

Sermon for Sunday, December 18, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"GOD AND HIS MICKEY MOUSE WATCH"

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

Back when I was a child, one of the most desired presents I ever got for Christmas was a Mickey Mouse watch. Those original watches have now become collectors' items and if you have one stuck back in the corner of a dresser drawer, it is probably worth something today. However, there was one problem with those watches. They were cheap and they didn't keep very good time. Ordinarily, before the 12 days of Christmas were up, they didn't work any more. And if you were late for some meeting, someone was likely to say sarcastically, "What's the matter, are you keeping time with your Mickey Mouse watch?" As a result, a new expression came into our American slang vocabulary. Now if we want to call something small and insignificant and cheap and worthless, we say it is, "Mickey Mouse."

In our scripture for this morning, St. Paul writes, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son..." Now, that phrase, "when the time had fully come..." is a very important one for a Jew. It expresses a whole philosophy of history. The Hebrews believed that God had a time for everything and that everything happened right on time. God had promised that a Saviour would come and they knew when the right time came, the Saviour would appear. So, St. Paul says that when time was full, God sent his Son.

The only problem was, God picked a bad time. He must have been keeping time with a Mickey Mouse watch. Centuries before God had chosen the Hebrews as his special people. They were to be his instrument for redeeming the whole world. But he decided to use them at a very bad time. When God's Mickey Mouse watch showed it was time for Messiah to be born it was obvious his watch was wrong. Why, the Hebrews were at the lowest ebb in their history. Only a remnant of the tribe of Judah was left. The temple itself was almost a make-shift structure. They were under the foreign domination of Rome. They had no army, no navy, no military leaders and what government they had was either Roman or a puppet of Rome. It was just a bad time for God to decide to act and his watch had to be wrong.

There had been times when things seemed right for God to act. For example, under David the Hebrew nation had been great and strong, one of the powerful nations of the world. That would have been a good time. Again, centuries later, under the Maccabees they rose once more to a glorious period of national independence when the Hebrews were a mighty people. That would have been a good time. But God must have had a Mickey Mouse watch, because when it showed the time had come, it was the worst time of all.

But not only was God's timing poor, his method was just as bad, just as Mickey Mouse. You see, St. Paul writes, "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law." That is, all God did was send a baby. And how Mickey Mouse can you get?

Let me rehearse for us the events leading up to this birth. The Jews had come out of the wilderness and taken over the Promised Land. As they developed, David eventually became King and led them to national greatness. But evil days had befallen them. Their nation had been torn by internal strife and through a bloody civil war, they had divided into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom, made up of ten of the twelve tribes, had been carried off eventually into captivity and were apparently assimilated into the pagan environment. For all practical purposes they disappeared from the face of the earth. The Southern Kingdom fared little better for they, too, were finally carried off into captivity in Babylon. At last, they

were permitted to return, but Jerusalem had been destroyed and the temple was gone. Once, several centuries later, they rebelled against their rulers and under the Maccabees briefly knew independence, but again they had fallen this time before the Roman armies. Now they knew only total subjection.

Put yourself in their place. What sort of Saviour would you want? Would you not long for a leader to whom you could give your loyalty and who would lead your nation to freedom and greatness again? First, he would have to be a dynamic, charismatic type person 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 successful revolt 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.

But let's "suppose" for a moment. Suppose they had gotten their wish and had become a great nation under a great leader. Would that have worked? As a matter of fact, at the time of the birth of Jesus there was just such a nation. Rome had a great Caesar and they ruled the world. They had the finest legal system, the greatest government, the mightiest armies, the best communications system the world had ever known. Did it matter? 300 years after the death of Jesus the Roman Empire was in shambles. Has any great culture, any great nation, lived very long as history measures time? No, not really. Here and there in the world from time to time nations have become great and ruled the scene for a brief period, only to decay and collapse back into the dust of history.

But see how God's Mickey Mouse method deals with the issue. It begins in a little town in a remote rural area called Bethlehem with a simple man named Joseph and a peasant girl named Mary, and a little baby whose name they called Jesus. Now, that was the method--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--and that is the method of God. Some unknown writer has put it this way: "Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of his divine manhood. While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying--and that was his coat. When he was dead he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

Yes, the wisdom of God. As it turned out, his Mickey Mouse watch was right on time and in retrospect, his Mickey Mouse method was the only one that could have worked. When St. Peter's was being built in Rome, Michelangelo was the architect for the great cathedral. The priests and the workmen criticized him severely as the building was going up because somehow to them the work that he had them doing didn't make 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 always 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. You see, his Mickey Mouse watch keeps time after all.

