Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The People Who Missed Christmas: The Innkeeper
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by John MacArthur

“No room.” Those shameful words describe more than the inn in Bethlehem. They apply just as aptly to today’s world. Sadly, in all the busyness of our Christmas celebrations, people still make no room for Jesus. Without even realizing it, they miss Christmas, just like most of the people in and around Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born.

Did you know *most people* miss Christmas every year? That may sound rather silly, especially in North America, where we drown during the holidays in a sea of Christmas advertising. Still, I’m convinced that most people miss Christmas. They observe the season because culture says it’s the thing to do, but the masses are utterly oblivious to the reality of what they are celebrating. So much fantasy and myth have been imposed on the holiday that people are numb to the real miracle of Christ’s birth. The legitimate emotion of the holiday has given way to a maudlin and insincere self-indulgence.

A newspaper I saw had a two-page spread featuring some man-on-the-street interviews where people offered their opinions of the real meaning of Christmas. The views ranged from mawkish to irreverent. Some were sentimental, saying Christmas is a family time, a time for children, and so on. Others were humanistic, seeing Christmas as a time to celebrate love for one’s fellow man, the spirit of giving, and that sort of thing. Others were crassly hedonistic, viewing Christmas as just another excuse to party. Not one person made mention of the incomprehensible miracle of God’s birth as a human baby.

What a mess Christmas is! We have compounded the holiday with so many traditions and so much hype and hysteria that we miss the utter simplicity of Christ's birth. It is ironic that of all holidays, this one has become the most complex. It is no wonder so many people miss Christmas.

Yet one thing hasn’t changed since the time of Joseph and Mary: nearly everyone missed that first Christmas, too. Like people today, they were busy, consumed with all kinds of things—some important, some not—but nearly everyone missed Christ. The similarities between their world and ours are striking. Every one of these people has a counterpart in modern society.

The Innkeeper

Scripture doesn't specifically mention him, but that night in Bethlehem, an innkeeper was confronted by a man and his pregnant wife. He turned them away saying he had no room for them. And so he missed Christmas. Not only did he turn Mary and Joseph away, but he apparently did not even call for anyone to help a young mother about to give birth.

Luke 2:7 sets the scene: "And [Mary] gave birth to her first born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

That verse is explicitly concerned with a lonely birth. There are no midwives, no assistance to Mary at all. The Bible doesn't even mention that Joseph was present. Perhaps he was, but if he was typical of first-time fathers, he would have been of little help to Mary. She was basically on her own.

Such a birth was far from typical in the first-century Jewish culture. These were not barbaric people or aboriginal tribes that sent their women off into the jungle to have their babies alone on a banana leaf. They were civilized, intelligent, educated, and, above all, hospitable people who cared deeply about human life. It would be highly unusual for a young woman about to give birth to be turned away from an inn and left to give birth alone in a stable.

Yet that's what happened. Mary brought forth the child, she wrapped Him in swaddling cloth, and she laid Him in a manger! Where usually a midwife would clean the baby and wrap him, there was no one. Mary did it herself. And where usually there would have been a cradle or basket for the baby, there was none. Mary had to put Him in a feeding trough.

G. Campbell Morgan wrote:

Think of the pathos of it. "She brought forth"; "she wrapped Him in swaddling clothes." It is very beautiful, but oh, the pity of it, the tragedy of it, the loneliness of it; that in that hour of all hours, when womanhood should be surrounded by the tenderest care, she was alone. The method of the writer is very distinct. She with her own hands wrapped the Baby round with those swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger. There was no one to do it for her. Again I say, the pity of it, and yet the glory of it to the heart of Mary (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Luke* [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1929], 36).

As I said, the innkeeper is not specifically mentioned. In fact, Scripture is not clear about what kind of inn Bethlehem had. The Greek word translated "inn" is *kataluma*. That can mean "guest room," "hostel," or simply "shelter." So the inn could have been anything from a full-fledged precursor of the modern bed-and-breakfast lodge to a lean-to on someone's property that was built to house both

people and animals. Scripture gives no clue beyond the single mention of an inn. In any case, whatever hospitality Joseph and Mary sought, it was unavailable to them. They were turned away.

The innkeeper may have been a landowner whose property included an informal shelter, or perhaps he was the host of a boardinghouse. Whatever the case, an innkeeper in Bethlehem missed that first Christmas. The Son of God might have been born on his property. But he turned away a young mother about to deliver a child, and so he missed Christmas.

He missed it because he was preoccupied. His inn, or his guest room, or his leanto shelter was full. It was census time in Bethlehem, and the city was bulging with everyone whose ancestry went back to the little town. Bethlehem was the city of David, so every living descendant of David would have been there, along with every other family whose roots were in Bethlehem. The town was crowded. The innkeeper was busy. There is no indication that he was hostile or even unsympathetic. He was just busy.

Exactly like millions of people today. Their lives are consumed with activity—not necessarily sinful activity; just things that keep them busy. At Christmas, people are especially busy. Shopping, banquets, parties, concerts, school activities, and other things all compete for attention. And in the clutter of activity, many preoccupied people miss the Son of God.

(Adapted from ***The Miracle of Christmas***.)

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