

Missing Christmas (*and other things to avoid*)
Matthew 2:1-12

"for from you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

Introduction: One of the favorite stories that our culture embraces every Christmas is Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carol". From the Glendale Center Theater (except this year) to Mickey Mouse to the Muppet's, this timeless story is retold in different iterations and updated versions and elicits emotional responses from its hearers. The message of the story is simple: a man has chosen wealth and isolation over friendship and charity, is shown by his past, present, and future what life could be, and what eternal destiny awaits him if he does not change. He wakes up, alive, and changes his way of life, uses his money to help others (yes, especially Tiny Tim), and redeems himself from sure destruction.

In some ways, this captures what people mean by "the Christmas Spirit", with people showing a little more kindness, giving, and focus on others during a time of year when Christmas is celebrated. In fact, the numbers actually bear this out. According to Businesswire.com, giving to charity goes up 42% during the end of November and December, with 85% of Americans donating to some form of charity at Christmas, and people being 34% more like to give during the holiday season. In fact, most non-profits realize this and part of their whole monetary and fund raising plans are to appeal to people at the end of the year, knowing a huge chunk of their annual funds come during December.

Now, my goal is not to disparage a beloved story, but to rather to point out a hugely important principle as we prepare to celebrate Christmas: we can easily embrace the *moral sentiment* of Christmas and in so doing, **miss Christmas altogether**. In fact, I would say that Christmas is a dangerous time for those who think that by trying more, doing better, and giving differently somehow changes them, that they are no longer "Scrooges" but are redeemed. This morning we want to look at the familiar story of what happened after His birth, seeing how so many **missed the Christ of Christmas the first time, why they missed it, and how the most unlikely group FOUND Christ, and worshipped**. May we be true worshippers of Jesus, now and forever, knowing that Jesus is our Immanuel, God with us, who came to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21-23).

Background of Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2 starts with "*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod, behold wise men from the East came to Jerusalem*", which gives us quite a bit of detail to the time, place, and situation of His birth. It starts with destroying almost all of our Nativity Scenes that scatter throughout our homes and lawns. Mary and Joseph returned to the town of Joseph's extended family (Luke 2:4) since he traced his lineage back to David. They had travelled down from Nazareth, no easy trip, and would have stayed for quite a while. As they entered into a relative's house, there was no room in the main house, so they stayed in a part of the house where animals would have been kept, especially at night. This most likely was an extension of the main house and would have been hewn out of rock on a hillside. The first visitors would have been shepherds who came to this house to see the Messiah as a baby in a manger, most likely a stone trough. This was not a pitched roof barn in the middle of nowhere, but a cramped cave.

At least several months later, Jesus is no longer a newborn but a young child (Matt. 2:11), living in a house in Bethlehem, either their own or a family member's. That means that the wisemen and shepherds would never have crossed paths, and the magi would not have been at the manger side.

Bethlehem means "house of bread" and is about **6 miles from Jerusalem**, which takes 2 hours to walk or 22 minutes if you have a car today. These two cities are close by, but things could go on in Bethlehem that would not catch the eye of Jerusalem.

We are introduced to **Herod the King, or Herod the Great**, as he's been referred to. He was at the tail end of a historic reign when Jesus was born, yet though he was 70 years old, he was not ready to cede any power or control that he had gained through shrewd and industrious maneuvering throughout his political career. He was NOT Jewish, but rather an Idumean (Edomite). His father, Antipater, was appointed by **Julius Caesar** to be procurator of the area of Palestine when it was under Roman occupation. He worked out that his son **Herod** would be prefect of Galilee. When **the Parthians** invaded Palestine, he fled to Egypt and then Rome in 40 B.C. There, through calculating diplomacy, had Octavian and Marc Antony declare him to be King of the Jews, allowing him to return with an army lead by General Gaius Sosius, and retook Jerusalem in 37 B.C, setting up a relatively peaceful reign, at least from Rome's perspective, as Herod kept uprisings down (like the Hasmonean's and zealots). There are a few characteristics of Herod that help fill out our context:

- **Politically Shrewd** - Though ruthless, he knew how to sway public opinion and assuage those in opposition. He married Mariamne, an heiress to the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty, making himself more acceptable to the Jews. He was known to give back tax money he had collected (can you stay *stimulous!*), and during the famine of 25 B.C he melted down gold from his palace to buy food for the poor. Though he taxed the people at a high level, he built theaters and tracks for the entertainment of the people
- **Historic Builder** - An egomaniac, Herod leveraged his immense resource and control to build some of the greatest wonders of the world, some that still stand and marvel today. He built a harbor at Caesarea Maritima, aqueducts bringing much needed water to desert places, built fortresses like **Masada**, made mountains where there was none like the *Herodium*, and expanded the Temple mount and lavishly refurbished the Temple to an immense structure.
- **Cruel, Merciless, and Paranoid** - When someone comes to prominence through power and brute force, he is always aware and afraid of the same thing happening to him. This is what drove historic leaders like Hitler and Stalin to power, and drove them to insanity. Herod was no different. He killed his wife and two sons because he thought she was conspiring against him. He had his brother in law Aristobolous killed by drowning, but showed up to weep at his funeral. Knowing that there would not be mourning at his funeral, rounded up distinguished citizens in Jerusalem into prison before his impending death, and gave the order to have them killed upon the news of his last breath to insure there would be weeping when he died. This all gives some context to **Matthew 2:16-18**, where Herod had all the male children killed in Bethlehem and the surround region up to the age of 2 when he found out about Jesus. This was right in line with his character and style of rule.

Next, we are introduced to the **wise men, the magi**, with whom there is an abundance of mystery. Who were these guys? Were there only 3 (probably not)? Did they wear pointy hats (probably)? Where did they come from? Let's try to give a quick snapshot of what we do know:

The *magi*, as they were known as, were a priestly-political class of the Parthians who lived to the East of Palestine. Being a class of people means they would have survived over centuries and through different rules of nations. They would have been a class, much like the **Levites** in Jewish culture. They first

appeared in **7th century B.C** as a tribe within the Median nation. We know they were skilled in astronomy and astrology, and were involved in occult practices such as sorcery and the interpretation of dreams. The term *magi* is where words like *magician* and *magic* derive. These were knowledgeable about science, agriculture, math, history, and the occult. Their religious and political influences grew until they were one of the most powerful political advisors in the Medo-Persian and after the Babylonian empires. It is here that we have Biblical knowledge of who they were:

Daniel 2 gives us insight into the life and political pull of the magi. They were referred to as "the magicians" in 2:2, and the 'wise men' in 2:24 and 2:48. They were brought in by King Nebuchadnezzar to interpret his dream, along with a slew of others like enchanters and sorcerers. We know that when the prophet Daniel was able to tell the content AND interpretation of the king's dream, he not only grew in prominence, but also became **chief prefect over all the wise men**. Through this he not only saved their lives, but became **influential to many in their ranks**. It is through this and other influences of the dispersed Jewish remnant that would have given some of the **magi** the knowledge of the OT Scripture and pointed them to a future King.

Now, all of this sets the stage for the dramatic story of **those who missed Christmas**. We will look at three groups: **Herod, religious leaders, and the people who were in Jerusalem and Judea at the time** who for various reasons refused to welcome in their promised Savior, and then look at **how a most unlikely group of religious political king makers came to worship**.

Herod: Rejected because Jesus was a THREAT TO HIS CONTROL

When the magi rolled into town, it must have created quite a stir in Jerusalem. They would have come with a large contingent, and been dressed in garb that signaled they were people of prominence, asking around for the one BORN king of the Jews! This was far from an everyday occurrence, and since they most likely came from a Parthian background, Herod could have thought they were vying for his throne.

*"The ruling body in the Parthian-Persian empire at this time was much like the Roman Senate. They were the king-makers in an almost absolute way, and were composed entirely of magi. They had become discontent with the weak king that presently ruled them and were looking for someone more capable to lead them in a campaign against Rome. Caesar Augustus was old and feeble, and since the retirement of Tiberius the Roman army had had no commander in chief. **The time was propitious for the east to make its move against Rome.**"¹*

Herod was aging, and the time was ripe for a change in leadership. Herod wanted to keep all the power and control he had finagled, and no one was going to take it from his cold dead hands. So it was in keeping with his character when he showed **political savvy** when after hearing from his religious leaders where this king was born, would have feigned desire to also worship this king (not the first time a politician has lied about motives, correct?). He showed **merciless rule** when he wiped out scores of children to protect his throne, even though any child would still be young by the time he died. This **king of the Jews that elicited worship from foreign king makers was in position to take him off his throne, taking away his power, and eliminating his control. This is why Herod missed Jesus**

This is also why some miss Jesus today, particularly at Christmas. They rightfully see that when Jesus offers Himself as Savior, He also presents Himself as LORD. **"If anyone would come after me, let him**

¹ John MacArthur, "Matthew Commentary", p. 31.

deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Luke 9:23-24) Where we were once slaves to sin and self we are now slaves of Christ, of righteousness, of God (Rom. 6:17-23). We know that we cannot accept Jesus as Savior and not also understand Him as our Lord and master. He came to set us free from the power of sin, but also to give us the freedom to follow Him into a life of obedience and joy. But those who want to simply add Jesus will be disappointed.

This is unfortunately what we see in our "mainstream Christian culture". In an article written by a secular observer of 'celebrity driven Christianity', Ben Sixsmith wrote about "...with a twist of Christianity", the type of people who say they follow Jesus but whose lives are not changed by Him. "It seems to represent (the fall of Carl Lentz, former 'pastor' at Hillsong) what I call 'with a twist of Christianity' trend. There is mainstream culture, celebrities, fashion, music, modish political activism and a message of self-love, but with a twist of Christianity. Most people stick with mainstream culture because they can still have all those things AND pre-marital sex. Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me."²

Herod was right. Jesus would have changed everything for him, so he rejected and tried to rid himself of Jesus. People today do the same thing. They reject the true Jesus because He calls them to repent, turn from their sin, and follow Him.

Religious Leaders: Ignored Jesus because they LOVED THEIR PROMINANT PLACE

Amazingly, in this story, Herod actually did something smart when he heard that a king of the Jews was born: *he went to the experts of Scripture, the chief priests and scribes*. These were the religious-political leaders of the Jewish people who carved out power underneath the heavy hand of Roman rule. They made up the Sanhedrin, which was both the Senate and Supreme Court over the people. They were made up of 70 religious leaders, mostly Sadducees, who controlled the Temple, and some Pharisees, who controlled the Synagogues. The Sadducees were liberal and rejected much of the OT, and the Pharisees were literalists who held OT law in a legalistic way.

What is clear, is that this group KNEW that the Messiah was to come in a personal way, to Bethlehem, in Judah, that He would be a ruler, and either they or Matthew added that He would be a shepherd to Israel, His people! In other words, they knew exactly what the Scripture said, but STILL MISSED JESUS! Does this still happen today? Sadly, it absolutely does. Why?

- **The Religious Leaders searched the Scripture but missed the Savior** - "*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to ME that you may have life.*" (John 5:39-40) They memorized, read, and even studied the Bible, but it was for any and every reason other than knowing Jesus. It gave them knowledge, and knowledge gave them power. The scribes were known as lawyers, and they could argue their case from Scripture, gaining property, rulings, or material gain through the law. Whatever the reason, they knew Bible verses, but did not see Jesus.
- **They only ignored Him for so long because they loved their place and nation** (John 11:48) - You cannot ignore Jesus forever. When it was clear that Jesus was too well known and loved, they made the fateful decision to arrest Him and put Him to death. Why? Because Jesus would have

² Ben Sixsmith, "The sad irony of celebrity pastors", spectator.us, December 6, 2020

shined the light on their controlling ways and weakened their positions of pathetic authority. So instead of receiving their long awaited Messiah, ruler, and shepherd of their souls, they snuffed out the One who came to save them.

