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John 1:1-14

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IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

I am not boasting when I tell you that I have recently been studying Einstein's theory of relativity. I became involved with the theory because I first became intrigued with the man. I think I am finally beginning to gain some small understanding of this tremendously important scientific breakthrough, but please do not ask me to explain it.

I mention the matter because the theory of relativity is closely allied to and includes the subject of time, which is also the subject of this sermon. It is fairly obvious to even the casual observer that time is relative. We are confused and bewildered when we are told that when speeding through outer space the aging process of human life slows down. We clearly understand, however, that there are occasions when time seems to us to go by with exceeding rapidity and other times when it seems to creep along torturously slow on hands and knees.

One of the theological questions which boggles many human minds at one period or another deals precisely with this matter of time. It goes something like this: "What was there before time began?" Or the question sometimes takes the form, "Did time have a beginning and will it have an end?"

Putting together this matter of Einsteinian time with the Christmas Star which plays a prominent part during this season of the year, perhaps it would be appropriate for me to share with you one of my favorite versions of an old children's rhyme, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star":

Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder where you are.
Up above the world you shine;
Yet according to Einstein
You are not where you pretend,
You are just around the bend,
And your sweet seductive ray
Has been leading men astray
All these years!
O little star
Don't you know how bad you are?"

Considering the various postulates and theories set forth by theologians, philosophers and astronomers concerning the Star of Bethlehem, perhaps that little rhyme might be dedicated to the Christmas Star.

II

But let us return to the matter of time. In Paul's letter to the Galatians (4:4) he speaks of a moment in time which from the Christian point of view at least was the most important time in history:

"But when the fullness of time was come God sent forth his Son..."

Paul in this passage is reflecting the Jewish philosophy of history: God lets nothing be done haphazardly or by chance. Let me share this philosophy of history with you as it is described in one of the best of Biblical commentaries, The Interpreter's Bible:

"God had a time for everything and everything happened exactly on time. To demonstrate his mercy as well as his power, he had to work slowly, allowing good and evil all the time they needed to grow into their full harvest. A predetermined measure of wickedness had to be filled up and a predestined number of righteous folk had to be gathered into the faithful remnant. The completion of this present age would be marked by a blood-red revolution in which all good men and good works would be ground under the heel of the tyrant, while the wicked reigned supreme. Then suddenly God would intervene with the lightning of judgment to snatch the world from the mouth of the bottomless pit and restore it to paradise whence it had fallen with the sin of Adam. Sorrow and sighing would flee away and the Messiah would reign with the perfection of a theocratic king."

I do not wish us to choose up sides this morning and argue the pros and cons of Paul's philosophy of history. No doubt there is much to be said on all sides of the matter and there is no way of which I am aware of determining which position is the one which is ultimately and absolutely right.

Rather would I like us to think together on a much more personal level by confronting ourselves with the question, "Has not the fullness of God's time come for me--the time in which God wants me to take Jesus Christ seriously and to become a dedicated and devoted follower of the Christian way?"

Such a question may indeed take a few of you by surprise. You may be one of those numerous persons who seem to think that they are Christians because they are members of a church. I assure you that that is not what makes a man a Christian. A Christian by any reasonable definition is a follower of Christ, and some who claim to be followers fall so far behind that their following is imperceptible.

Some people follow Christ in about the same way they celebrate Christmas; a way which has no noticeable relationship between cause and effect. The excessive use of alcoholic beverages, the gay holiday

parties, the lavish expenditures on gifts, the overgrown habit of sending Christmas cards to everyone, including people we don't even like, the secular music and decorations--none of this has much if anything to do with the central meaning and significance of Christmas.

I would certainly not want to return to 1620 and to the way in which the Mayflower Pilgrims failed to celebrate Christmas at all. But I would prefer that to much of what goes on in 1972 and which pretends to be a celebration of Christmas by men and women who pretend to be Christians.

In the third century A.D. a man by the name of Cyprian wrote a letter to a friend named Donatus which in part read as follows: (1)

"This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadows of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world."

When one reads or listens to the news media it is not difficult to feel Cyprian's description is still a valid one nineteen centuries later.

But that was not the end of Cyprian's letter to Donatus. Listen carefully to the rest of it:

"Yet in the midst of (this world) I have found a quiet and holy people that have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians--and I am one of them."

The central message of Christmas is hope and in the midst of the incredibly bad world in which he lived, Cyprian found hope. You may well define the world in which we live today in much different terms than do I, but I, like Cyprian, find it to be, in many respects, an incredibly bad world when I compare it to the world as it could be. But like Cyprian of old I do find within it hope. That hope becomes most clear and real to me at Christmas time.

One of the most beautiful things that happens to me at Christmas is that brief period of time which I jealously snatch away every year in order to listen to Handel's glorious and divinely inspired oratorio, "The Messiah". I must say to you that in spite of what anyone says

(1) Moments With the Devotional Masters, Kates, Upper Room, Nashville, 1961

about the inspiration of the scriptures, I myself find manifestly more inspiration in Handel's oratorio than I find in many of the books of the Bible. There is only one test for inspiration, and it is this-- does it inspire? "The Messiah" inspires me with hope, with faith, with confidence, and with the love and mercy of God as I see it revealed in that divinely inspired man named Jesus born in that humble place called Bethlehem.

III

Thomas Carlyle once wrote a book called Heroes and Hero Worship . In that book, as I recall, he posed the question; do the times make the men or do the men make the times? Was it the challenge of the late 18th century that brought forth that tremendously talented and dedicated group of men who signed the Declaration of Independence? If men had not been inclined in the early part of the 19th century to enslave the black men from Africa, would we ever have heard of Abraham Lincoln? Was it the fullness of time, the terrible evil of the times, that caused God to send into the world a man named Jesus? Or did the "incredible evil" of the times cause a young man named Jesus to dedicate himself completely as the servant of God, in response to the call of God?

Again, we can't decide the question by taking a vote. It is an important question and one which the Christian church has tried to solve during twenty centuries. But there is for each of us, personally, a more important question: "Is this the fullness of time for me and for my life?" The answer must always be in the affirmative. There will never be a more propitious time.

Hear these words of Paul to the Corinthians:

"Behold, now is the accepted time;
Behold, now is the day of salvation."

Today, this hour, is the fullness of time for you and for me. There is no need to wait. There will never be a better time for you to let the life and teachings of Jesus Christ become the motivation and the way for your life.

Charles Dickens opened his Tale of Two Cities by insisting, "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." It is so in every age and in every life. I read the other day where some company president opened his annual report by saying, "Our company, as you know, has had good years and bad years. As president, it gives me a great deal of pleasure to report that 1972 has been one of them." Is it not always so?

The fullness of time for you and for me in our commitment and in our devotion to God is now. There will never be a better time, a more crucial time, a more necessary time. As one of the Christmas carols puts it: "Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Now is the fullness of time. Now is the accepted time. And when you let him in do not be surprised if you hear a beautiful whisper coming to you as it came to Zacchaeus so long ago, "This day has salvation come to this house." Amen.