

## The Man Who Missed his Christmas Party

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Matthew 2:1-12

*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 in the east 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 Christ 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 be the shepherd of 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 make a careful search 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 in the east 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 and of incense and of 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*

Tomorrow, in the wee hours of the morning: A battle will ensue. It's a battle that has been going on for decades - maybe centuries. I'm talking about the battle between parents - who want to get a little sleep - and kids, who want to wake up early and start Christmas. How many of you know this battle?

There will be tactics on the kids' side. I read a blog post the other day that classified kids by their tactics: There are peepers, who sneak into your bedroom and just stare at you until you get up. There are pacers, who don't come into the bedroom, but pace noisily outside just to let you know it's almost time. And there are dive-bombers, who pounce on the bed.

There will be tactics on the parents' side: Some will use the stocking as a distraction - you can open your stocking whenever you get up, but not presents until we've had coffee. Some will invoke the "no presents before we've had a nutritious breakfast" rule.

We have some friends who think they may have found the ultimate weapon here: We asked them how early their kids were going to wake up to see what Santa brought this year. They said "Oh - we think we solved it." We told our four year old the truth about St. Nicholas this year - that he was a real person who lived and died in the 4th century and was very generous to children. So now whenever people ask their four year old if she thinks Santa will come on Christmas Morning, she just says "No, Santa Claus is dead." So parents - you might want to try that!

Why do kids do that? Why do they get up so early? Well, they're doing it because they don't want to miss the party! There's not a kid in the world that wants to miss out on the party at Christmas!

So let me ask you a question: How about you? Are you missing out on the party this year - at Christmas? I don't mean the "opening presents" party. I know most of you will get to that! I mean - have you had that Christmas moment where we quiet our hearts and take away the trappings and the pressure of the season and really pause to celebrate in our hearts this amazing gift - this incredible moment - that is Christmas. Has that moment come for you yet? Or are you missing the party this Christmas?

Tonight I just want us to look at one character from the Christmas Story in the Bible - from that last passage that Kelley just read. A character that for some reason has always fascinated me, because this is the one character in the story who really missed the party at Christmas.

Tonight I want to look at him see why he missed his Christmas. As we look at his story, I want to make sure that each and every one of us here tonight knows for sure that we are invited to the party this Christmas.

## Everyone is coming to the party

As we come to the Christmas story in the Bible - in those early chapters of the gospels of Matthew and Luke - it just seems like everyone is coming to the party. You know what I mean? That really hit me this week, as I was reading the story of the wise men again: Matthew starts the story and he tells us: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men / Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. When he says "behold" - he means "voila!" - "presto!" - "alakazam!" because he is showing us something completely unexpected.

Here are these Magi - these Gentile Pagan Astrologers - that have come from the east - probably from Babylon - the very country that made war on Israel and sent them into exile. And they are coming to the party. They are coming to worship this child that has been born - the king of the Jews. They are going to kneel down before this Jewish child - and give him valuable gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh - and they are going to worship him. It's outrageous that God would invite these outsiders to the birthday party of his Son. But here they are - invited probably from hundreds of miles away - and they've come. They've joined the party.

That amazed me, but I have to say as I thought about it - it seems like much of creation is coming to the party of Jesus' birth. Think about it:

- There are Pagan Gentiles - like these three magi.
- There are Jewish shepherds - those blue-collar workers who were out in the fields.
- There are Angels - like Gabriel who came to Mary.
- There was Heaven's army. I don't know if you realize that, but when it says "heaven's host" appeared to the shepherds - it literally means the angel-army of God.
- There are Poor saints - like Mary and Joseph - who live in Galilee
- There are Old saints - like Anna and Simeon, who lived at the temple; these two elderly, godly people that Luke mentions in his account of the Christmas story.
- There are priests - like Zechariah
- Even Babies - like John the Baptist - have come to the party!