The second thing we learn from Christmas is patience. You see, once you put your faith in God and his wisdom--once you trust God to do the right thing and the best thing for you, then you must learn the lesson of patience. See how it works! When Dr. Jonathan Goforth went to China as a Christian missionary, he had chosen Changte as his field of labor, feeling that was where God had called him. But for years he was not permitted to enter the city. Dr. Goforth, however, never once over those years lost sight of God's promise to him or failed to believe. Finally the word came that they could enter the city, and Dr. Goforth was there by the next morning. On the way he prayed that God would make the hearts of the people receptive to him and give him the land he needed for his mission. Within three days of his arrival he had 35 offers of land, one of them the very site he had personally chosen as the best place to begin his work. 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. Judas apparently belonged to an underground revolutionary group who were out to overthrow the power of Rome with arms and Judas thought that Jesus was going to be their leader. But Jesus wasn't moving fast enough to suit Judas and many historians believe in betraying Jesus he was trying to force his hand. Impatience! When you get impatient with God's plans for you or for the world, remember how long men waited for Bethlehem. Do you remember the patience of the prophets of the Old Testament? The writer of the book of Hebrews says of them, "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar." As some poet has written:

Not so in haste, my heart;

Have faith in God and wait;

Although he linger long,

He never comes too late.

Yes, God may have a Mickey Mouse watch, but it always runs on time.

A third thing we can learn from Christmas is that God loves us. God loves little children; God loves those who are drawing close to the end of life; God loves young people who are struggling to make a go of things; God loves you. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave..." Yes, he gave the most precious thing he had, his Son. Some time ago a young lady came into my study. She had been divorced twice and had five children. I say had, because now she has only four. Some weeks before she had buried her little eight year old girl who had died with cancer. Tears ran unchecked down her cheeks and she couldn't stop crying. "I feel so hostile to God," she said, "why did he let this happen to my little baby? I loved her so much. 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 just can't seem to let her go. Why did God do this? Why did he let it happen to me?" I couldn't answer her question, because I really don't know why things happen either. But I do 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 he gave him for you, he gave him for me, and we know he has to love us.

So that's what Christmas means--it means God came at the right time and he did the right thing for us, for our world. And we can wait patiently for him because whatever happens, we know he loves us. Yes, when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son. His Mickey Mouse watch was right on time.

The second thing we learn from Christmas is patience. You see, once you put your faith in God and his wisdom--once you trust God as the right thing and the best thing for you, then you must learn the lesson of patience. See how it worked. When Dr. Jonathan Gotroth went to China as a Christian missionary, he had chosen Changsha as his field of labor, feeling that was where God had called him. But for years he was not permitted to enter the city. Dr. Gotroth, however, never gave up. Those years were a trial of God's promise to him as he waited for the day when he would come that they could enter the city, and Dr. Gotroth was there by the next morning. On the way he proved that God would make the best of the people receptive to him and give him the land he needed for his mission. Within three days of his arrival he had 32 acres of land, one of them the very site he had personally chosen as the best place to begin his work. As one of our poets has put it:

God's plans like little puns and words, unfold;
We must not fear the close-but-tenuous space;
Time will reveal the edifice of gold.

This was the great sin of Judas. Judas apparently belonged to an underground revolutionary group who were out to overthrow the power of Rome with Jesus and John thought that Jesus was going to be their leader. But Jesus wasn't moving fast enough to suit Judas and many historians believe in betraying Jesus before he could force his hand. Lamentable! When you set important with God's plan for you as for the world, remember how long men waited for justification. Do you remember the patience of the prophets of the Old Testament? The writer of the book of Hebrews says of them, "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar." As our poet has written:

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

Yes, God may have a Mickey Mouse watch, but it always runs on time. A third thing we can learn from Christmas is that God loves us. God loves little children; God loves those who are drawing close to the end of life; God loves young people who are struggling to make a life of theirs; God loves you. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son... Yes, he gave the best gift ever that he had. God's love is a young life that my strategy. She had never loved before and had five children. I can't say because now she has only four. Some weeks before she had buried her little child, her child, the had that had been was the only child for which she had the soul's cry. I can't say because now she has only four. I loved her so much. I loved her so much, she said, "I will give my little child." I loved her so much and I hope she is not dead. I just can't say to her how you may think she is, but she is not. I can't say to her how you may think because I really don't know why things happen. But I do know this: