Sermon: How Bethlehem Missed Christmas - Luke 2, Matthew 1

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 2:1-20; Matthew 1:13-18

Introduction

Ann was a working mother in her 30's, and one of the millions of women who saw the marshmallow castle on the December cover of a popular women's magazine. Ann confessed, later, that she felt like a "bad mother" unless she made something from the magazines every Christmas. But the marshmallow castle was the Waterloo of her annual battle to be Super Mom at Christmas.

The directions for the castle assured her that it was a "traditional project that would add so much to a festive season," and would provide the "focal point of your holiday decorating" as well. More than likely, the article also said the castle would be fun for the entire family to construct. Ann tackled it by herself.

The ingredients were advertised as inexpensive, but Ann spent much more than she'd anticipated, and was off to a bad start even as she left the grocery store. The editors also claimed that the project was simple enough for a child to make, but Ann spent ten frustrating hours putting it together.

The hardest part for her was the turrets that surrounded the castle. The directions told her to paste peppermint candies to four vertical cardboard tubes with marshmallow crème. When Ann went to bed, the peppermints were holding fast to the towers, but when she woke up the next morning, they had oozed away from their stately positions. The castle was sagging, the towers looked exactly like naked toilet paper rolls, and the peppermint slugs were disgusting.

Ann's children wanted only to eat the marshmallows. Ann's husband took one look at the white glob of goo and declared it the ugliest thing he'd ever seen. "He didn't even want it in the house," she said.

The next Christmas, Ann was much more selective with her Christmas energy. "This year I'm going to spend that time with my children," she said. "That's what they really want from me, anyway." (Source: Unplug the Christmas Machine, Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, New York: William Morrow, 1991, pp. 28-29)

Missing Christmas because of a marshmallow castle? It happens. It's possible to miss Christmas even as it happens all around you. The stress of finding the right gifts, of wrapping them, and especially for the paying for them, can camouflage Christmas so well it might just disappear altogether.

It happened to a lot of people that very first Christmas, and nowhere was it more obvious than in the little town of Bethlehem, which slept right through the most important birth in history. Yes, Christmas came to Bethlehem, but almost everyone there missed it.

Bethlehem, however, had a good excuse. The people there were overwhelmed with life. An unexpected census meant that a tiny village was suddenly packed to the gills, unprepared for the extra guests. The demands for food, water, and lodging must have stretched the townspeople to the max, and the stretching probably went on for quite some time. To make matters worse, many of their citizens were surely required to be somewhere else! At first, the business probably looked like a golden financial opportunity. In time, however, it just looked like exhausting work.

But on top of the horrible schedule that surrounded the actual birth of the Christ child, in time, by the end of the Christmas story, exhausted Bethlehem became overwhelmed with grief.

The more familiar Christmas story is in Luke's record. But Matthew records the darker side of Bethlehem's Christmas, when a paranoid king ordered a slaughter of children, a crime of unimaginable proportions.

(Read Matthew 1:13-18)

Illustration: We hold a special place in our broken hearts for villages like Bethlehem, for people like those who lost their children. It was a horrible tragedy. It was terrible. It was an ancient version of Russia's nightmare in Beslan, when terrorists associated with al-Qaida seized a school building in 2004 and killed 338, including 172 children. We cannot comprehend that kind of terror, and yet it happened in Beslan, and it happened in ancient Bethlehem.

Yes, the residents of Bethlehem had the very best excuse to explain why Christmas came to them, but then slipped away in the night before anyone seemed to understand that the shepherds' story was true. They had been overwhelmed with life.

The truth is, a lot of things can keep you from Christmas, a lot of really, normal life-things. And just as it did in Bethlehem, grief can steal the joy of Christmas faster than any other enemy.

Illustration: "Dying is hard work," a friend with incurable cancer once told me. Even as he prepared to die, he said he had not had time to consider the issue of faith, in part because his time was completely consumed with medicine schedules, constant care, appointments with doctors and other medical personnel, surgeries, recoveries, and his most unwelcome house guest . . . exhaustion. Thankfully, he finally made the time to consider the Bible's story, and in the process of dying, found life in Christ.

The sound of Bethlehem? It certainly was no Christmas carol. Bethlehem's cry is a cry of grief, of pain, of sheer exhaustion of it all, and in the midst of the pain, they missed the song. And yet there was a song, of course, over the skies of Bethlehem. It was a song like no one had ever heard, and had the residents of the village been awake, they could have been as amazed as the shepherds.

(Read Luke 2:8-14)

The angels' message? They proclaimed the goodness of God as if there had never been an inconvenience in Bethlehem, or that there would ever be a tragedy there. They sang of God's glory, and of a birth that would bring peace on earth, over the very city where peace would soon seem like an impossible dream. It was a contrast of the greatest kind.

In time, those who believed Jesus to be the Messiah would all understand that the announcement of heaven overwhelmed all other circumstances in Bethlehem, even great grief.

My friend with the terminal illness suffered great pain for a short season, but soon was overwhelmed with the confidence that comes in accepting God's Christmas gift of grace. I can only imagine what it was like when he entered heaven, but I'm sure, at that moment, his cry of pain gave way to the angels' song of praise for the God who had saved him.

So consider the angels' song, even if grief has sapped your strength and left you wishing this Christmas would just disappear. Relate to the truth, and affirm it again, even if the pain you know today is like none other you've ever known.

Alternative illustration concept

If someone in your church has been diagnosed with terminal illness, but would be willing to talk about trusting God in the midst of dying, or in discovering the deeper meaning of Christmas, the testimony could be unforgettable. The ideal way to share such a testimony is through video, if you have the capability. Through video, a person's comments can be edited, other photographs can make the testimony even more interesting, and music can set an emotional tone for the testimony, and for the message. Best of all, you'll know exactly how long the testimony will last, and can bracket your comments around it for maximum effectiveness.

I. God is always at work: Worship Him!

The angels' song was worship at its finest. It considered nothing of the circumstances of earth, and only considered the majesty of God. The angels had a view of God that completely blocked their view of anything on earth, and they sang as if God alone was worthy of praise. And they sang as if the glory of God was making a difference in the lives of those who lived on earth. Ironically, those on earth were so focused on their circumstances, very few of them caught so much as a glimpse of what the angels saw on that first Christmas night.

The angels sang: "Glory to God in the highest! And on earth, peace to all men, on whom His favor rests!" In other words, this is the best day the world has ever known!

More than likely, Mary and Joseph missed the full impact of the angels' message. After all, Joseph was more stressed than he'd ever been, and when his young wife had needed him the most, the best he could do was find a smelly cave on the backside of Bethlehem. Mary had just given birth, and despite the sweet refrains of "Silent Night," giving birth is . . . well . . . giving birth. The labor and delivery must have been difficult. The shepherds were tired, both physically and emotionally. Financially? The shepherds were very near the bottom of the economic pyramid. The people of the village were packed into tight quarters, exhausted from a census and all the trouble the census had caused. For all of them, life seemed very difficult, in its own way. If their life circumstances were the logical reason they would give glory to God in the highest, then this wouldn't have been the night for a song.

Your circumstances are probably very different from any of those in Bethlehem. But perhaps it's a job that applies the daily pressure. Maybe it's a relationship challenge that dominates your thoughts. Each December, it could be a schedule packed too tightly with things to do, things to buy, things to wrap, things to cook, things to decorate, things to eat, things to attend . . . you get the idea!

Or maybe your circumstances have taken a turn toward the painful. Some loss, some illness, some point of grief has taken away any desire to celebrate Christmas, or even life. Perhaps financial pressure has squeezed the joy right out of your daily schedule.

If life is difficult, or even too busy, it's possible to miss the truth of the angels' song that broke into the night skies over troubled Bethlehem.

In the midst of your circumstances, be they good or bad, God is worthy of your praise. God never changes, while circumstances change constantly. Therefore, God is worthy of your best song of love, right now. And God's favor is upon you, even if your circumstances would argue that the opposite is true. And whether you can see it or not, God is always at work.

Illustration: The great missionary explorer, David Livingstone, served in Africa from 1840 until his death in 1873. Pastors Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro tell of an incident from Livingstone's life that illustrates the truth that God is always at work, even if we can't immediately see what God is doing.

Livingstone was eager to travel into the uncharted lands of Central Africa to preach the gospel. On one occasion, the famous nineteenth-century missionary and explorer arrived at the edge of a large territory that was ruled by a tribal chieftain. According to tradition, the chief would come out to meet him there; Livingstone could go forward only after an exchange was made. The chief would choose any item of Livingstone's personal property that caught his fancy and keep it for himself, while giving the missionary something of his own in return.

Livingstone had few possessions with him, but at their encounter he obediently spread them all out on the ground - his clothes, his books, his watch, and even the goat that provided him with milk (since chronic stomach problems kept him from drinking the local water). To his dismay, the chief took this goat. In return, the chief gave him a carved stick, shaped like a walking stick.

Livingstone was most disappointed. He began to gripe to God about what he viewed as a stupid walking cane. What could it do for him compared to the goat that kept him well? Then one of the local men explained, "That's not a walking cane. It's the king's very own scepter, and with it you will find entrance to every village in our country. The king has honored you greatly."

The man was right. God opened Central Africa to Livingstone, and as successive evangelists followed him wave after wave of conversions occurred.

Maybe we could put it this way. Even if life seems to "get your goat," God is still at work! (Source: Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro, The Culture Shift (Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 1-2

II. God is always in control: Trust Him

Illustration: Did you catch the story of the man who tried to pass a counterfeit, one-million-dollar bill? It happened in October, in Pittsburgh, Pa. If it hadn't been a serious effort to make a fortune fast, it would have been a laughable prank.

After all, there is no million-dollar bill in United States currency. In fact, there's nothing larger than a $100 bill! And, come to think about it, few check-out clerks in few stores are actually going to have change for a million. Nevertheless, on a Saturday night filled with high hopes of solving all his financial problems, the counterfeiter made quite a scene in a supermarket checkout line, fighting with the manager who took his big bucks, and very quickly leaving the store in police custody.

OK, most of us are aware that it's silly to put your hopes in a bogus, million-dollar bill. But where is your hope? The Bible says our hope is found in Christ alone. (Source: "Man jailed for trying to pass $1M bill," Associated Press, Yahoo News, 10-9-07.)

Mary and Joseph were making great changes in their lives, and they must have wondered several times if they were on the right path.

Mary's instructions had come in a mysterious vision. Joseph's instructions had come in a dream. As the months passed since those incidents, there was, apparently, silence from God. How many times had she wondered if she'd heard properly? How many times had Joseph seen the doubtful looks from those who knew about his dream, or his decision to stay with Mary?

It must have meant the world to Mary and Joseph when the shepherds arrived, breathless with excitement, and filled with the wonder of a miraculous message. In the eyes of the shepherds, Mary and Joseph reconnected with their own encounter with the Holy. Later on, international travelers would visit, their eyes also filled with the wonder. There would be conversations at the Temple with an old man and an old woman, both of them ecstatic with the joy of seeing a child whose arrival - they said - had been told to them by God Himself.

Those separate encounters began to build in their total impact. By the time Joseph had a second dream, a few nights later, there was no hesitation in his willingness to believe, or obey. He and Mary took the child and ran toward Egypt, trusting that God was in control at that moment, just as God had been in control leading up to that moment.

Trusting God is the challenge of life. It is the essence of faith. The entire Bible is woven around this principle. Moses had to trust that God was in control, even as Pharaoh turned the people against Moses. Noah had to trust God even though he'd never seen a flood. Ruth trusted as she walked toward Bethlehem with bitter Naomi. David had to trust as he waited to become king. Jeremiah had to trust as he followed a trail of tears out of Jerusalem. When Mary and Joseph were asked to trust God on the backside of Bethlehem, they weren't in a unique position. Instead, they were simply two more individuals in a very long line of God's people who had been asked to believe that God was in control. even if they couldn't see the evidence of that control right at that moment.

You're in that line, too. God will ask you to trust Him, to believe that He is in control.

But be aware of the truth the Christmas story gives us. Not everyone can make the leap of faith that is required here. The shepherds managed to make it to the birthplace, but no one else in Bethlehem did. The long-timers in Bethlehem surely knew that one of the prophets had promised that the Messiah would be born there, and more than likely, they quoted Micah's famous prophecy often. And yet the big moment came and went, slipping past Bethlehem the way the meaning of Christmas sometimes slips past us.

III. God loves us more than we'll ever know

In our culture, Christmas is all about the gifts. We spend billions on the gift exchanges every holiday season, and much of the joy of the holiday is in seeing the delight of a gift that has been chosen with care, and received with delight.

Christmas was God's ultimate gift. Jesus would later say that it was God's love for us that served as the motivation of Christmas. "For God so loved the world," Jesus said in John 3:16, "that he gave . . . " And there's something inside us that has never gotten over the gift.

Illustration: Thanksgiving Day in 2003 brought the news that President George W. Bush had secretly traveled to Iraq to have Thanksgiving Dinner with the troops in Baghdad. It was a stunning visit for the 600 soldiers gathered in the mess hall, and morale among the troops was sky-high.

The soldiers had gathered for what they thought would be a speech by chief U.S. administrator, Paul Bremer. Bremer told the troops he would read a Thanksgiving proclamation from the President, then paused and noted that it was customary for the most senior official present to read the President's proclamation. "Is there anybody back there who's more senior?" he asked. The President himself then emerged from behind a curtain as cheering soldiers climbed on chairs and tables to yell their approval.

The unannounced visit not only brought wild cheers from battle-worn soldiers, but also stunned the nation and even surprised the President's parents, who had been expecting him at the Thanksgiving table at his Crawford, Texas, ranch.

By the end of the day, the soldiers were back to the business of war, in a very difficult and dangerous environment. But it had made a huge difference that the President had come to them, in the midst of their environment. The gift of his visit was the highest honor the President could give his troops.

Christmas is the season to remember that God Himself came to us, ready to teach, encourage, and make a way for us to see our way home after our particular battle is over.

The shepherds heard the song of Christmas, and returned to their fields with a different outlook on life. The magi were impacted with the child they found, literally changing their path home as a result. Mary and Joseph - already convinced that God had led them to Bethlehem - left Bethlehem with a deeper conviction than ever that God could be trusted, and that the child they carried with them was the greatest gift the world had ever known.

And through the ages, millions more have found the gift, realizing that the God who is so worthy of worship, the God who demands that we trust Him, is also the God who first of all gave us a gift, motivated by unspeakable love, so that we could know Him personally.

Illustration: Country music star Travis Tritt spent many years playing out-of-the-way joints before he made it big in the music industry. He reports that many of the bars were dangerous places, with drunk fans starting fights over the smallest matters. But Tritt found a unique way to keep the peace in such situations. He says:

"'Silent Night' proved to be my all-time lifesaver. Just when [bar fights] started getting out of hand, when bikers were reaching for their pool cues and rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing 'Silent Night.' It could be the middle of July - I didn't care. Sometimes they'd even start crying, standing there watching me sweat and play Christmas carols." (Source: Twang! The Ultimate Book of Country Music Quotations, compiled by Raymond Obstfeld and Sheila Burgener, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.)

Illustration possibility

Briefly share your testimony here of how you came to Christ, or use the testimony of someone in your church (with their permission, of course) who's recently come to Christ. Help your hearers connect the information of Christmas with a decision they could make to profess Christ, be baptized as a believer, and to live committed lives for Christ as a result of that decision.

Conclusion

Illustration: Charles Schulz found the gift of Christmas, coming to faith in Christ as a child, and returning home after service in World War II with very strong Christian beliefs. For a while, even worked as a writer for a Christian magazine. But he found fame, of course, as the creator of "Peanuts," the most famous comic strip in history.

Ironically, in 1965, television producers almost turned away the Shultz' most successful project of all.

When the first screening of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was seen, executive producer Lee Mendelson says that CBS network executives hated the show. "They said it was slow," says Mendelson, who, along with animator Bill Melendez, told Schulz, "You can't read from the Bible on network television."

Schulz's desires prevailed, however, and the simple cartoon special garnered an unbelievable 50 percent of the nation's viewers that first year. It went on to win both an Emmy and a Peabody award. Pop Culture experts affirm that the program, now considered an icon, draws strength from its back-to-the-basics approach.

The ironic thing is that the program, which intentionally turned away from a materialistic view of Christmas, has become a huge corporate moneymaker. During its 40th broadcast, it won its timeslot in terms of total viewers (15.4 million), and led all adult, teen, and children's demographics. It also earned over $6 million in ad revenue, as companies paid over $200,000 for each commercial airing with it.

Schulz's widow, Jeannie, is not surprised that the show has earned such large profits, saying, "[Charles] said there would always be a market for innocence." (Source: Bill Nichols, "The Christmas Classic That Almost Wasn't," USA Today, December 6, 2005, pp. 1-2A; "You're a Good Magnet for Holiday Ads, Charlie Brown," LATimes.com).

It turns out the song of Christmas is a beautiful one, indeed, if people will only hear it. Most in Bethlehem missed the song. Pain and grief and tragedy and busyness got in the way. But for those who were listening, and for those who responded, the gift the received was nothing short of life-changing. Every Christmas, the song plays again, with God's constant invitation for us to hear, to believe, and to respond.