Sermon: The King Who Missed Christmas - Matthew 2

by Andy Cook on Thursday, November 01, 2007

Sermon series: Don't Miss Christmas

The King Who Missed Christmas - Matthew 2

The Leaders Who Missed Christmas - Luke 2

How Bethlehem Missed Christmas - Luke 2, Matthew 1

How Nazareth Missed Christmas - Mark 6

Scriptures: Matthew 2:1-23

Introduction

It's a Christmas classic by now, the wonderful story written by Dr. Suess, of how the Grinch stole Christmas. As you know . . .

"Every Who down in Who-ville liked Christmas a lot, but the Grinch, who lived just North of Who-ville, did NOT!"

Why you ask? Perhaps, said Dr. Suess,

"It could be that his head wasn't screwed on quite right.

It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.

But I think the most likely reason of all

May have been that his heart was two sizes too small."

The story, of course, is really about how the Grinch didn't steal Christmas at all. Yes, he stole the trees, the gifts, the food, the stockings, the lights and the greenery. He took the popcorn, the plums, and every last drop of Who-pudding. By the time the Grinch returned to his wickedly lonely home on top of the mountain overlooking Who-ville, all he left behind was the snow, a few hooks on the wall, and a speck of food so small, even the Who-ville mouse turned up his nose at it.

But, much to his surprise, the Grinch left one thing behind. He somehow, some way, left Christmas in Who-ville!

When the good folks of the village woke up on Christmas morning, they joined hands in the street and sang their songs of Christmas as if it didn't matter that the gifts were gone, that the food was missing, and that the decorations had been stolen.

High on his mountain fortress, it puzzled the Grinch to no end to realize that despite all his work, despite all his evil intent, he hadn't stolen Christmas at all.

He had simply missed it. As Dr. Seuss penned it,

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?

It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, `till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.

"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"

And what happened then...?

Well...in Who-ville they say

That the Grinch's small heart

Grew three sizes that day!

And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,

He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light

And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!

And he...

...HE HIMSELF...!

The Grinch carved the roast beast!

(Source, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," Dr. Seuss, 1957)

It's one of our favorite stories to hear every Christmas, whether it's the 50-year-old original, or the more modern movie, or even the hundreds of parodies that have sprung from first story.

But maybe the first Grinch wasn't the one Dr. Seuss invented. Maybe the first Grinch, the first evil character to miss Christmas even as he tried to destroy it, was Herod the Great, a cruel man now known as "The King Who Missed Christmas."

Historical background: As surely as a fictional Grinch stood on a mountain overlooking a small village where Christmas happened despite all efforts to destroy it, there really was a king who stood on his own mountain over the original Christmas village.

And just as surely, the king missed Christmas, despite his best effort to kill it.

Archeologists have shown us this mountain, a man-made, sky-scraper-sized palace that might have been the largest in the world. It was built just three miles from Bethlehem, one of four incredible fortresses Herod had constructed in Israel. (Follow this link for photos: http://www.bibleplaces.com/herodium.htm) Perhaps you've heard of the "Herodium," for just this year, archeologists discovered firm evidence of Herod's tomb inside the fortress. (Source: . ("Herod's Tomb Found," May 8, 2007, Biblical Archeology Review, www.biblicalarcheology.org)

The mountain of the Herodium is shocking in its size. It was built to house 1,000 soldiers, and the royal family, for a full year. It had huge storage bins for food, and plenty of fresh water, thanks to the aqueducts that stretched all the way to Jerusalem. At the base of the mountain are the remains of an opulent swimming pool twice as large as one of today's Olympic-sized pools, with gardens around it, and in the middle of it. If the decorations inside the Herodium are anything like the ones found in Herod's fortress at nearby Masada, the artwork there would have been stunning. Master craftsmen created priceless works of art with mosaic tiles, steam baths waited for the royal guests, and palace bedrooms were open to the soft breezes coming from the Mediterranean, the closest you'd come to ancient air conditioning in the stifling heat of the Middle East. There would have been the best of food, the best of wine, and the richest of guests.

Illustration: In recent years, it wasn't an archeologist who gave us our best glimpse of Herod the Great, but rather, the notorious figure of Saddam Hussein. The similarities between the Hussein and Herod the Great are numerous. Both killed innocents by the hundreds, if not thousands. Both killed family members and faithful supports, in part because both suffered from paranoia. Both built huge palaces and lived in unparalleled splendor, surrounded by a people living in abject poverty. Both men lived in the same area of the world, even, for Bethlehem is only 540 or so miles from Bagdhad.

Perhaps the only major difference between the two dictators was how they died. Saddam Hussein was executed by his own people, while Herod's power lasted even beyond his death. He actually had people executed as he died, guaranteeing grief over his death, and was carried on a specially built road to his tomb inside his Herodium, just three miles from the tiny village where Jesus was born.

Even today, the cone-like shape of the Herodium ruins can still be seen from Bethlehem of Judea.

Matthew gives us more details of Herod's Christmas than any of the other Bible historians.