They are all coming. These very diverse parts of God's creation are all brought together to play their roles in this incredible event:

- Rich Magi come together with a poor young couple
- Heavenly angels come together with earthly people
- Jewish saints come together with Gentile astrologers
- The old who are about to depart this world come together in this story with the young who haven't even been born yet
- Powerful armies and powerless shepherds

They all come together for this Christmas moment.

They are coming together to celebrate:

- The Magi - rejoice when they see the star
- The angels - bring glad tidings of great joy
- Heaven's army - puts down its weapons and shouts praise to God

- Simeon and Anna - these ancient saints - who had been promised that they would see God's salvation - are saying this event is so significant - this child is so special - that once they know he has arrived, their life is fulfilled - and they can now depart in peace
- The Shepherds - are glorifying God
- Even the babies - are leaping for joy in the womb

My point is that they all come together to see what God is doing - to feel his presence at this special moment - to praise God for this momentous occasion. Everyone in the story is at the party. Everyone in the story is celebrating. Everyone in the story is drawing us in. They are all inviting us to put down our divisions - to release our cares - to let go of our fears and judgment - to drop our resistance and let God's Spirit just knock us down, and roll us around in the grass - and dirty up our good clothes - and make us laugh so hard our sides ache. As we read the Christmas story, there's a party going on. We're invited. And everyone is delighted.

## The man who missed his Christmas party

Everyone, that is, except for one man. As we read the Christmas story - when we get to the second chapter of Matthew - we read about this guy that Matthew calls King Herod. King Herod was also known as Herod the Great, and there was a lot that was great about Herod:

- \* He had great power. By the time Jesus came along, Herod had been ruling as a Roman Client King over Judea for almost 40 years. His tenure had lasted through the reigns of several Caesars, which was unheard of. He had great power.

- \* He undertook great projects. Like the port of Caesarea - which is still a wonder to archaeologists - and a massive expansion of the temple - which he had started 20 years before Christ's arrival. So he had great power and great projects, but Herod had one more thing that was great

- \* He had great fear. He had managed to hold onto power through the ruthless extermination of anyone that he even suspected would challenge his rule. He strangled his wife - he murdered his sons - he even arranged for hundreds of Jewish noblemen to be executed on the day of his death, so that people would actually be sad on that day. He wanted to hold onto power at any cost.

As we come to this story, Herod is not delighted. He is not celebrating. Herod is scheming. As the story unwinds, we see Herod's character revealed. When it begins, Herod just seems a little cautious. Matthew tells us that when these wise men came to Jerusalem - that Herod was troubled - he was stirred - he was alarmed - and the whole city joined him in that.

Then as the story goes on, he seems to be curious. He asks the religious experts where the Messiah was to be born, and they immediately answer that he is to be born in Bethlehem. Then he asks the Magi the exact time when the star appeared to them to let them know about the child's birth. Then he tells the wise men to let him know when they find the child, so that he can go to Bethlehem and worship him. He seems curious. But in the end, we see that Herod wasn't just cautious or curious - he was cruel.

If we were to keep reading the story, we would see that once Herod realized that the wise men were not going to tell him where the child was - he became furious and sent troops to Bethlehem - and killed every male child two years of age and under. What a tragedy! It stands in stark contrast to the joy of the rest of the story. Everyone else thinks the news of this child is awesome. Herod thinks it's awful. Everyone else is celebrating new life. Herod is destroying life. It's tragic - for the children - for the families - but also for Herod. What a way to live your life - in total paranoia, while everyone else is at the party.

The tragedy is only made more pronounced when we think about why exactly it was that Herod missed the party.

- \* It wasn't that he wasn't invited. The wise men were happy for him to join them and worship the king. It's only because God warned them about Herod's plan that they didn't tell him the location of the baby. He was invited.

- \* It wasn't that he didn't know what the birth of this child meant. He knew as soon as the Magi said the King of the Jews had been born that this was the Messiah. That's why he asked the religious experts where the Christ was to be born. They would have told him not just where he was

to be born, but everything that he would bring with his rule: The restoration of Israel - justice - and peace - care for the helpless - an everlasting kingdom - and a way for people to find forgiveness for their sins, and live in God's favor. He would have heard that. It wasn't that he didn't know.

