

Truthfully Christmas

Christmas is the most advertised and commercialized holiday in the world. Bar none. Nothing else even comes close to the amount of attention Christmas gets. It gets months. It is the most anticipated holiday. It is the most celebrated holiday of the year.

You would think it would be hard to miss Christmas because for months there have been Christmas decorations, Christmas lighting, Christmas songs, Christmas shopping, Christmas parties, Christmas TV specials, Christmas advertisements and on and on and on. How in the world could anyone miss Christmas?

Well, people do it all the time. They do all the things we're supposed to do for the holidays, but they still manage to miss Christmas. They get the trappings of Christmas, the trivia of Christmas and the traditions of Christmas, but not the truth of Christmas.

The ways that can happen are nothing new - in fact you can see them at work at the very first Christmas. To get at the truth and see where we can get into trouble, let's look at three reasons why people missed out on the truth of Christmas even during the first Christmas.

The first one is, **1. Distractions Can Hide the Truth** - Luke tells us, *"At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire... All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea... And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them."*

Bethlehem was full of people, come to fulfill the requirement that they participate in the census - so many people that there was no place left for Mary and Joseph to stay. We know now that it wasn't a lack of room at an inn - that was a mistranslation. There was no guest-space available for them with any of Joseph's family in town.

They were just another couple of people in the crowd. No one was paying any attention to them. There was just too much going on in town. People had other concerns. No one would have time or energy for them.

It's way too easy to let all the requirements of our lives distract us from what God may be doing. Many of the people of that time were actually waiting for the Messiah - they wanted God to do something; they were looking for God to do something. But they were so distracted by everything around them, that they didn't notice that what they were looking for was actually beginning. They didn't recognize the reality when it came.

John 1:9-10 tells us, *"The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him."* They just didn't get it - and a lot of the time we miss it when God is doing something as well because we're just too involved in other things.

The second thing that can make us miss the truth is, **2. Complacency Can Make Me Miss the Truth** - It is interesting that the Son of God is being born, and not a single religious leader seems to be interested enough to take any action. None of them come to the party. They all missed it because they're so familiar with it - they've become complacent, content with what they know.

We can be too familiar with the Christmas story - enough so that it doesn't inspire us anymore. It doesn't cause any awe or amazement. You've heard it all before. You've celebrated Christmas your entire life. You know the story of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. You know the story of the shepherds and the wise men. You know the story of the angels. You've been there, done that. You know the story; the songs; the traditions.

You miss it because you *think* you understand it. And you end up taking it for granted. You don't expect God to do anything new or teach you anything new.

Last week we talked about the Magi - the wise men and how they're an example of how to worship. They researched the prophecies and knew that a Messiah was to be born but didn't know exactly where. So they ask for a meeting with the king ask, "Where is this king supposed to be born?"

Herod doesn't know. So he calls for help. Matthew 2 says, *"He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, 'Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?' 'In Bethlehem in Judea,' they said, 'for this is what the prophet [Micah] wrote...'"*

The religious scholars know immediately what he's talking about. They'd been discussing, debating, and dissecting this for hundreds of years. So they know what's going on.

They knew that the book of Micah chapter 5, verse 4 says the Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem. They knew the details. But even though they were very familiar with this, they are so used to it just being a subject of

discussion that they had stopped thinking of it as something that they needed to do anything about. They've heard it all before.

So often those of us who know the stories and are very familiar with the customs who miss the point of it all. It's often people from outside the culture who end up getting most excited about the real Christmas story. People in our culture are so familiar with Christmas that they think they know it all.

With those religious scholars, do you know how far they were from Bethlehem there in Jerusalem? About five miles. They wouldn't even go five miles to check it out. They were so familiar with the story. They would discuss the Savior than go see the Savior.

This is so easy to have happen if you've grown up in church. You've studied the Bible. You've heard the story of Christmas over and over. You can miss it. Because you think, "I've seen it all."

Over the centuries as they kept waiting for the Savior to show up they added more and more traditions. By the time Jesus arrived, people were paying more attention to the traditions than they were to any possibility that God might actually be doing something.

We have so many traditions around Christmas now. And they keep adding on. There's Santa and Rudolph and Frosty and Elf on the Shelf. They keep adding new traditions, new traditions, new traditions. They're just piling on! So many things that, eventually, there's no time to do anything about Jesus coming to us on earth.

This year Christmas day is on a Sunday and a lot of churches aren't going to have worship services that day because they say that people have other things to do and will want to stay at home. So we're going to celebrate Christmas by NOT gathering as Christ's family, the church? Doesn't that miss the point?

You can put up Christmas lights and still be in the dark.

The third reason people missed the truth during the first Christmas was because of, **3. Selfishness Can Blind Me to Truth** - Herod was the king of Israel. But he was also a Roman citizen and of Arab decent. Herod's father was by descent an Edomite whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. Herod was raised as a Jew. So he's not Jewish by heritage. Most Jewish people hated Herod.

Herod was all about Herod. He was for anything that built up his authority and against anything or anybody who might threaten his authority as king of the Jews. Anybody who he thought might overthrow him, he had killed. He had his wife killed because he thought she would oppose him. He had his mother killed. He had two of his sons killed early on in life because he thought they might challenge his reign. He had his brother-in-law killed. Five days before Herod died he had most of the rest of his children who were in the area killed and he had all kinds of prominent people in Israel rounded up and put in prison. He ordered that the moment he died they would all be killed because he didn't think there would be enough weeping over his death so he wanted to give people more to weep about.

So when the wise men showed up, he was determined to eliminate anything that would interfere with what he wanted. Matthew tells us, "*King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem.*" He didn't like what he heard. He was like this about everything - every custom and tradition and teaching. He only looked at things in the way they affected his plans. He only paid attention to the things that said what he wanted to hear and he ignored or rejected or crushed anything that challenged his ideas and desires.

A lot of people don't take the time for Christ at Christmas. They know at some level that if they really dedicate the season to Christ that they will lose some freedom to do all the things they want to do.

Bottom line on Herod is that Herod didn't want anybody to be in control of his life except himself. We're not really that different. We don't have the kind of power Herod had but we don't want anybody to be in control of us except us. We don't want anybody else to be king.

It's the Herod mentality. I'm not going to let anybody else be king in my life. Not even God who made me. 1 Timothy 6 says, "*Some people have missed the most important thing in life – they don't know God!*"

You can know all kinds of other stuff but if you don't know God you missed the purpose of your life. Because you weren't put on this planet to mark things off your to do list. You were put here to get to know God and to prepare for being with him forever in eternity.

So how do I not miss Christmas? How do I focus of Christ's presence rather than the presents we give and receive? Do these three things:

1. Simplify and Prioritize - That's the first thing to do. Stop filling your life with less important things. Don't let busyness keep you from knowing God. Psalm 39 says, "*We are merely moving shadows, and all our busy rushing*

ends in nothing.” The pace of life we allow this time of year. We rush around trying to buy things - many of which are things people don't really need.

Sometimes you can accomplish more by doing less, by not being so busy. Busyness can fill your schedule and fracture your family. The greatest tragedy in the world is that so many of us get too busy to take time for God. And it's not just because of work. Even after we retire, we often don't actually take more time to be with God, to serve God and others.

The antidote is to stop running and slow down. Psalm 46:10 says, “*Be still and know that I am God.*” Be still. That's the chill out verse of the Bible. Take some time to stop and sit for a minute and know that God is present and God is God.

French scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal said, “All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.” I don't know that that's true but I know that a lot of our problems come from our inability to sit still. We're just too hurried and worried. We don't seem to be able to stop filling our lives with less important things that crowd out God.

So all of the people right there in Bethlehem are rushing around, coping with the crowds and who does God choose to tell that God is coming to earth in human form as the Son of God? He tells shepherds. Shepherds!

In that culture sheep herders or shepherds were on the lowest rung of the status ladder. They were lower than most criminals. But God tells them the good news first. The outcasts. The people on the fringe; people no one else wants to associate with. Why does God tell the shepherds?

Well, one reason was that Christ came to save those who are outcast, but probably another reason was they weren't too busy to listen. They weren't too busy to listen to the angels. And when God said to go to Bethlehem and see this new baby, they go. They didn't say, “Sorry! We've got too much we've got to go do first.”

God speaks to people who are ready and willing to listen. If you're too busy, no wonder you feel like God never talks to you. Take some time to just sit still and be quiet and read the Bible. If you don't have time to get to know God, then you're too busy. You need time with God on a daily basis. So you've got to stop filling your life with less important things. Simplify! Get rid of things that take up too much of your time and resources. Prioritize! Do what's important and loving rather than just what seems urgent.

Then the second thing is, **2. Focus and Pay Attention** - The second thing you've got to do is you've got to really consider what this all means in your life. Look closely at why Jesus came. Why does he matter? And what difference does it make to my life today?

Despite the wrong motives and without the right information, Herod still managed to tell the wise men the right thing to do. In Matthew 2:8 Herod tells the wise men “*Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child.*”

Make a careful search for this child.

As I said last week, we don't really know what they saw in the sky. But here's what we do know: Other people had to be able to see it too. Because if it's in the sky the rest of the world could see it. And there were many people much closer to Bethlehem than those wise men. The thing is, none of them noticed or made the effort.

Jeremiah 29:13 says, “*If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.*” I want to challenge you to not be like one of those people who celebrate all the traditions of Christmas year after year with little concern about why we actually are celebrating and what it means to your life today.

You don't have to understand all of it in every detail. Theologians have been trying to figure it out for centuries and it's still mysterious in many ways. But you don't have to understand it to benefit from it. There are a lot of things I don't understand that I benefit from. I don't understand the details of quantum physics. But that doesn't stop me from using technology that is developed from it.

One time there was a guy who came to Jesus and said Jesus, I need you to heal my daughter. Jesus goes, Do you believe that I can heal your daughter? And the guy says, I want to believe. Help me with my doubts. And Jesus said, that's good enough. And bam! He healed the girl.

3. Surrender and Celebrate - Christmas is good news. You don't have to keep control over the good news like Herod wanted to. Herod didn't worry about whether it was from God or not, he only worried how it would affect him. Don't avoid the good news. Don't be afraid the good news. Don't ignore the good news. You can celebrate the good news.

Luke 2 says “*...the angel reassured them. 'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!'*”

Notice he doesn't say I bring you bad news of great misery. In John 10:10 Jesus said, *"My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."* It is good news.

You cannot live life to the fullest until you connect to the Creator who loves you and made you and has a purpose for your life. Only God can tell you your purpose in life. Then you can live life to the fullest.

So, you don't have to hold back from God; you don't have to look out for your own interests; you can surrender to God because Christ is good news for your life.

John 3:17 tells us, *"God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."* He came not to penalize us but to save us.

I don't know everything you're going through. It may have been a tough year, a rough year, a sad year.

I have lived through tough times too. I have been down in the pit. I've pastored for twenty-some years. There is no sin that can shock me. I've seen the dark side and the evil side and the weak side of people. But I also know this: For unto you is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And he says, I have come that you might have life. I didn't come to condemn you; I came to save you.

So no matter what you're going through here's my advice. When things get bad don't run from God. Run to God. You don't get any comfort running away. You just get more fear, more anxiety, more misery, more pain.

So let me just wrap it up. Which of these things could cause you to miss Christmas?

Do you have Distractions? Are you too busy. Is there too much going on around you?

Is it a matter of Complacency? Are you so familiar with this story because you've heard it all your life and you're going through the paces - doing what you usually do; following your traditions just because it's what you do? You put up the tree, you send the cards, you do the gifts. But all the traditions have more to do with warm feeling you have than any real connection to Christ. Is it something like the religious people two thousand years ago who knew all the answers and all the traditions, who did the right things and knew the right things but it didn't really change their day to day life.

Or are you letting it be all about you and what you like? Are you kind of like Herod and don't want to surrender control and let someone else to be king in life? Selfishness doesn't just mean not being willing to share. It can mean just wanting what you want and letting that be the more important thing.

Let me just close with this. The whole reason we give gifts at Christmas is because the wise men started this tradition. They brought gifts to give to the baby Jesus. So at Christmas we give gifts to each other.

Can you imagine going to somebody's birthday where everybody gives gifts to everyone except to the birthday boy? What kind of party is that? You get gifts. Everybody else gets gifts. But nobody gives gifts to the birthday boy.

What are you giving Jesus for his birthday? You're going to give gifts and you're going to get gifts. What are you going to give Jesus for his birthday? What do you give the guy who's got everything?

What does Jesus not have? He doesn't have your love unless you give it to him. He doesn't have your trust unless you give it to him. He doesn't have your life unless you give it to him. And he's not going to force it. It's a matter of love. He gave his life for you. Will you give your life to him every day?