

Sermon for Sunday, December 8, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HOW TO SKIP CHRISTMAS"

St. Matthew 2:1-12, St. Luke 2:7

Text: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." St. Luke 2:7

During the advent season this year we are focusing in on people and events around Jesus at his birth. Today I would like for us to look at some of the people who skipped Christmas. For one reason or another they never made it to the manger at Bethlehem and while they may have known of the birth, they did not come to kneel or worship as others did. Yet, in skipping Christmas these men had factors working in their lives that caused them to miss the greatest event in history. These factors are not limited to them alone. It may be that some of us may discover these same factors working in our lives that will, in the long run, cause us to skip Christmas, too.

One of the best known men to skip Christmas was the innkeeper. Now, you may not be aware of this, but actually the Bible does not even mention an innkeeper. The Bible simply says that there was no room for them in the inn. Over the centuries we have just assumed that there was an innkeeper and I suppose there was. But by the time the story of the birth of Jesus was put into writing, no one remembered who he was or what his name was. And when you stop to think about it, there was no reason to remember him. The only thing people remembered was that there was no place for them in the inn.

In some ways we feel a twinge of sympathy for the innkeeper. The Romans had ordered a census and everybody had to go back to the town of their family origin to register. So Bethlehem was like a convention city that day. From everywhere people poured into the little town to register and every facility for the public was strained beyond limit. They simply were not equipped to handle the sort of business that descended upon them. And the poor innkeeper wanted to take advantage of this bonanza. It was not often that he got such an opportunity. Frederick Beucher, in his book "The Magnificent Defeat", dramatizes for us how the innkeeper must have reasoned. This is what he makes him say, "Do you know what it is like to run an inn - to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees, and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them all tomorrow? A million trees. A million things..Finally we have eyes for nothing else..."

This speaks to my life - does it speak to yours? In a way aren't all of us innkeepers who skip the true meaning of Christmas because we are so busy with other things? Our business, our parties, our Christmas cards to get out our tree to put up and decorate, our special baking, our shopping to do. And somehow, in the midst of it, we suddenly discover that we have skipped Christmas - I mean really skipped the real Christmas that has to do with Jesus and his being born and the world having a Saviour.

Some people missed Christmas and never knew it happened - people like Caesar Augustus. But he wouldn't be expected to be aware of Christmas. He was far away

in Rome and besides, he knew nothing of the promise of God. But the innkeeper was different. He lived right there in Bethlehem where Jesus was to be born. He was a Jew who looked for the coming Messiah. He should never have skipped Christmas. And isn't it precisely us Christians who shouldn't be expected to skip Christmas? We are the ones who should really be celebrating the birth of Jesus and yet too often we are just the ones who really skip it.

Another man who skipped Christmas was Herod. Herod was the king of Judah. He really wasn't much of a king since he ruled over a little province that Rome let him run. He wasn't a very attractive man and history tells us that he had murdered at least one wife and three of his own sons. He knew of the hope of the Jews, but he didn't take them seriously. What he did take seriously was the constant threat to his throne from rebel leaders who were always claiming to be the Messiah and gathering a group of dissidents around them to create trouble. And if there was too much trouble, Rome would replace him quickly enough. So, when word came to him that a new Messiah had been born, all he could think of was putting the trouble down before it got started. So, he called together the religious leaders to find out where the future king was supposed to be born. When they told him it was the city of Bethlehem, he called in the wise men and asked them to come back and tell him where they found the new-born king. He would take care of things from that point on. You see, he didn't have worship in his heart, he had murder. And of all the people who skipped Christmas, perhaps Herod was the worst. He knew about the promised Messiah; he knew the significance of the event if it had finally, really happened. But Herod was filled with greed and self-interest. If there was a threat to his kingdom, he fully intended to destroy it.

