

LESSONS FROM THOSE WHO MISSED THE MESSIAH

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INTRO.

-- There's an old movie called *The Great Man's Whiskers* that tells a mostly fanciful tale about how Abraham Lincoln decided to grow his famous beard. It starts when an eight-year old girl writes a letter to Mr. Lincoln suggesting that he would be more appealing to voters if he grew a beard to enhance his thin, stern-looking face. That part is true. Lincoln, did, indeed, grow a beard after receiving the letter. In fact, when Mr. Lincoln's campaign train came to the town where the girl lived, he surprised everyone by calling her up to join him on the platform. The movie, however, tells the story in a different way. In the movie Mr. Lincoln sends the girl a letter thanking her for her advice and mentions that his campaign train will be making a stop in her town. That sends the whole town into frenzied preparations. On the day of the anticipated visit the girl's father and other dignitaries lead almost the entire town to gather at the train station. About the only person who isn't at the station is the little girl who had written to Mr. Lincoln. Her parents leave her at home with their house servants. When the train has to make a stop for some repairs a short distance outside of the town, Mr. Lincoln sets off on foot to find the little girl's house. With everyone gathered at the train station the streets of the town are empty. When Lincoln finally finds the place where the girl lives and knocks on the door, the maid comes to the door. Lincoln introduces himself and asks for the girl. The maid is shocked and speechless, but the little girl invites him in, and she and the maid's daughter have a pretend tea party with him. After several minutes Mr. Lincoln excuses himself and returns to his train. In the movie's closing scene the train goes straight through the town without stopping, past the local dignitaries and politicians in their top hats, past the ladies in their flowing dresses, past the playing band and townsfolk. The only ones in the town who got to meet Mr. Lincoln were the little girl, her maid and the maid's daughter.

-- Christmas can be a lot like that story. It's far too easy for us to participate in all kinds of activities getting ready to celebrate the birth of the Savior and miss out on the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Some of the participants in the first Christmas story missed the Messiah, and some found Him. Let's see what we can learn from both groups.

I. SOME MISSED JESUS BECAUSE THEY WERE TOO BUSY.

-- Some of those in the Christmas story missed Jesus because they were too busy. The traditional example, of course, is the innkeeper.

A. THE INNKEEPER

-- Luke 2:6-7 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

-- A haunting part of the Christmas story is the statement, "there was no room for them in the inn." The innkeeper was so occupied that he missed the opportunity of a lifetime - the opportunity to welcome the Messiah into his home.

A poem entitled "The Ballad of Befana" envisions a busy housewife who is invited by the three magi to join their search for the Savior.

THE BALLAD OF BEFANA

Befana the Housewife, scrubbing her pane,
Saw three old sages ride down the lane,
Saw three gray travelers pass her door -
Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior.

"Where journey you, sirs?" she asked of them.

Balthazar answered, "To Bethlehem,
For we have news of a marvelous thing.
Born in a stable is Christ the King."
"Give Him my welcome!"
Then Gaspar smiled,
"Come with us, mistress, to greet the Child."
"Oh, happily, happily would I fare,
Were my dusting through and I'd polished the stair."
Old Melchior leaned on his saddle horn.
"Then send but a gift to the small Newborn."
"Oh, gladly, gladly I'd send Him one,
Were the hearthstone swept and my weaving done.
"As soon as ever I've baked my bread,
I'll fetch Him a pillow for His head,
And a coverlet too," Befana said.
"When the rooms are aired and the linen dry,
I'll look at the Babe."
But the Three rode by.
She worked for a day and a night and a day,
Then, gifts in her hands, took up her way.
But she never could find where the Christ Child lay.
And still she wanders at Christmastide,
Houseless, whose house was all her pride,
Whose heart was tardy, whose gifts were late;
Wanders, and knocks at every gate,
Crying, "Good people, the bells begin!
Put off your toiling and let love in."
Phyllis McGinley

-- Of course, we can all be like Befana - just too busy to meet with Christ - not only at Christmastime but throughout the year. Our "To Do List" always has more than we can get accomplished.

-- Several years ago a book titled Margins was a bestseller. The basic idea in the book was that most Americans don't have any "margins" left in their lives. We live "maxxed-out" lives: maxxed-out on our schedules, maxxed-out on our credit cards, maxxed-out in just about every area of life. We're so maxxed-out that we can't fit God in any where. The book urges us to create some "margins" in our lives - to cut back on some activities and to rearrange priorities in order to make time for God and to make ourselves available to Him.

B. THE SHEPHERDS

-- One reason the shepherds connected with Christ was that they were available.

Luke 2:8, 15 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night…. 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

-- The innkeeper was too busy to meet Jesus, even though the Savior was right at his doorstep; but the shepherds who were out on the hillside met the Messiah because they made themselves available.

II. SOME MISSED JESUS BECAUSE THEY WERE SELF-ABSORBED.

A. HEROD

-- Herod is a prime example of this group.

Matthew 2:1-3, 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." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. … 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

-- Herod was obsessed with his place in history. To assure his reputation as a great ruler he engaged in massive building projects, and to protect his power he eliminated any possible threat, even executing his own sons and wife when he suspected them of plotting against him. So when the Wise Men came to Herod asking about the birth of the Messiah, Herod saw it as a threat to his throne instead of an opportunity to welcome the Savior. The only thing Herod worshipped was his own power. So it was the Magi who found Jesus because they were willing to worship someone other than themselves.

Matthew 2:11 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.

-- If you want to connect with Christ, you need to start by recognizing that He is the one who belongs on the throne.

III. OTHERS MISSED JESUS BECAUSE THEY WERE CLOSED TO GOD'S SPIRIT.

A. RELIGIOUS LEADERS

-- Interestingly, among those most closed to the Holy Spirit were the religious leaders. They should have been the first ones to recognize and receive Christ. After all, they were looking for the Messiah and praying daily for him to come to deliver Israel. They knew instantly the obscure one-verse reference to the place of the Messiah's birth.

Matthew 2:4-6 When [Herod] had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 "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."

-- Furthermore, when Jesus was eight days old, Mary and Joseph took the child to the Temple for the dedication ritual. The priests and scribes were everywhere, walking right past Jesus and presiding over the dedication, but none of them recognized who He was. In fact, throughout His ministry, Jesus was constantly face-to-face with the religious leaders, but they refused to recognize who He was. Why? Because they were bound by their traditions and closed to the Spirit. The religious leaders knew the Messiah was coming, but according to their traditions the Messiah would come as a great king surrounded by glory and splendor.

B. THOSE WHO CONNECTED WITH JESUS OPEN TO THE SPIRIT.

-- It was those who were open to and in touch with the Spirit who recognized and welcomed Jesus. In fact, this is something you find throughout the Christmas story: it's only those minds and hearts that are first opened by the Spirit that find Christ. There were two people at the Temple who knew who the infant Jesus really was, and neither of them was a priest.

1. Simeon

-- The first to recognize Jesus was an elderly and godly man named Simeon.

Luke 2:25-32 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

2. Anna

-- The only other person to recognize Jesus that day at the Temple was a godly old woman named Anna.

Luke 2: 36-38 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. 38 Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION

If you want to connect with Christ now and throughout the coming year, then you need to follow the example of the shepherds and make yourself available to God and the example of the Wise Men and make Christ the center of your life, and the example of Simeon and Anna and keep your life open to the fresh moving of the Holy Spirit.