

Sermon Preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 18, 1994 by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

LUKE 2:7

"Mary wrapped her Baby in strips of cloth and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

HOW NOT TO MISS CHRISTMAS

One of the things I have enjoyed at Christmas time over the years has been reading the letters to Santa Claus that come out in the newspapers, and I remember a couple of them that particularly impressed me. One of them said,

"Dear Santa,

You didn't bring me anything good last year. In fact, you didn't bring me anything good the year before either. This is your last chance.

Signed Albert"

And I like this one –

"Dear Santa,

There are three little boys who live at our house. There's Jeffrey; he's two. There's David; he's four. And there's Norman; he's seven. Jeffrey is good some of the time. David is good some of the time. Norman is good all of the time. I am Norman...!"

Wouldn't you like to be a "Norman"?! I'm reminded of the story of the boy who wanted a watch for Christmas, and so he kept mentioning to his dad, "Dad, I want a watch...", until his dad finally said, "Hey; time out. If you mention 'watch' one more time, you're just not going to get it." And so, he didn't mention it any more until Christmas Eve. As they sat down to eat their evening meal the boy said, "Dad, can I say grace?" And his dad said, "Sure." The boy said, "I would like to quote a verse from the Bible before I pray. It's Mark 13:37 -- 'I tell you now, what I've told you before, WATCH!'"

During Desert Storm we were told in television newscasts how our troops out there in the Middle East didn't want to miss Christmas. I thought about that, and I asked myself the question, "Is it possible to miss Christmas?" Here in America you might think it impossible to miss Christmas. For almost a month now you have been bombarded with Christmas music; whether it's on the radio; in an elevator; or in the mall. And there are Christmas decorations everywhere -- houses and shopping centers and gas stations and lamp posts. And, of course, we are bombarded with Christmas advertising; and the storekeepers are all singing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"!

But in spite of all that, I believe it is possible to miss Christmas. You remember how there were some people at that very first Christmas 1994 years ago who missed it.

- There was the innkeeper. He missed Christmas because he was too busy. You know the story. Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem for the census taking. She was about to have her Baby. They tried to check into the Bethlehem Hilton but there wasn't a single vacant room. So, the innkeeper said, "I'm dreadfully sorry we have no room; but you can go to the barn." And the innkeeper missed Christmas because he was too busy. I mean, things were going great -- lots of out-of-towners crowding into his little hotel. He's making lots of money. Christmas was happening right under his nose, and he missed it because he was up to his ears in work!

- And there were other people who missed Christmas -- the religious leaders. Do you know that not one religious leader showed up at Jesus' birth? Not one. They were all over in Jerusalem, eight miles away. In fact, the Bible tells us that when the Wise Men came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the King of the Jews to be born?" King Herod called in all the theologians and religious top brass, and they knew immediately where He was to be born. They said "Micah 5:2 tells us that Bethlehem is the place of His birth." For hundreds of years they had eagerly anticipated the coming of their Messiah, but when these people from hundreds of miles away showed up and said, "Where will He be born?", and they said, "In Bethlehem"; they didn't even follow the Wise Men!

Does that not strike you as strange, to say the least? Especially since the Wise Men said, "We saw His star in the East and have come to worship Him." The religious "pros" didn't even go to check it out! I'm sure they said, "We have our traditions, our rituals. That's enough for us." They could have walked those eight miles from Jerusalem to Christmas. But they missed Him because they were indifferent.

- Another person who missed that first Christmas was Herod the King. He was called "King of the Jews," which was ironic. The name was given to him by the Romans; but the fact of the matter is that he wasn't even a Jew! He was a terrible leader. Everybody hated him. And into the bargain he was paranoid; he thought everybody was after his throne. When these Wise Men came looking for "the King of the Jews," he got uptight; he panicked. He was a madman. He had his mother, his brother-in-law, and even his wife murdered. Two sons whom he thought were trying to oust him were also dispatched. Five days before he died, he had all his sons killed so that they could not take over his throne. He would make Saddam Hussein look like a cub scout. And, of course, he ordered that every child in Bethlehem under two years of age be killed, to make sure he would eliminate this young "King of the Jews." He certainly had a fear problem, didn't he?

