Sermon: The Leaders Who Missed Christmas - Luke 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: Luke 2:21-38

Bob Cratchet's new line: "Bah! Humbug!'

Are you searching for Christmas, amid the Christmas crush?

Introduction

If Charles Dickens wrote a new version of A Christmas Carol today, it's likely that the story would be quite a bit different. Imagine Scrooge not as the hard-driven tyrant who hated Christmas, but as a hard-driven CEO of a shopping mall who loved Christmas. That is, he loved the increase in sales that accounted for 25 to 50 percent of his annual revenue each year. Scrooge would love Christmas so much, he'd start advertising his Christmas wares in October, he'd use the latest in consumer research to coax the most money out of his shoppers, and he'd offer new ways of borrowing money for the generous giver who only had the misfortune of running out of Christmas cash.

But the father of Tiny Tim, poor Bob Cratchet? The man who knew the Christmas spirit so well in Dickens' first classic would almost certainly be working horribly long hours because of Christmas. At home, he'd likely be dealing with the pressure of Mrs. Cratchet's desire to have the best - and therefore most expensive - decorations and food possible for yet another social event at the house. And through it all, he'd hear subtle and not-so-subtle hints for the expensive toys, iPhones and Gap gift certificates from Tiny Tim and the other Cratchet children. He'd hate the Mall Christmas music, he'd hate the crowds, he'd hate the traffic, and he'd hate the way he and the Mrs. were obviously headed toward deeper level of credit-card debt because of all the Christmas expenses.

Once home, exhausted after yet another day of the Christmas rush, he's likely to hear Mrs. Cratchet, say, "Bob, dear, I'm almost out of ribbon. Could you run down to the store and pick up some more wrapping supplies?" And seething with the exhaustion of it all, he'd head back out into the Christmas riot, wondering if there had ever been a day when people actually enjoyed Christmas.

Yes, it's quite possible that the most famous line of Dickens' new re-write would not belong to Scrooge, but to the millions of Bob Cratchets in our consumer-driven culture, more and more of them uttering "Bah! Humbug!" at the whole mess. (Source: Unplug the Christmas Machine, Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, New York: William Morrow, 1991, pp. 20-21)

Illustration: Or take Susan's story, far from fictional. A normal Christmas involved the family reunion, and since she was the hostess, Christmas meant several days of house cleaning, guest-room preparation, shopping for groceries, baking what she could in advance, and gearing up for the big reunion as if it were a war and she was in charge of feeding the troops. Through it all, she was mentally working on solutions to the following problems: How could she tactfully persuade her husband to pay more attention to his mother-in-law? How could she entertain her 14-year-old niece, who would be the only teenager at the family reunion? How could she make life easier for her youngest sister, who had a 2-year-old and a brand new baby? How could she shield her 85-year-old grandfather from the noise and chaos of so many children? How could she arrange the eating schedule so her diabetic father would have small and frequent meals? (Source: Unplug the Christmas Machine, page 25.) In her stress-inducing list, Susan made no mention of the gifts she might still need to purchase and wrap, or whether or not her husband was helping with any of the chores. More than likely, he was not.

Men tend to be left out of much of the Christmas process. Pick up a women's magazine in November or December, and you'll find pages upon pages of Christmas decorations and recipes - many of them impossible to imitate without professional help. The magazines are thick with Christmas. But try a men's magazine at Christmas. Maybe Sports Illustrated, or a hunting magazine. The only Christmas reference you're like to see in those magazines - aiming primarily at men - is an increase in liquor ads, which is sending a message in and of itself! Put the two together. Women get stressed by crafts and recipes that don't work, and men head for the liquor cabinet!

More and more, people are become less enamored with a consumer-driven, schedule-packed, all-encompassing, ever-exhausting Christmas. The first Christmas advertising blitzes show up before Halloween, the buying frenzy dominates Thanksgiving, and the schedule of social events can keep December booked solid, usually months in advance. Even the church can add to the Christmas stress with its array of musicals and pageants and parties and calls for special offerings. For a person searching for Christmas, it might seem that the holiday actually arrives more like a dark storm cloud than a festive season of joy. The ensuing, driving rain of having too much to do, too much to buy, and too many places to go can leave a person chilled to the bone and weary of the whole mess.

And unfortunately, Christmas slides by and the meaning of it all is lost somewhere beneath all that expensive wrapping paper, empty boxes, and the crumbs of Christmas dinner.

Wouldn't you like to change this pattern?

Would it surprise you to know that the struggle to find an elusive "peace on earth" has been going on since the very first Christmas? And would it surprise you more to find that the people looking the hardest for Christmas were the ones who missed the mark most severely?

The Temple in Jerusalem was the busiest religious place in the world. The sacrifices never stopped, the offerings never ceased, and countless priests and singers and rule-makers continued the work of worship with every shift change. They argued over the fine points of the Law, wrestling with a complex set of 613 injunctions that had come from a far simpler list of Ten Commandments originally handed out on Mt. Sinai. They read and memorized the Torah, they quoted the prophets, and most of all, they looked for the Messiah.