(Read Matthew 2:1-23)

So consider the king who missed Christmas. Consider how difficult it was for him to miss it! International scholars traveled a great distance to tell Herod of the event. His in-house advisors confirmed that the prophets at promised the messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the same Bethlehem near the Herodium. In short, Herod knew as much as anyone could have known about the very first Christmas - and yet he missed it. He was a real-life Grinch with blood dripping from his hands, and the truth of Christmas slipped away from him as surely as Mary and Joseph hurried toward Egypt, slipping away from his reign of terror.

On the other hand, be sure you understand this: There were those in the same region who found Christmas. None were quicker to the manger than the shepherds, who got the message from angels. They heard an announcement worthy of royalty, they heard a song never before heard by human beings, and they rushed to the place where a baby lay in a manger, attended by a young couple from Nazareth. The shepherds worshipped the child there, and left as radically changed people.

Luke takes only a moment to finish the comparison:

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." (Luke 2:15)

What a contrast, this king and the shepherds.

Herod had more power, and more money, than anyone in the land. He could order infants in an entire village slaughtered, and he could lounge in luxury that still amazes us, 2,000 years later. If he didn't want to rest in his Herodium, he could use his palace in Jerusalem. He had another palace on the Mediterranean coast, at Caesarea, and yet another one at Masada, near the Dead Sea. From a worldly point of view, Herod lacked for nothing.

On the other hand, the shepherds lived in poverty, and the only power they exercised was directing the path of their flocks.

Herod was an aging king, they were very young. If they were like shepherds today, they were probably teen-agers, or even older children.

Herod lived in luxury, they lived in the fields.

Herod was assured that he would never run short on food or other supplies. The shepherds lived day to day, on meager diets.

Herod was surrounded by intelligence gathering assistants, and even visited by foreign experts who told him Christmas was upon him. The shepherds were surrounded by wide-open spaces, and were caught completely off guard by the news that the Messiah had been born.

And yet it was the shepherds who found Christmas, and the king who missed it.

Why is it important? Because our Christmas holiday season is surrounded, immersed and even defined by Herodian-like wealth and luxury, and a schedule that gives us almost no time to wait like shepherds on news God Himself might want us to hear. It can happen to the countless numbers of people who know the information about the Christmas story without knowing the Christ of the story. And it can happen to committed believers, trapped in a schedule too full, blinded by a gift list too long and expensive.

Finding Christmas is critically important, and unless you follow the right example, you might find yourself on top of your own little mountain, missing Christmas in Who-ville . . . or Bethlehem.

Main idea

The only way to "find Christmas" is to find the Christ child. Of all the gifts surrounding this holiday, this is the only gift that can make a lasting difference in any life. In a culture so saturated with a Christmas defined by gift-giving and extravagant spending, "finding Christmas" will require some planning and effort.

In other words, the heart of Christmas isn't in the materialism that surrounds the holiday.

Even Herod would be impressed with the materialism surrounding an American Christmas season. Adults are spending more than $900 per person on gifts each year at Christmas, according to a Gallup poll released in October. (Source: "Gallup's initial read on holiday spending looks positive." The Gallup Poll, Oct. 15, 2007, www.galluppoll.com) Just as telling, the polls have shown that while few Americans ever admit to spending more on holiday gifts than they spent the previous year, the amount we actually spend almost always goes up! That equates into something like $200 billion that will be spent on Christmas gifts this year, all of it over and above our normal expenditures. How much money is that? You could lay dollar bills end to end, on the equator, and then circle the globe . . . eight hundred times!

But Herod had that kind of money, and he missed Christmas. If we're under some illusion that the best Christmases are the ones that allow us the most money to spend on gifts, we're going stack presents so high, they'll become something of a wall that keeps us from finding Christmas at all. So, despite all the urging from advertisers to put a big red bow on a shiny new car in every Christmas driveway, despite the heart-warming commercials that end with some presentation of a diamond necklace . . . and despite my own secret desire that someone might put a brand new tractor in my driveway this Christmas . . . we've got to find a way to find the real deal.

Herod missed Christmas. The shepherds found it. Follow the shepherds with me, and we, too, might find what's been right under our noses all along.

I. Set aside the time this year to find Christmas

The shepherds had plenty of time. They worked around the clock, but their work was slow and dull. When he was a shepherd outside Bethlehem, David found ways to kill time by killing wild animals and perfecting his sling-shot routine. Visit a shepherd today, and you'll find an equally bored worker. But for all the downside of a dull job, it provided the shepherds of Bethlehem their best chance to discover Christmas. Inside the village, an exhausted population tried to sleep off one hectic day after another. The village was packed, the government paperwork was demanding, and the visitors were exhausted.

Only the shepherds, it seems, had the luxury of so much time to hear such an important message. But in reality, they had no more time than anyone else in Bethlehem . . . or in America.

Schedule the time to find Christmas the way you'd schedule your attendance at a party. Block it off on your calendar. Write it down on your date book. Plug it in to your Blackberry. If you'd like, coordinate with the rest of your family to do the same. Or do it for yourself. Best yet, schedule some quiet time for both yourself, and your family, even if your "family" is a collection of other singles you consider to be family.

