



After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Matthew 2:1–12).

As we continue in our celebration of Advent, I want to ask the question: today, How do you miss Christmas? I think many people miss Christmas every year. That may surprise you, seeing we all get drowned in a sea of Christmas advertising starting in November. But I'm convinced many of us still miss it. We observe the season, but we're oblivious to the reality of what we're celebrating. Don't get me wrong. It still brings up lots of warm feelings for many of us. We love how it brings our families together, and the look of wonder on children's faces. We love the holiday parties. Many of us still see it as a time to help others and express the spirit of giving. All those things may have their place, but even with all that it's possible to miss Christmas.

Not a lot has changed since the time of Joseph and Mary because nearly everyone around them missed that first Christmas. Like people today, they missed it for different reasons, but nearly everyone missed the reality God was being born in a stable! Ironically, one of the people who missed Christmas was the one

called King of the Jews; Herod, the Great. This morning we have the privilege of meeting him.

Welcome, King Herod!

Herod: I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I haven't had a chance to defend myself for centuries. I've been insulted and demeaned and I am determined to set the record straight this morning.

Mark: Well thank you for being with us. You're going to have to pardon me, but how do I address you? Are you comfortable with the title "Herod the Great"?

Herod: Of course I am! The title is well deserved! I was a great builder. During the 41 years of my reign I built theaters, amphitheatres, hippodromes. I introduced athletic games in honor of Caesar. I rebuilt fortresses. You know, it was my idea to cover the temple dome in Jerusalem in gold.

Mark: Well, those are impressive accomplishments, but what about the events Matthew recorded about you? You wanted to murder infants?

Herod: You had to bring that up, didn't you? You want to skip over my great accomplishments and talk about what that no good tax collector Matthew wrote about me. Fine!

Mark: Do you remember the astrologers and the baby I'm referring to?

Herod: Of course I do, how could I forget those men who came to visit me and ask about that baby who was to come?

Mark: What did you think of them?

Herod: They asked me what they'd been asking everyone else: "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We've seen his star and we've come to worship him."

Mark: Did their question worry you?

Herod: More like, concerned. Frankly, I didn't know what to make of them. So I assembled the experts and asked about this Messiah. They said according to their Scriptures there was a Messiah who was to come from Bethlehem, a small village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. None of them thought there was much credibility here and no one wanted to go there to check it out. But you can't be too careful when your power is being threatened. So I gave those astrologers instructions to go to Bethlehem and then report back to me. After a couple of weeks passed and they hadn't come back to see me, my concern turned into worry. I wondered if they'd found something ... or someone.

Mark: But King Herod, Matthew says you had the little boys around Bethlehem slaughtered. It sounds like a heartless act for a great leader to commit.

Herod: I did what anyone in power would do. One way or another you protect yourself. There were only about 40 boys there anyway. I was threatened. You do all kinds of things when you're afraid. Fear makes you strike out, doesn't it? Have you ever felt threatened by someone?

Mark: Yes I have, but I've never responded in such violence...

Herod: But you know how I felt. Listen! You ought to feel threatened now. Threatened by that baby. After all, he didn't stay a cuddly cute baby; he changed the world. I should have wiped him out when I had the chance. Not that it would have stopped him. My son, Herod Antipas, conspired with a Roman named Pilate to put him to death, and they succeeded. The 2 of them had him crucified. But they couldn't get rid of him because he came back from the dead. How do you deal with someone like that? He's a king like I could never be a king. He threatens any kingdom builder, I tell you. He's dangerous. I came to warn you. You make Christmas about that chubby man in a red suit or gift giving or holiday parties. You make Christmas into whatever you want it to be about. But you can't make Christmas all about you.

Mark: King Herod, that's what you wanted to tell us? What you really wanted to tell us?

Herod: I had my opportunity. I had my chance. My choice was clear. I always put myself at the center. Now I'm linked to that choice for eternity. I must go now. They didn't give me much time to be here. But remember Jesus makes you ask yourself, "Who is at the center of my Christmas?"