When the Messiah arrived, barely five miles from The Temple, in the fields outside of Bethlehem, not a single expert in religion made it to the manger. The child lived a week, and there were no visitors. And then, on the eighth day, Mary and Joseph brought the baby to the Temple! They brought Christmas inside the very place where it should have been most likely, and most logical for someone to have recognized the long-awaited Messiah.

But Mary, Joseph, and the baby managed to come into the Temple, complete the ceremony of circumcision, and almost slip away almost unnoticed, passing as quietly into the background as the original meaning of Christmas slips away from our over-stressed Christmas culture today.

There were two, however, who found Christmas when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple. They were overwhelmed with the discovery, and they did their best to share the news with anyone who would listen.

Unfortunately almost all of the religious leaders of the Temple never found that which they'd been so earnestly searching. Even at the cross, many sneered at the idea that Jesus of Nazareth, that Jesus born in Bethlehem, could possibly be the Messiah.

Why had they missed a truth that seems so obvious to those who follow Jesus, 2,000 years later?

If we could have seen the routine at the Temple, if we could have seen the all-too-familiar rush and hurry and exhaustion of all those so immersed in religion, we'd have seen a frightening truth. Fact is, the religious leaders who were so close to Bethlehem missed Christmas because they were too busy.

And they stayed busy for the next 33 years, missing the teaching, the miracles, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. They were so busy doing the work of God, they missed God's greatest work in history! They had the scripture, they knew the prophecy, they sang the songs, and they kept the holidays. But somehow, they completely missed what all of the scripture, songs, prophecy and holidays had been promising.

It's not hard to make the transition to today's Christmas holiday crush. It's not surprising that so few seem to know the origins of the celebration, the simplicity of the shepherds' discovery, or the majesty of the angels' song. What is surprising is the frustration felt by people in the church over the lost wonder of the holiday.

Perhaps we should spend a bit more time in the Temple, for in two quiet corners of the huge complex, two people managed to find Christmas. Ignored by the all-too-busy priests, Levites and Sadducees, an old man, and an old woman, found the Messiah for which they'd long been searching.

Their names were Simeon and Anna, and their example can help us find Christmas, too.

(Read Luke 2:21-38)

Finding Christmas will not be easy, no easier than finding it the first time. If most of the religious experts missed the very first Christmas, it wouldn't be surprising to find a lot of modern-day religious people missing the big event, too. But if we'll take the clues from Simeon and Anna, we might very well find exactly what we've been looking for.

I. You must be willing to wait

Illustration: Thomas Merton writes: "There were only a few shepherds at the first Bethlehem. The ox and the ass understood more of the first Christmas than the high priests in Jerusalem. And it is the same today." (Source: Thomas Merton in The Seven Storey Mountain. Christianity Today, Vol. 39, no. 14.)

The only people who found Christmas in the Temple were two individuals who were willing to wait for it. They were waiting, and they were anticipating. Simeon was apparently an old man, but he clung to the promise that he would see the Messiah before he died. Anna was 84, a widow, and she simply would not leave the Temple complex. She was there all the time, fasting, praying, and waiting.

What a contrast to consider all the priests of Jerusalem, and all the Pharisees. They spent a lifetime arguing the finer points of the Law, and carrying out the never-ending stream of sacrifices at the Temple. When God designed the furniture of the Tabernacle, there were no chairs. With all the work of offering sacrifices, there simply would be no time for the high priest or the other priests to complete their task, and find rest. That's one of the shocking visuals from the book of Hebrews - the idea that Jesus finished his task and "sat down at the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10:12) The concept of a priest being able to sit was just unthinkable (Hebrews 10:11), for the work was never-ending. And in a large part because they were so busy, the priests and other religious experts in Israel missed Christmas!

It is conceivable that the modern-day church has modeled more of the priestly approach to Christmas than that of Simeon and Anna, for the buzz-word of Christmas is "busy."

Waiting implies patience, and it implies quiet. What part of an American Christmas is quiet and patient? Shoppers pushing, traffic snarling, televisions blaring and company's coming. With all the noise, with all the hurry, with all the stress, we've got about as much chance of simplifying Christmas as we would of seeing snow on Christmas Eve in Georgia. It's possible, just not very likely.

So what will you do to "wait," this Christmas? Which hour, of which day, or even, which hours of each day, have you set aside to re-connect with Christmas? When's the last time you read a good book during the Christmas break? What about a schedule of Bible reading leading up to the holiday? Could you plan a few walks in a wooded area, just to be give your ears a chance to remember what the first Christmas sounded like?

When God spoke to Elijah, he used a voice so quiet, and so small, Elijah knew immediately he'd just experience the very presence of God. Had Elijah been in a shopping mall at the time, he'd have surely missed the whisper of God.

