

Sermon for Sunday, December 10, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHO COMES TO BETHLEHEM"

St. Luke 2:8-20

Text: "When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'" St. Luke 2:15

Some of the best theology today is written on bumper stickers. Not all of it is good, of course, but some of it is most pungent and thought-provoking. One that has often caused me to reflect deeply appeared several years ago. It said, "What if they gave a war--and nobody came." Another that has been funny and yet not funny says, "Due to lack of interest, tomorrow has been canceled." With those running through my mind, I have imagined a horrible "what if" bumper sticker. What if there were a bumper sticker that said, "Due to lack of attendance, Bethlehem has been postponed indefinitely."

Well, maybe that isn't so far-fetched after all! The fact is, if the event at Bethlehem had depended on attendance, it would have to be called off. If it depended on the attendance of the rich or the mighty or the powerful or the religious, there wouldn't have been enough people there to open the stable.

Let's talk for a few moments about people who didn't make it to God's extravaganza at the Bethlehem stable. Of course, the Innkeeper didn't make it. The Bible doesn't mention him explicitly and probably when the New Testament story of the birth of Jesus was written, nobody remembered his name. After all, there was no reason to remember him. Yet surely there was an Innkeeper because the Bible tells us there was no room for Mary and Joseph in his inn. He was a businessman. Fate had decreed that people whose ancestry was in Bethlehem had to come there to register for the census. It meant the town would be crowded to over capacity. So he booked his inn to full--and maybe even overbooked it, too. And when you are a business man with a full house, it gets terribly busy. Maybe he had trouble with the help in the kitchen, or maybe the heating system wasn't working in the east wing, or maybe the maids had run out of linen for the third floor rooms. In any event, the Innkeeper had not time or room or interest in a young couple looking for a place to stay when they had no reservations.

Frederick Buechner, in his book The Magnificent Defeat, images the thinking of the Innkeeper as he makes him speak these words, "I speak to you as men of the world. Not as idealists but as realists. 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..." Well, we can understand that. The world today is filled with people like the Innkeeper who miss Bethlehem because their business, their parties, their tinsel and trees seem too pressing. Sometimes it is true in our lives and Jesus gets lost in the press of things.

The second person to miss Christmas was the King of Judea, Herod. Herod knew of the tradition of the Jews that a Messiah would come, but he had no religious interest. He was so intent on his own power and wealth that he had already murdered one wife and at least three of his children. So when three strangers showed up in Jerusalem asking about the Messiah, this old cynic decided to play it cool. He brought in the religious leaders and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. When they told him it was in Bethlehem, he called in the wise men and gave them the report and then he did a sly thing. He said to them, "When you find the child, come and tell me so that I, too, may go and worship him." But murder--not worship--was in the heart of Herod.

So here was Herod, a ruler of the land, even if it was but a mere border province of the far flung Roman Empire, who knew about the birth. But he didn't go--not then--because of his greed and self-interest. Later, when the wise men didn't return, he would go to Bethlehem, but only to murder and destroy all those children under two. Well, a lot of people today miss Bethlehem because of greed and self-interest. We miss such things as friendship and beauty and love and happiness because of greed and self-interest. Do you remember how Jesus put it? He said, "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

But the most surprising group of all to miss Bethlehem was the religious leaders. Remember how Herod called them in? Why would the king ask such a question and who were those strange aliens from the East who met with him? Wouldn't your curiosity have been aroused? Wouldn't you have wondered what was going on and why Herod wanted to know about Messiah? But they were so busy with religious things they didn't have time to go to Bethlehem. There was no real hunger in their hearts for God.

Do you see that in Christians today? I do. Sometimes I see it in myself. Sometimes we Christians get so involved in our local church, our local programs, the things we are doing, that we lose sight of the broader vision and broader mission. And we find there is no hunger in our hearts for God and no hunger in our hearts for others for whom Jesus died. So, like the religious men of old, we end up not going to Bethlehem...there just isn't time and no hunger in the heart.