Is there some Herod in your heart this morning? I don't want to insult you, but a lot of us miss a lot of wonderful things in life because of our self-interest and greed. We'll ruin a friendship for a buck; we will destroy beauty if it makes money; we will forget about good times if it is profitable. We will even ignore love if it stands in the way of a nice bank balance. Yes, all of us have a little Herod in our hearts because all of us are guilty of some greed and some self-interest. Those qualities made Herod skip Christmas and you and I may miss it too if those characteristics are not curbed. Do you remember the warning Jesus once gave? He said, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

But there was another group that skipped Christmas, too. Maybe you never stopped to think about it, but what about the men who told Herod where the Messiah was to be born? Why didn't these religious leaders go? Why didn't they take to the road with fast-beating hearts and breathless anticipation. If anybody skipped Christmas, it shouldn't have been they. They had the prophecies of old, the Holy Scriptures. They had studied and read and they knew what God had promised. Yet, not a single one of them left his home to take the dusty road to Bethlehem.

Doesn't that strike you as passingly strange? Doesn't it seem awfully odd to you that not a single one of them ever knelt at the manger? And why do you suppose that was? Do you suppose it was because they were so proud of themselves, of their knowledge of the scripture, of their learning, of their holiness, that they so worshipped the book, the letter of the law, that they never saw beyond it to the One who wrote it.

I want to warn you that many of us may skip Christmas for the same reason. There is a neo-pietism among us today, a sort of self-styled spiritual elite. These modern-day Pharisees pride themselves on their knowledge of the Bible; they pride

themselves on their personal walk with the Lord; they pride themselves on how good they are and begin to compare others to themselves. Soon they are judging the life of others, the faith of others, the commitment of others. And if others don't know their special jargon or say things with just the right vocabulary, or believe just as they do, they are quick to point fingers and say, "You are not a Christian," or, "You are not living a Christian life." And somehow in the process they are missing the sweet simplicity and love and joy of the man beyond the book - Jesus himself.

Let me say to you that we do not all have to have the same religious experience. We do not all have to have the same knowledge of the Bible although I hope all of us will desire to know the Word better. We do not all have to be at the same level of understanding to be saved. We do not all have to understand perfectly to know Jesus. There always stands out in my mind the father of a child that Jesus once healed. The father cried out to Jesus, "Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief." When I hear people say about someone else, "He doesn't have the same walk with the Lord that we do," or someone say, "He is not really a Christian as we are," I always think of the parable Jesus told of the two men praying in the temple. One, a Pharisee (exactly like the Pharisees who skipped Christmas) who prayed, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men are..." and then the poor publican who smote his breast, who dared not even lift his eyes to God, and who cried out, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus tells us that the man who was justified before God wasn't the Pharisee at all.

Yes, the religious leaders were super-spiritual, but they were so focused in on themselves, so focused in on judging and condemning others, that they were so busy they didn't have time to go to Bethlehem - they just skipped Christmas. Are there some of us here this morning who are judging one another? If so, it may be that we will be so busy looking at the speck in our brothers' eye, so busy congratulating ourselves that we are super-Christians, that in the process we will miss Jesus and awake to discover we have skipped Christmas. You see, God wants us to see and know the Word, but most of all he wants us to see beyond the word to him of whom it speaks - Jesus himself.

With that thought in mind, let me remind us of those who didn't skip Christmas, who ended up at the manger on their knees. They were unlikely people. They were not kings like Herod nor property owners like the innkeeper. They were not religious leaders like the Pharisees. Had anyone been picking people to go worship Jesus, they would have been ignored because they didn't know much or own much or amount to much. But a strange thing happened, because God picked them. They were the shepherds. Out there in the fields they saw the angels and heard the choirs of heaven.

Have you ever wondered why the shepherds went to Bethlehem. Have you ever wondered why they didn't skip Christmas? The innkeeper was too busy, Herod was too greedy, the religious leaders were too spiritual proud. But the shepherds knew they needed a Saviour. How about us? Most of us are busy, most of us are greedy, most of us are proud. Dare I suggest that because that is true we are precisely the ones who can't afford to skip Christmas? It is because we are that way that we desperately need a Saviour.

A second reason the shepherds found Christmas was because they were humble enough to receive Jesus when he came. There are some today who will skip Christmas because it is too degrading to do a simple thing like accept Jesus. Give them