Once you've got the time blocked off, it'll serve as a wonderful blocking agent to other potential commitments, to other potential Christmas stealers. This sounds horribly obvious, but since an over commitment of time seems to be a common complaint, let's be extremely simple. When you're asked to be a part of something, or maybe to attend another party, look at your calendar. If the potential party is scheduled for the same block of time that you've reserved for your own time to find the real meaning of the holiday, then say, "Thanks for the invitation, but I've already got something scheduled that evening."

II. Searching for Christmas? Be still

We're not looking for just any time. This isn't the evening you're reserving to watch another rerun of "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," "A Miracle on 34th Street," or even "It's a Wonderful Life." All of the movies have a great theme, but none of them offer quiet.

When's the last time you've honestly enjoyed the quietness you might find in a shepherd's field? Could it be that a simple trip to such a place might do the trick, this year?

You won't find any stillness while shopping, of course. You won't find rest and reflection the day you're frantically preparing for all those house guests. But there are opportunities for stillness, and if you want to find Christmas, you'll have to find them.

Maybe you can't find a full day, or even a full evening. What about an hour? Or even a few minutes early each morning? Can you make sure you attend a Christmas Eve service, and even make it the highlight of the day?

If you schedule the time, be sure to find the quiet. As you do, you'll be modeling Jesus, who often took time to escape the crowds, to escape a crowded schedule, and to escape the noise.

It's no wonder that the famous line of Psalm 46 ("Be still, and know that I am God") comes from a song that describes war and natural disasters!

Make the time. Be sure to be still. There's one more thing.

III. Bring your faith to the manger

If Herod had taken the time, if he'd even ordered a day of quiet, he still would have missed Christmas. Herod was as far from faith as he could get, even though it appears God had gone to tremendous lengths to make sure Herod heard the news.

International visitors traveled a great distance, and they came first to Herod's palace, asking about the birth of a new king. Herod's advisors told the king where the Jewish king was to be born, according to the scriptures, and that yes, indeed, the Jewish people were looking for their Messiah. Even so, he was the king who missed Christmas, for he had no faith in God, no trust in God's message, and he saw no need for a Savior.

Without the faith, without being willing to kneel before the Christ child, it just won't work. Not for Herod, and not for you.

Illustration: Dwight L. Moody discovered in the last century something we need to discover today: that faith comes from seeking the Lord. Moody wrote: "I prayed for faith and thought that some day faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not seem to come. I remembered, 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.' I had up to this time closed my Bible and prayed for faith. I now opened my Bible and began to study and my faith has been growing ever since."

You may be so familiar with the Christmas story that you can quote Luke 2 and role-play the visit of the magi. You may feel as though you've heard the story a thousand times, or told it twice that. But do you know that the story is true, and that the baby born there was the Savior of the world?

Conclusion

Walking away from the ruins of the Herodium, it's hard to miss a major truth. All that Herod ever owned lies in the broken ruins and dust of the Middle East.

The Herodium once was a place as opulent as the White House. Once, it teemed with wealth, with luxury, and with force. Once, it was covered with fresh, cool water, a jungle of plants, right in the middle of the Judean wilderness.

Now? It's just a rock-covered hill where scholars occasionally make a new discovery about the man history calls "Herod the Great."

Great? Today, there are no hospitals built in Herod's name. No colleges or universities claim Herod as their inspiration. No charities rally people to a good cause by remembering Herod's influence. Herod's picture doesn't adorn anyone's building, home, or jewelry.

If it weren't for the Christmas story, most of us would have never heard this man's evil legacy.

On the other hand, there is Jesus. At the beginning, Jesus was born in a homeless set of circumstances, while Herod enjoyed his choice of palace beds. At the beginning, Mary, Joseph and Jesus ran from Herod the way ants would flee a pest-control worker.

In the end, however, Herod lay dead, and Jesus lived. Even after his death, Jesus lived again, and today, the world is a changed place not because of Herod "the Great," but because Jesus lives.

Two thousand years later, you can't count the hospitals that were born because of what Jesus said, and because of what he did. Many of the greatest schools and universities in the world were birthed because of devotion to Jesus. Billions still revere his name, memorize his sayings, and trust him with their very lives, and their deaths. We have paintings of Jesus in hour homes, offices, and churches, and symbols of his influence in our jewelry.

While Herod had enormous wealth, Jesus never had a penny. Herod had palaces, but Jesus had simple lodging. He probably slept on the ground, or in borrowed beds more than his own bed, during his ministry. To the untrained eye, in that day, Herod and his kind were in control, had the power, and left the great legacy.

But now that 2,000 years have passed, we know the truth: Herod's dead, and Jesus lives.

Herod's dead, and Jesus lives!

Fear, destruction, hatred . . . all are dead . . . and Jesus lives!

Terror, torture, and murder . . . all dead . . . Jesus lives!

Hope lives eternal because of the Christmas story. We have a reason to fight with justification, because of the Christmas story. We can fight the war on terror, as many of our people literally do. We can also fight the war on depression, despondency, or the filling that our lives don't matter . . . all because of Christmas.

Herod's dead . . . Jesus lives!