Herod Missed Christmas

Herod missed Christmas because this newborn King was a threat to his throne; he missed it because of jealousy and fear. Early on Herod established himself as one who would go to any length to secure his position and power. Eventually, he secured his own army from Rome and extended his empire from Judea to Jordan, and from Syria to Lebanon. He was a deeply insecure man; he was also ruthless. Later in v. 16 Matthew tells us, "**When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.**" But that was such a minor incident in his reign of terror that the Jewish historian Josephus didn't even bother recording it!

During his reign, he had the High Priest drowned while bathing because he was afraid of an uprising among the Maccabees. He had his brother-in-law killed without a hearing because his wife accused him of impropriety with Herod's wife. He even had three out of four of his own sons killed! Just before he died, he had some of the best citizens of Jerusalem put in prison and commanded they be slaughtered the moment he died. Why? Because, as he said, "The people will not weep when I die, and I want weeping, even if it's over someone else." Alfred Edersheim, the great Jewish scholar, sums up Herod's reign with these words, "So long as he lived, no woman's honor was safe, no man's life secure."

The ironic thing is that, as if to appease his conscience, he also did some good for the Jews. He built them a Temple; he never intruded into the Holy Place, nor did he interfere with the functions of the priesthood. Was Herod just a good politician or did he have some small streak of respect for the God of Israel? We don't know. But we do know when he learned from the Wise Men a possible rival to his throne had been born in his land, he panicked and he took measures to stamp out the threatening baby.

Herod missed Christmas because of jealous fear, deep insecurity, and the need to hang on to control of his own kingdom. It's no different today, is it? This baby threatens us because he intends to take over our lives. He doesn't do it through force, as Herod did, rather through love. But he's no less dangerous than Herod. There are those of us who enjoy taking time off to commemorate his birth. Some of us take comfort we can run to him when we get in trouble. We may even adhere to the morals Jesus taught. Like Herod, we're willing to be benevolent as long as it somehow fits in with our own agenda or secures our own kingdom. But, as soon as this Jesus insists on being King; as soon as he makes a demand that might threaten our own self-rule; as soon as he starts nudging his way into our lifestyle—our values, our priorities, our love life, our schedule, our pocketbook, our career advancement or our friendships—as soon as he demands we die to our own agenda for our lives, then we pull away. If you want to miss Christmas then out of jealousy and fear hold on to the reigns of your own life.

All Jerusalem Missed Christmas

There's another group who missed Christmas. Herod wasn't the only one disturbed by the news of a newborn King. Matthew says "all Jerusalem" was disturbed with him. There's irony in this because never would the inhabitants of Jerusalem want to be lumped together with Herod, but they are here. Though their reason for being troubled was different than Herod's, the net result was the same.

Why did the inhabitants of Jerusalem miss Christmas? They missed it because they were preoccupied with other things. You see, they knew Herod. They knew when Herod was threatened all hell could break loose. He could do some crazy things; no one was safe. I believe they were so preoccupied with the possible ramifications from Herod they missed the significance of the miracle which had taken place just five miles south in Bethlehem! They were so preoccupied with fear of an earthly King they missed out on the King from above! They just couldn't see past their own immediate issues and concerns.

It doesn't matter why we're preoccupied. Like the people of Jerusalem it might be some real problem or danger looming on the horizon of our lives. The threat of losing a job; the threat of a child getting in trouble; the threat of terrorism. These are real problems and they ought to concern us, but they can also cause us to miss Christmas. Jesus demands our attention. He

rearranges our perspective on life. I'm reminded about a statement in the New Testament made by Paul: "If you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above... Set your minds on things above, not the things that are on earth." That doesn't mean we ignore real life; it's an issue of where our focus is. But isn't it strange the one thing that characterizes us at this time of the year is preoccupation with earthly things? How about you? Will you allow the problems you face, or the pressures you face, or the schedule you face to preoccupy you so much you miss the miracle of God in the flesh?

