make him act against Rome. Impatience! When you get impatient with God's plans for you or for the world--remember Bethlehem. The saints of the Old Testament looked for and longed for the Messiah of God, but patiently waited. You remember how the writer of Hebrews put it? He spoke of the prophets of old and their faithfulness and then he said this: "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar." As some poet wrote,

"Not so in haste, my heart;
Have faith in God and wait;
Although he linger long,
He never comes too late.

This leads us into our final lesson from the manger that I want to mention because there at the manger in Bethlehem we learn the most important thing anybody can know-- we learned there that God loves us. God loves you. God loves these little children. He loves older people who are coming close to that final moment-- to the young people who are struggling to make a go of things--to those of you who have done well and can enjoy the fruits of your labor-- to all of you, God loves you. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave..." Yes, he gave his most cherished possession, his only son for you. The other day I had a young lady come into my study. She has been divorced twice and had five children--I say had because now she has only four. Nine months ago she buried her little eight year old girl who died from cancer and as she sat there the tears just ran unchecked down her face and she couldn't stop crying. She said, "I can't even go to church anymore, I feel so hostile to God. Why did he let this happen to my little baby? I loved her so much." She said, "There are so many people who are evil and bad, people in prison. Why couldn't one of them have died? Why did God take my little baby? I wake up at night and see her sitting on the foot of my bed and I talk to her and I know she is not there. I can't let her go. Why did God do this?" I don't have any answers to a question like that, because I don't know, I don't understand things either. But I know this. I know God loves us and we can trust him. And I know he loves us because when I look at Bethlehem, that little child is the only Son of God and I said to her, "You can appreciate what God felt on Christmas. He gave his only Child and he knew what lay ahead for Jesus." I don't understand why God took her baby but I understand that God loves her, so she can trust him and so can you.

One day I had an occasion to go downtown and the streets were crowded. It was a Christmas time a year or so ago. You know when it gets near to Christmas the streets get crowded and you hear Christmas music being played somewhere and I saw this man coming down the street and he had on dark glasses and he had the white cane of the blind but he walked with his head up and a smile on his lips because walking beside him was his wife and he had his hand on her arm. And his steps were confident and sure because while he couldn't see the way somebody who loved him and could see the way, walked beside him. That's the lesson of the manger. Though we do not understand always, though we walk in darkness and cannot see the way, yet we can walk with our heads up and a smile on our lips--we can walk the pathway of life confidently--not because we understand or know where we are going but because someone who loves us and who can see the way, walks beside us. That someone is God and he loves us. That's what the manger of Bethlehem says and it is the greatest lesson of all.