Now it is interesting when you look at these people –

- The innkeeper was too busy;
- The religious leaders were indifferent; and
- King Herod was afraid.

Aren't these the exact same reasons why people miss Christmas today -- why they don't really meet Christ in Christmas?

- "I don't have time for God; I'm too busy." Would you agree that Christmas is the busiest time of the year? "I don't have time for Jesus."

- Or they're indifferent. "Yes, I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; he was born at Christmas; He died on the cross and rose again. So what? I've got work to do!" They're indifferent.

- Or they say, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid that if I really got to know God, He will turn me into some kind of fanatic -- some "Jesus freak." So maybe I'll just keep my distance. "God, You keep on Your side of the line, and I'll stay on my side. You handle all the big world problems, and I'll handle all my personal problems." And they miss Christ. Now because of that I want to speak this morning about "How not to miss Christ this Christmas."

You remember when you were a small child your parents and your school teachers would say, "Now before you cross the street, always remember to stop, look and (what?) listen." Stop; look; and listen. I want you to think of that this morning: To stop, look, and listen in order to know Christ for Who He is this Christmas.

2. **STOP.** Stop and make time for the cultivation of your spiritual life.

- There are people who focus mainly on the physical aspect of life. They have their bodies in excellent shape. They're into sports; they eat the right food, and they do their aerobics every day. They're in great shape, but that's the most important thing in their life -- the physical.

- And then there are those who emphasize the financial aspect. They're making all the right investments. Their net worth increases every year. Indeed, they may be approaching financial independence. And yet their family may be falling apart, while they themselves are workaholics.

- There are others who lay most of the emphasis on their social life. They're party animals and they love it, and they have lots of good times; but they say, "I have no time for God."

- The first thing anyone has to do if he or she wants to meet Christ at Christmas is to make time for the spiritual aspect of life. After all, it's the most important part of anyone's life, and if you don't have that, you're out of balance.

Look at Psalm 39:6 (LB), "All man's busy rushing ends in nothing. He heaps up riches for someone else to spend." Sounds like Fairfax County doesn't it? Would you agree that the pace of life is hectic in Metropolitan Washington? All of this rushing ends in nothing, says the Psalmist. As I said recently, you can be so busy making a living that you fail to make a life. How many folks get up in the morning, go to work, come home, watch

T.V., and go to bed. Is that a living? No. It's just existing. You've got to make time for the development of your spiritual life.

Look at Psalm 46:10 to find the antidote, "Be still and know that I am God." Pascal once said that most of man's problems stem from his inability to sit still! Isn't it significant that the shepherds were the first ones to get the message? I think they were open enough to listen. They weren't too busy. If God called some people around here, He'd get a constant busy signal. "All the circuits are busy at this time." "I haven't time to listen to God. I don't have time to get to know God." That person is too busy.

Look at Proverbs 10:27, "Reverence for God adds (what?) hours to each day." How many of you would say, "I need more time."? But when you put God first in your life, He'll make your time last longer. We can't afford not to spend time with God, getting to know Him, and allowing Him to speak to us. So, if you're not going to miss Christ this Christmas, you've got to make time for Him.

Take some time this coming week just to consider the direction of your spiritual life. "Where am I going in 1995? Am I out of balance? Am I putting too much emphasis on my career goals, on my finances, on my physical well-being? And do I have a stunted spiritual life?"

If the innkeeper had let Mary and Joseph in, he would have had to displace somebody else; just as people sometimes get "bumped" at an airport. There's a principle here that anytime you invite Jesus to really take control of your life, there will be something else that may have to go, because you have only a certain amount of time and energy. So many people are not ready to displace anything in order to give Christ His rightful place. We keep adding and adding things to our schedule, and as I've said many times before, "if you burn the candle at both ends, you're not as bright as you think you are." You can get so many irons in the fire that you put the fire out. Don't miss Christ this Christmas. The starting point is to slow down and make time to really get to know God.

2. LOOK. Honestly investigate who Christ is. Notice what Herod told the Wise Men to do. Matthew 2:8, "Go and make a careful search for the child." By the way, why do we call the Wise Men wise? I think it is because they cared enough to check it out. Evidently, they had seen some extremely bright star in the sky which they began to follow, and it led them from wherever they lived, all the way to Jerusalem. These men had no pre-conceived notions; they were open-minded. They were not believers; they had probably never heard of the Old Testament; but they said, "Let's go and investigate."