If you can take a week off, do it. If it's only a day to be quiet, take that. If you have to work in an hour or two a day, go for it. But connect with quiet, somewhere, and wait upon the Lord. If this Christmas is going to be anything like the first one, you'll have to learn to wait with Simeon and Anna, even as everyone else around you misses the point.

II. You must trust that God will keep His promises

Simeon had waited a lifetime, it seems, to see God's promise. When he saw Jesus, Simeon knew the promise had been kept. Anna had waited decades. As she waited, she became a "prophetess," telling people that God was a God of kept promises.

God has promised to never leave you or forsake you. Trust God to keep that promise, if you're nervous about the holiday. A huge percentage of people face some stressful event every Christmas. Maybe it's your first year in a marriage, or a new marriage, and it's time to visit the rest of the family for the very first time. Could be there was a loss in your life in the past few months. A death, a divorce, a deployment. What's it going to be like, to have Dec. 25 roll around in such a new stage of life? All we know for sure, in moments like that, is that God does not leave or forsake us.

Maybe you'd want to claim the "peace that passes all understanding," as you trust God to bring that particular teaching to your set of life circumstances. Or maybe it's the application of God's greatest promise ever, to give you eternal life through faith in his son Jesus.

Illustration: Author and pastor Leith Anderson writes:

Several years ago I was visiting Manila and was taken, of all places, to the Manila garbage dump and saw something beyond belief. Tens of thousands of people make their homes on that dump site. They've constructed shacks out of the things other people have thrown away. And they send their children out early every morning to scavenge for food out of other people's garbage, so they can have family meals. People have been born and grown up there on the garbage dump. They have had their families, their children, their shacks, their garbage to eat, finished out their lives, and died there without ever going anywhere else, even in the city of Manila. It is an astonishing thing.

But Americans also live on the garbage dump. They are missionaries, Christians who have chosen to leave their own country and communicate the love of Jesus Christ to people who otherwise would never hear it. That is amazing to me. People would leave what we have to go and live on a garbage dump. Amazing, but not as amazing as the journey from heaven to earth.

The Son of God made that journey, and he knew what he was doing. He knew where he was going. He knew what the sacrifice would be. He journeyed from heaven to earth on a mission to save the human race. (Source: Leith Anderson, "A God's-Eye View of Christmas," Preaching Today #208)

III. You must be willing to proclaim what God has done

Simeon and Anna never considered keeping the good news to themselves. Simeon broke out into song, and then spoke a word of difficult prophecy to Mary and Joseph. As soon as she saw the child, Anna "came up and began to thank God and to speak about Him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

Perhaps it's the concept of the thank-you note. A gift received well includes an expression of thanks. A nice note of thanks is something of a vanishing art, but consider what God has done. The heart of Christmas is the incredible reality that God left His abode in heaven, and willingly placed His son in the belly of a peasant girl, so that he could experience all that it is to be a human. He came in disguise, the King of the Universe, to redeem all who would accept His offer of life.

To such a gift, a word of thanks is appropriate! Like Simeon and Anna, we can't hold back our praise of Almighty God after such a generous act of love.

Illustration: On several occasions, King Abdullah II of Jordan has disguised himself and mingled with his subjects. His rationale for this unorthodox approach is to better understand and serve his people. Taking the character of an ordinary old Arab man, he has appeared in public with a fake white beard, wearing the traditional Jordanian kufiah, and the Arabic white dress. While so disguised, the king walked around two government buildings without security and was not noticed. While waiting in a long line, he engaged people in conversation and listened to their point of view.

Such incognito appearances have marked the 42-year-old monarch's reign since he assumed the throne in 1999. He disguised himself as an old man previously while visiting a hospital. Another time, he circulated around Amman behind the wheel of a taxicab. Still another time, he passed himself off as a television reporter trying to cover a story at a duty-free shop.

According to reporter Costa Tadros, "I think that being in disguise and going around as a normal civilian to listen to their problems and know more about their needs is a good thing. I think it would make a great movie."

Jordanian government employees aren't taking any chances. They have started to spend time looking at people's faces, fearing they could meet the king in disguise.

Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois; source: Costa Tadros, Crossingborder.com

Our king came, slipped past most of the always-busy religious leaders

Conclusion

Illustration: Christmas can still arrive when you least expect it, sometimes in the most unexpected manner. Dr. James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior through a slow developing cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. She felt terribly alone - so much so she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas.

Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope?" She nodded. He said, "Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, Ma'am. He's six weeks old, completely housebroken." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

"Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked.

The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book, How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever.

In desperation she again asked, "Who sent me this puppy?"

As the young man turned to leave, he said, "Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas."

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then.

She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the World, the Lord has Come." Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness.

"Little fella," she said to the dog, "It's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it."

God has a way of sending a signal of light to remind us life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God is more powerful than Satan. Good will overcome evil.

"The people walking in darkness have seen a great light," the prophet said. "On those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned" (Matthew 4:16). (Source: Condensed from "A Special Christmas Story from Dr. James Dobson," Focus on the Family newsletter, December, 2006. Click here for complete story.