\* It wasn't even that he didn't believe on some level. I don't know if you noticed it - but in the story, when the Wise Men come to Jerusalem - the citizens are troubled - the religious authorities are troubled - but Herod is the only one who believed enough to do anything about it. He had some measure of faith that this was real.

So in the end, Herod didn't miss the party because he wasn't invited - or didn't know what it was about - or didn't believe. In the end, he missed the party for one reason and one reason only, and it was this: Because Herod had a lot to lose. He really did. Herod had a lot invested in the status quo. Think about it: 40 years of working the system - 40 years of sucking up to one Emperor after another - and riding on the back of the Roman system - 40 years of beating back his opponents - and assassinating the competition. Until he had his place of power - and his magnificent palace - and his title of "Herod the Great."

And now one little child - one infant born at an inconvenient time - could knock it all down and take away Herod's rule - his sovereignty over his life. When you look at it from that perspective, Herod had an awful lot to lose. I guess his behavior does sort of have a logic to it.

When we read this story and see the party - when we see the rejoicing of the heavenly host - the delight of the shepherds - the joy of the Magi - when we think about the greatness of Christ's kingdom, and the wonderful things he's going to bring when he rules - don't we want to say to Herod "Give up the paranoia - stop the bloodshed - put down your little plans for yourself - just raise the white flag and be a part of something so much bigger - so much better - than the little kingdom you've been fighting to maintain?" Don't we want to say "put down your resistance - your suspicion - your fear - and join the party! After all - you are invited!" Don't we want to say that to Herod?

## **Are you missing out on the party this year?**

Well, I think we want to say that to Herod, because that's what the passage is saying to us. It's saying "Don't miss the party! Everybody is here! They are all cheering you on! Don't miss out!"

There are lots of reasons that we can miss the party this Christmas. For some of us - maybe we're so burdened down - we're so worried - so weary with the cares of life - that it's hard for us to see what there is to celebrate. But the party's going on. Your cares will be there tomorrow, I promise. Just put them down for a minute - and ponder the Christ - and join the party.

For others of us - maybe we're so busy planning the party - that we haven't really come to the party. Maybe we're so busy with the trappings - the lights - with good things like family - and even ministry - that we haven't actually stopped to join the party and worship at the manger. This passage invites us to that.

I think this passage especially encourages us not to miss the party, because we have too much to lose. I think one of the reasons that Herod fascinates me so much as a character in the Christmas story is that Herod is a picture - he's a metaphor - he's a type - of some of us. While we would never do the things that Herod did, some of us either have been in or are in that Herod spot. We sit here tonight - and we know we've never really joined - that Christ party. We've always been outside the stable looking in.

If we're very honest, it's not that we've never been invited. We know that there are people who care about us that would love nothing more than for us to join the party. It's not that we don't know. We do know about the kingdom that Christ offers us. It's not even that we don't kind of believe. We do believe that Jesus was born - that he existed - we believe in the goodness of his teaching - that he died on some level for us - maybe we even believe that God raised him from the dead. It's not that we're not invited - not that we don't know - not that we don't kind of believe the facts.

For some of us - like Herod - we just have a lot to lose. If we're honest, we wonder: What exactly is this Christ-child going to do - with this life I've made for myself? What is his kingdom going to demand? What's it going to cost me? Is it going to cost me my money? My friends? My hobbies? My insistence over all these years that I'm fine without him? Will it cost me my control over my life? I know that if you are in that spot tonight - from where you sit, it may seem like you have a lot to lose: the cost may seem huge. And resistance may seem like the only logical path. I know that.

But tonight you are surrounded by people who have faced that same choice. We've been right where you're at. We're praying - with all our hearts - that you'll see the bigger picture - and the rejoicing of the angels - the delight of the shepherds - the joy of the magi - the wonder of the Kingdom that the Messiah will bring. And that you will join the party. Wherever you're at in your faith tonight - don't miss the party.

## Benediction

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace  
(Is. 9:6)