The Religious Leaders Missed Christmas

But that's not all. There's another group who missed it. Matthew calls them as the "chief priests and teachers of the law." Ironically, they missed Christmas because of religion. When the Wise Men came to Jerusalem they began inquiring as to where the newborn King was, and when Herod heard of it he turned to the religious leaders and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. The amazing thing is they knew! They knew from the Scripture. The prophet Micah said Bethlehem would be his birthplace. And so they told Herod and he sent the Magi to Bethlehem. But, do you know what's amazing? The religious leaders didn't do anything about it themselves. They didn't even bother to take the five mile walk down to Bethlehem to see if the rumor was true!

Why didn't they do anything? I believe it had to do with the assumptions of their religion. They expected the Messiah to come on the scene in a much more dramatic way than he in fact did. They expected him to come as a national hero who'd deliver them from Roman oppression and establish himself as a world-wide ruler. The only ones paying attention now were a few strange Gentile Magi from Persia. This wasn't the way Messiah was to come on the scene. How could God allow himself to come in the form of human weakness? What they failed to realize was that he **was** a deliverer, and he came to deliver them from a power far greater than the Romans — from the grip of sin, death, and the devil. But, they had to humble themselves for that; they had to recognize their own sin and need for forgiveness. But, as religious leaders they were steeped in the pride and self sufficiency of a religion that revolved around their own ability to keep the demands of the law.

Did you know religion can cause you to miss Christmas? You might be one of those Christians who's been going to church your entire life. You've settled into a comfortable conformity to the Christian lifestyle, but you've lost a sense of passion in your walk with Christ because you've forgotten why you came to him in the first place. The reality of Jesus being God's lifeboat to rescue you from the grip of sin is only a faint memory in your mind. You go to church and sing the songs and read the Christmas story but you don't weep. Or perhaps you're caught up in a religious way of thinking where you're constantly measuring your own performance against a prescribed code of behavior.

You're trying so hard to live the Christian life you've forgotten Jesus came because you couldn't live the Christian life! The Son of God came to seek and to save the lost; he came to heal the sick. Those who fail to realize this is their condition, despite their religion, will miss Christmas for sure.

So, like Herod, we can miss Christmas because of jealous fear of our own self-dominion being taken over. Or, like the inhabitants of Jerusalem we can miss it because of preoccupation with other things. Or, like the chief priests and teachers we can miss it because of religious pride. These are all negative examples. But in the midst of this we have the positive example of the Magi who teach us how **not** to miss Christmas.

The Model of the Magi

Who were the Wise Men? There's so much mythology and misinformation out there about them we no longer are able to separate truth from reality. We've been told there were three of them. Where does it say that? The fact the whole city was thrown into a tizzy because of their visit suggests there were more. We've also been told they were Kings. Where does it say that? The fact is Magi were priests of an ancient form of Zoroastrianism. Though their religion had some elements of truth in it, for the most part it was based on superstition and fear. They practiced things forbidden in Scripture like astrology and sorcery. We get our word "magic" from the Magi. They were highly respected by Kings and often given positions of importance and called on for advice. Furthermore, they weren't from the Orient like the song says but they were most likely from modern-day Iran. And when they finally got to Bethlehem they didn't visit Mary and Joseph and the newborn baby Jesus in the manger. They came to a house. Matthew doesn't even use the word "baby" to describe Jesus; he uses the word "child." It's possible Jesus was up to two years old when the Magi visited him.

The most outstanding thing about them though is that, in contrast to most everyone around them, they didn't miss Christmas. They still teach how **not** to miss it. Notice a number of things they did.

They searched

It wasn't unusual in those days for Magi to look for an astrological sign that a new ruler was being born. Apparently, these men saw something akin to a star that signaled to them a new King was born to the Jews. Though astrology is forbidden in Scripture, God communicated to these men in a way they understood. It's quite possible these men knew of Israel's hope for a Messiah. The people of Israel were scattered throughout Persia after the Babylonian exile. No doubt the exiles had spoken of their coming King. So when these men saw the star they dropped everything and began searching and eventually headed for Jerusalem. Almost two years of searching probably passed before they got to Herod. I'm impressed with the diligence and the patience

demonstrated in their search. Some of you are seekers. You may not have discovered the Son of God yet. Take a lesson from the Magi: be patient and keep seeking. Ask questions. Listen. Pray. Read Scripture. The Son of God can be found; but for some the finding comes only after a long and careful search.

They rejoiced

But that's not all they did. When the star led them to Bethlehem where the Child was they "were overjoyed." I guess if I was looking for something for two years and finally found it I'd be overjoyed too. Joy is the appropriate response to Christmas. The angels told the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy." When Elizabeth saw Mary, her baby "leaped with joy" in her womb. This is a joy that comes not from outward circumstances but from knowing the reality of who Jesus is. These men had to suspect they were in danger from Herod, but they still had great joy. How about you? Do you see this season as a burden or a joy? Joy is a choice, which is why so often in the Bible we are commanded to rejoice. Instead of being overstressed at Christmas, why not be overjoyed?

They worshipped

Notice what else they did. Not only did they search and rejoice, "they bowed down and worshipped him." At first they may not have recognized the significance of what they were doing. In those days, it was customary to worship Kings. But, we see here a hint they began to recognize the true identity of the child—he's God in the flesh, worthy of worship. I believe these Magi must have sensed this was more than an ordinary King. Could these Magi be the first Gentile believers in Christ? Might their eyes have been opened to the reality of who Jesus was? Is that why they worshipped him? Christmas is a time for worship. It's a time to bow down before the King of kings and sing, "Oh come let us adore Him!"

They gave

There's still something else they did: they gave. "They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Gold and frankincense were normal gifts for a King. Gold was a symbol of royalty; frankincense was an expensive fragrance. Some say it symbolized deity since it was used in the Temple. But myrrh is a bit unusual. Myrrh was a substance used in embalming the dead. The gift of myrrh seems to foreshadow Jesus' crucifixion and death. Without even knowing it, God was speaking of the child's destiny through their choice of gifts. He'd one day grow up and suffer for their sins. He'd give his life for them. This, of course, is how the whole gift giving thing

started in the Christmas tradition. All the marketing and sales and millions of dollars spent at Christmas started here with gifts for the newborn King.

They changed

But there's one more thing. They changed. They were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod. They listened to that warning and changed their course in going home. They probably went south to Hebron, and then north along the coast to Gaza, through Nazareth and Capernaum, and then on to Damascus. This would have been a hard trek for anyone. But there may be a double meaning in this. Not only did they change their course in a geographical sense, they also changed it in a spiritual sense. We can imagine the whole course of their lives was changed by this encounter with Jesus! That's what this child will do to those who come to know him; he'll change the whole trajectory of your life. You had a plan, but his plan is better.

So if you don't want to miss Christmas, take a lesson from the Magi. Depending on where you're at in your journey, you might search for him diligently. If you've found him, the way not to miss Christmas is to rejoice in him exceedingly, worship him humbly; give to him generously, and submit to him fully.

A story is told about a family who decided to go out one Christmas Eve to go around and sing Christmas carols in their neighborhood. In one of the homes where they stopped, there was confusion and commotion and tension with all the preparations for Christmas. The lady inside peaked her head out the front door and said, "Not now, please, we've got too much going on." The gentleman at the door simply said, "Yes, ma'am," and then moved to the next house. Little did the lady inside know it was the famous singer Bing Crosby and his family at the door.

It's possible for us too to miss the One who came to visit us at Christmas. As wonderful as family is, Christmas isn't about family being together. As important as it is we care for the poor and needy, it's not about the spirit of giving. As appropriate as it is we celebrate with time off work and decorations and good food, it's not about having a good time. Christmas is about God coming to our door in a last ditch rescue attempt; it's about God visiting us in the person of Jesus Christ; it's about God as a fetus; holiness sleeping in a womb with elbows, eyebrows, two kidneys and a spleen; it's about total surrender to a new King. Anything short of that and we'll miss it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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