Sermon: How Nazareth Missed Christmas - Mark 6

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: Mark 6:4-6

Introduction

Maybe you've seen the absurd-looking holiday trend. It is literally turning a traditional Christmas celebration upside down. One company based in New York offered a 7-foot, pre-lit Christmas tree that stands out because it stands on its top. At $599.95, it also must have been a bargain, for the company says it's completely sold out. Advantages, you ask? It's easier to see the ornaments, and it allows more room underneath for decorations, and presents! And needless to say, it's quite the conversation piece. And it's not just one company. Another business offers a crystal tree, all in white, that stands on its head, and Target is among the chains that has offered such a product. (Source: "Fake trees turn Christmas on its head," Craig Wilson, USA TODAY, Nov. 7, 2005)

Illustration: Most folks, says psychologist Patricia Dalton, don't need a tree to be turned upside down at Christmas. She says rampant consumerism, once confined to the holidays, has become a year-round American affliction. She observes unhappy people trying to fill the emptiness of their lives by irresponsible spending and then consulting psychologists like her to figure out what has gone wrong in their lives.

"Those of us who lived through the '60s," she says, "seem to have forgotten the warning that everything you buy owns you." To pay for all their junk, people now work so hard that they're ruining their marriages, their families, and their health.

No wonder many of us feel "spiritually empty" as the year winds down.

(Source: "Christmas: The Growing Backlash Against Greed," The Week, Dec. 10, 2004).

Left unchecked, an American Christmas can be turned upside down in a hurry. Purchases can leave months of extra debt to pay off, hectic schedules can rob an individual or family of much needed rest during the holidays, and the blinders of consumerism can, appropriately enough, leave someone searching for Christmas "blind" to the true meaning and spirit of the holiday.

Illustration: Americans spend more than $23 billion every Christmas on toys alone, more than the next 10 industrialized countries spend on toys combined. (Source: "Harper's Index," Harper's Magazine, December 2005, p. 13.)

A used car that's worth less than its owner owes on it is an "upside down" car, according to the car salesmen among us. A Christmas season that leaves its celebrants gasping for rest and struggling with debt is just as discouraging. So the question comes, every Christmas: "Wouldn't you like to trade your "used-car Christmas" for something better?

This series of messages is about the very first Christmas, and the amazing number of people who missed it. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, there were countless opportunities to celebrate Christmas, and precious few people who managed to do so. The repercussions of missing Christmas? It goes far beyond a short season of decorations and rich foods. In the case of Nazareth, missing Christmas led to something far more troubling, for this community managed to miss life-changing faith, even with Jesus living in their midst.

And here's the irony of an upside down Christmas. The meaning of Christmas can hide in the plain view, inviting all who would pause a chance to see the beauty of God's incredible gift.

Take that upside down Christmas tree. As it turns out, it's not the first time people have decorated for the holiday with an inverted tree. In the 12th Century, Christians hung fir trees upside down in their homes at Christmas to remind them of the Trinity. The fir tree's triangular shape had become known as the "Trinity tree," and the practice of hanging one indoors was actually a sign of the faith! However, it almost certainly never occurred to Christians living 900 years ago to fill that extra floor space with expensive gifts purchased on credit-card budgets!

Back to Nazareth. The story started there, when Mary got the word that she would carry the long-awaited Christ child.

(Read Luke 1:26-38)

Needless to say, Mary found Christmas. It's not just that the angel of the Lord found her, for the critically important factor in Mary's life was that she was willing to be found. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary said, and the rest of her life was a matter of the Lord filling in the details.

But there in Nazareth, for a season, Mary was the only person to believe God was at work in a new way. It took a miraculous dream for Joseph to get on board (Matthew 1:18-24), and eventually, Mary had to spend most of her pregnancy, and her time of giving birth, away from her village, her friends, and even her family.

The lesson for us today is more important than you might think. Yes, we'd like to reclaim the rest of the holiday. Yes, we'd like to remember the real reason for the celebration. Yes, we'd like to spend less money on gifts, and realize what an incredible gift God has given to us.

But if we miss the meaning of this season of faith, we also might miss the opportunity for experiencing life-changing faith years later. It happened that way in Nazareth! When Jesus began his teaching ministry, he returned to Nazareth and was invited to preach in the synagogue. When Jesus delivered the same message that was already being accepted in other villages, the people of Nazareth refused to believe.

(Read Mark 6:4-6)

What a stunning statement. Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith. If he'd asked his mother, he'd have known that the village had been nursing the problem for the past 30 years.

Nazareth had heard not from one, but from two of its upstanding young adults that angels were delivering important messages from God, and yet the people of the village refused to believe. They were far too familiar with Mary and Joseph to believe God might be using them.

Nazareth had seen evidence of Mary's pregnancy, and evidence of Joseph's decision to believe a miracle had taken place. Granted, it was a stretch, but it seems not even Mary's family would believe their was the faintest of possibilities that a miracle had taken place.

Nazareth had access to the scripture in its synagogue, and had surely read the promise that "a virgin would be with child," (Isaiah 7:14), and that he would be called a Nazarene (Matthew 2:23, in a summary of several Old Testament prophets). Even so, when their native son, a Nazarene, the one born of a woman who still insisted her pregnancy had been a miracle, they refused to believe that Jesus might be the Messiah.

They were simply too familiar with Jesus. He'd grown up among them. He'd lived among them every day, for decades.

So, though the miracles were already happening in other places, in the hometown of faithlessness, people with diseases, pain and disabilities returned home holding fast to their doubts … and their problems. A little faith could have changed their lives, and shown them far more than the truth of Christmas.

The impact of this story? Most of us are as familiar with Jesus as the folks in Nazareth. If you've been in church very long, you know the stories, you've sung the songs, and you've even memorized scripture. But there's still a huge gulf of faith and trust that needs a bridge, and only you can build that bridge. This Christmas, would Jesus be amazed at your faith … or at your lack of faith? Would it be yet another Christmas filled with too much to do, too much food, and too many expenses? Or could this be the Christmas when faith finally takes hold, and like Mary, you might say, "I am the Lord's servant?"

I. This is the right time for the right message

What's the right message? Most of our culture seems to miss it that in a season of frantic giving and going, there is a reason for the season. His name is Jesus, and he is called "Immanuel." The very words mean "The Lord Saves," and "God is with us."

There's a sense that telling the world about Jesus might never be easier than at Christmas, when the concept of gift-giving is so clearly seen.

Illustration: A woman was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds. She was tired of standing in lines. She was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out days before.

Her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened. It was full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load.

As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up, and shot!"

A few others nodded theirs heads or grunted in agreement.

Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator, came a single voice that said: "Don't worry. They already crucified him."

(Source: Homiletics, November/December 2006) Volume 18; submitted by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky.)

A lot of this Christmas series has been about simplifying Christmas. It's about spending less, doing less, and as a result, enjoying Christmas more.

Illustration: A survey on men's attitudes about Christmas shopping may provide useful information for busy women. Apparently, many men dread holiday shopping so much, they will do almost anything else.

Instead of going Christmas shopping, 89 percent of men would choose to watch their favorite sports team lose.

As an alternative to venturing into crowded stores and shopping for gifts, 37 percent of men would rather bake cookies.

Greg Saitz, Newark Star-Ledger (12-10-04); submitted by Fred Mueller, Hillsborough, New Jersey

How can we share the right message, right now?

Your family and friends might very well stand up and take notice if you simply sat down and took some rest. If you intentionally schedule in a time of personal worship and reflection, you'll probably draw more attention to such a surprising practice than you ever dreamed. If you make it a family tradition to give at least one major gift to missions efforts around the world, or even your favorite local charity, it'll make a mark on someone's memory.

Upon reflection, it may never be easier than at Christmas to share the message of Christ. It's the right time for the right message.

II. This is the right place for the right message

Nazareth didn't see itself as the right place for the home of the Messiah. Part of the meaning of the phrase "Nazarene," is "despised one." The village did not have the best reputation. Remember Nathaniel, the disciple who put his foot in his mouth even as he met Jesus? "Nazareth?!" he had said. "Can anything good come out from there?" (John 1:46)

And yet Isaiah had promised that the Messiah would be despised, even contemptible. Psalm 22 had driven the point home, too.

Few young people grow up thinking their home town has the chance to produce greatness. And yet Knob Creek, Kentucky produced Abraham Lincoln before it had a chance to disappear from the map. Without Lincoln, it surely would have vanished. With 611 people living there, Plains, Georgia, produced Jimmy Carter. John Wayne was born in Winterset, Iowa, population 4,805. Tiger Woods was born in Cypress, California, population 49,000, and President George W. Bush was born in New Haven, Conn., population 124,000. Then again, Michael Jordan was born in Brooklyn, just one skinny kid trying to find his way among the 2.4 million people living around him.

Any place, at any time, can produce a great leader or an unforgettable entertainer. And this place, our place, happens to be the right place for the right message of Christmas.

Who else is going to bring the Good News to our community? Frankly, everyone else is far too busy at Christmas! At some point, it's important to realize that the best person to reach your family, or your circle of friends, is you. It's the someone else's responsibility, and it's probably not even someone else's opportunity. And yet you are there, inside the circle, armed with years of relationships and trust.

Find a way to get the message to your area of influence this year. Include a spiritual side to your family celebrations. Include a prayer of faith, or even the simple reading of the Christmas story, as part of your gift-exchanging. When the afternoon grows quiet and it's a good time for a reflection, engage the person God has put in your path with a conversation more serious than the outcome of that afternoon's football game.

Application opportunity

If your church has a Christmas outreach ministry, promote it here. Connect the presentation of a musical, a food ministry, or a Christmas drama to the concept of sharing the right message of Christmas with your community. What would your community be like without that particular outreach? The magic of the movie "It's a Wonderful Life" is in George Bailey's opportunity to see what his community would be like without his positive influence. Your church, too, has made a positive impact on your community. What an honor to have made a difference! If you have the ability to show photographs of your church in action, do so as you explain the ministry, and in the process, introducing newcomers to their possibilities for ministry in your church. If it's appropriate, you might invite a testimony from someone involved in a small Christmas outreach, or perhaps, someone changed by that outreach.

III. You are the right person for the right message

You might have doubts about your ability to deliver the message, or you might be the most confident prophet since Elijah. But each of us, in our own ways, with our own skills, has been gifted and charged by God to deliver the news of Christmas.

Mary and Joseph accepted the challenge, trusted God, and found the miracle. They paid a tremendous price for accepting the task God gave them, enduring shame, scorn, and hundreds of miles of difficult and dangerous journeys. The rest of Nazareth, it seems, endured none of the discomfort, for they did not accept the challenge of faith. As a result, they missed a lot more than simply Christmas. They missed it all.

What a person does with the right message, given in the right time, at the right place, is completely up to him or her. Life-changing faith - Christmas-finding faith - is the kind of faith that will put action steps on top of belief.

The decision belongs to you. Take the journey of faith that Mary and Joseph took, and you'll find the miracle. Can't believe? Can't trust? You'll suffer the same fate as people in Nazareth, who simply never overcame their lack of trust. If you can trust, if you can come to faith in Christ, then you'll find the same truth that Mary found as she journeyed into the unknown future of faith. "Nothing," the angel had told her, "is impossible with God."

Conclusion

The right place, the right time, the right person … and most importantly, the right message. Christmas started in Nazareth and came to Bethlehem. Both villages were filled with people who missed what God was doing in their midst, the same way people in our culture can literally celebrate a huge holiday without ever comprehending what God has done, and continues to do, in our midst. And yet God is at work, changing lives one at the time, and getting the message out in some surprising ways.

Illustration: Pete Winn was in his local post office just a few days before Christmas. At the end of the transaction, a very helpful postal managed a smile and the standard line: "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Pete quipped, "Can you help me pay for Christmas?"

Without missing a beat, she replied, "He already paid for it."

And shocked with a glimpse of Christmas right there in the Post Office, Pete Winn found his bearings, and said, "He certainly did." (Source: Pete Winn, "Citizen Link Update," Dec. 24, 2003).