Some people try to ignore Jesus through activity or religious looking actions or artificial morality, but no one can ignore Jesus forever. Philippians 2:9-11 says that one day, every knee will bow and tongue confess Jesus Christ as Lord, one as personal Savior and Lord, the other as righteous judge and executioner. At Christmas especially, we cannot **ignore Jesus**. You might reject Him, but ignoring simply pushes reality down the road.

People: Dismissed Jesus because they FEARED FOR THEIR LIFE

As the *magi* entered Jerusalem, Herod was vexed (a great word), *troubled*, or agitated. He was all shook up. The scramble drill began and when paranoia set in for Herod, heads tended to roll out the door. So the text simply says, "**When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him.**" The people of Jerusalem cowered, bracing not for the incarnation of a long awaited King, but for the inevitable demonstration of merciless wrath. So the people dismissed Jesus, allowing it all to pass without as much as a visit, out of **fear for their life, knowing that following Jesus the King would put their life at risk in front of Herod the King.**

When Jesus sent out His disciples, he reminded them not to fear man but God, since men can kill the body but God can destroy the body AND the soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). Though the angels sang of peace on earth, Jesus declared, "**Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.**" (Matt. 10:34) This was to separate out those who loved something MORE than Him. When we come to Jesus, we are willing to risk our lives for the sake of finding our life, knowing that He brings peace between us and the Father but SETS us at risk with those around. Those who fear losing their life in this world will NOT be able to yield their life completely to Him, having to dismiss Jesus rather than yield to Him as Lord.

Magi: Found Jesus because they YIELDED IN WORSHIP

So we are left with these mysterious figures from the east who knew the Scripture, saw the glory of God shine at Jesus' birth, rode the hundreds of miles across the desert to come to **worship**. When they finally heard where to go and saw the exact location, they **rejoiced exceedingly with great joy**, a list of Greek words and superlatives that jump off the page and show how over the top excited they were to find the child. They entered the house and gave their gifts that were fit for a King, costly and precious resources that expressed their praise. Their response was right. They found the Christ of Christmas. What do we learn about missing Christmas?

- **We find the REAL JESUS in Scripture, not folklore** - There was NO WAY these guys would have found Jesus outside of studying God's Word, particularly the Old Testament. We find Jesus when we understand and know Him the way Scripture tells us about Him, not what the culture or popular beliefs would want to tell us. This Christmas, we must be committed to knowing Jesus, His birth, and Kingship not from what WE think it is, but from what God has revealed in His Word. We can only truly worship what we know.
- **Worship is THE issue** - The magi came to worship, bowing down to this king who presently was simply a child. Worship is the issue. **Christmas reveals what and who we worship.** Herod

worshipped His power, the chief priests their power, and the people their safety. The magi worshipped the king. What do you worship? Your money, comfort, kids, traditions, or preferences? Often we know what we worship when what we value the most is taken away. When our comfort is taken, our attitudes turn. When our safety is threatened we take matters into our own hands. But Jesus calls us to worship Him, to fall down, yield our lives, to cease trying to fix, solve, and control everything and simply rest on Him. Christmas is about worship of Jesus the King, and everything else is everything else. Who are you worshipping?

- **Gifts were an extension of worship** - There is a categorical difference between giving or serving to try to earn something rather than an expression of worship. The magi brought costly gold, frankincense, which was like giving pure *Essential Oils*, a costly incense used for Temple worship and special occasions, and myrrh, a less expensive but still costly perfume used in burials and an anesthetic (Mark 15:23). Practically, these gave Mary and Joseph funds for their flight to and life in Egypt, but also showed that these Gentile magicians understood they were worshipping a true King.

So this Christmas, we celebrate the birth of our King by yielding our lives to Him in joyous surrender, trusting Him, turning from our sin, and resting in His greatness. We respond in the only way that is reasonable: in obedient worship, laying our lives down to Him as our Lord. In the midst of so much darkness we lean on the One who is ruler and shepherd, the One born in a nothing town with little fanfare from those He came to save, who offers Himself to us by Grace alone to be freed from our sin, fear, and judgment. May this Christmas be about Worshipping our King Jesus!