So, who comes to Bethlehem? Well, not the busy people preoccupied with other things; not the greedy, self-interested people, not the religious people who have no heart for God. But the shepherds came. Shepherds were not very important and could not even testify in a court of law because their testimony was not considered reliable. And what about the wise men? They came to Bethlehem. And who were they? Aliens--strangers--Gentiles--who weren't even Jews! Well, that's a pretty unlikely group for Bethlehem--shepherds and alien men from some distant land who were not even Jews.

But there is something we need to remember. God always does that. When those who are the invited guests, refuse to come or turn down the invitation, God always opens the doors to give someone else a chance. Do you remember the parable Jesus told about the great banquet? (St. Luke 14:15-24) When those who were invited refused to come, the host said to his servants, "go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame...go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in." Well, God's banquet table will be filled. If you and I who are invited fail to come, God always opens the doors to come in." Well, God's banquet table will be filled. If you and I who are invited fail to come, God always opens the doors to others that his house may be filled.

Why do you think the shepherds and the aliens from the East came? I suspect there were two basic reasons. First of all, they knew that they needed a saviour. Those shepherds were a poor lot. How desperate were their lives. Oh, how they needed a saviour. And those wise men from the East--they had found their philosophic systems empty and in their hearts there was a desperate yearning for something more. And then they saw the star! Yes, they knew they needed a saviour and they set off after that star.

The Innkeeper--Herod--the religious leaders were self-sufficient and the self-sufficient never know of their needs for a saviour. Do you need a saviour? Are you self-sufficient? But I suspect there was a second reason the shepherds and wise men went to Bethlehem. They were humble enough to receive Jesus. The Bible tells us the wise men fell down and worshipped Jesus and presented gifts. Doesn't that strike you as odd? Here are rich men with rich gifts, wise men with the wisdom of the world, and they come to a lowly stable and fall down to worship what?--why a little baby. Yes, they were humble enough to accept what God gave them.

Would you like something better than Jesus? Do you wish he were more socially acceptable, more intelligent and sophisticated to the learning of the world? Would something else be more impressive to your learned friends and scientifically oriented neighbors? Yet, the shepherds and the wise men were humble enough to receive the gift God gave at Bethlehem.

So that's why they came. Who comes to Bethlehem? Do the busy innkeepers of the world come? Do the greedy and self-seeking Herods come? Do the pious, self-righteous, self-sufficient religious people who have no heart for God come? No. They never come. Then who comes to Bethlehem? Well, the poor shepherds of the world come. The wise men come. And why? Because they know they need a saviour and they are willing to accept Jesus, the gift that God gives to the world. Maybe it wasn't the gift the world wanted or the gift the world would have preferred, but it was the gift they needed and God gave.

Jack Moore is a Presbyterian minister who writes for our church magazine, the Presbyterian Survey. In a recent article he tells of the Christmas when he was ten years old back during those hard days of the depression. He writes, "But I sure wanted a catcher's mitt and I'd been doing all sorts of things to get one for Christmas. Shaking with excitement, I walked over to the little tree. In the flickering firelight, I could see the box with my name on it. My heart jumped. It was just the right size. A Mickey Cochrane mitt would just fit in it. Breaking the string holding it together, I tore the box apart. How can I tell you of my feelings now? What can I say? Through the years I've relived that moment hundreds of times, trying always to sort through the emotions that flooded my soul on discovering that mama had gotten me a brand new pair of overalls. I was old enough to know times were hard, and even I had to admit I needed the overalls. My school pair was too small and my Sunday ones, now used for everyday, were patched all over. But it's hard being practical when you're 10 years old, or even 50, when it's Christmas and hopes are high. Still standing there, looking at those old overalls and trying to hold back the tears, I felt my mama in the room. Turning I rushed into her out-stretched arms. She held me till my hurting eased. Now I know--oh God, do I know--my hurting was nothing compared to hers. And my loving."

Maybe Bethlehem wasn't what we wanted, but it was what we needed--a Saviour. And if it hurts because it isn't what we expected, our hurting is nothing compared to God's--or to his loving. After all, it was his Son.

So, who comes to Bethlehem--do you?