Now that's the second thing you need to do if you want to discover Who Christ really is. It seems incredible to me that people will celebrate Christmas year after year, put up the tree and sing carols, without ever checking out Who this Jesus Christ is -- Was He more than just a man? The Bible says that He was and is God. So, we had better listen to what He has to say. If He wasn't Who He said He was, He was the greatest imposter the world has ever known. And if He were an imposter, what are we doing here this morning? Why will billions of people celebrate Christmas again this year? Because God came to

earth almost 2,000 years ago in the form of a human being so that we could relate to Him and so that He could redeem us from our sins. His coming split history. This one event was the hinge between B.C. and A.D. Every time you write a check, Jesus Christ is the reference point -- 1994 from what?

Of all the ways the Creator could have come to earth, He chose to come in the same way all of us came -- by being born into it. Notice Jeremiah 29:13, God says, "You will seek me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart." God says, "I want you to become a seeker -- see if what I say is really true or not."

There was a cover article in Newsweek magazine some time ago entitled, "And the children shall lead them -- young Americans return to God." It was about the Baby Boomers. The article said that these people are returning to God in record numbers. The subtitle of the article was "A time to seek." One sentence read, "With babies in arms and doubts in mind, a generation returns to God." Now that is very interesting.

"With doubts in mind." You know, it's all right to have doubts, as long as you allow those doubts to motivate you to check out and discover the truth. People say, "I don't think Christianity is logical." I say to that, "You haven't really checked it out." I would say that our Christian faith is the most logical, rational interpretation of our life here on Planet Earth. When I became a believer, I didn't remove my head and put it up on a shelf!

Sometime I would like to start a small group called an "Investigation Group." We would study the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" There would be three requirements to gain admission to the group: (1) You cannot be a believer; (2) You must have doubts; and (3) You must have an open mind. I believe that the people who seriously think through their faith before they make a commitment, become the finest Christians of all because it is the logical way to live.

So, if you want to have Christ at Christmas, you must take time to develop the spiritual dimension of your life. Life is more than fun and games, work and watch T.V., retire and die. You're going to spend infinitely more time on the other side of death than you will on this side, so you had better check it out. Only a fool would go through life unprepared for what he knows is eventually going to happen. If you have doubts, if there are parts of the Bible you don't understand, that's all right. I don't understand all about internal combustion, but it doesn't keep me from driving a car. I don't understand all the chemistry of digestion, but it doesn't keep me from enjoying a good meal. I don't understand the laws of aerodynamics, but it doesn't keep me from travelling in a plane. I don't understand how T.V. waves go through the air, but it doesn't keep me from watching the evening news on T.V. I don't have to understand something fully in order to benefit from it. I just have to know that it works. And if a billion Christians celebrate Christmas, they must be saying, "It works!"

3. LISTEN. Don't be afraid of the good news. Look at Luke 2:10-11, "The angel said, 'Fear not; I bring you good news of great joy... a savior has been born for you -- He is Christ the Lord.'"

I think it's interesting that the first thing the angel said to the shepherds was, "Don't be afraid!" Why did the angel say that? Because most people don't get close to God because they're afraid. We might summarize it in three statements:

"I'm afraid I'll lose my fun";
"I'm afraid I'll lose my freedom";
I'm afraid I'll become a fanatic."

There are those who think, "If I really give my life to God, and start living the way He wants me to live, I'll lose all my fun. Besides, Christianity is just a bunch of rules and regulations and rituals. Don't do this and don't do that.

"Don't drink, smoke, cuss, chew;
Or run around with girls that do."

But Jesus didn't come to earth to give us a list of Do's and Don'ts.

Then there are people who say, "If I become a Christian, I'll lose my freedom. The party's over. God is this big cosmic killjoy waiting up in the sky to stomp on me if I make one false move." But this is patently untrue, as any joyful Christian will tell you.

Then others say, "If I become a Christian, I'll become a fanatic. I know some people who call themselves Christians, and they're neurotic. Do I have to become like that?" And I want to say, "No, you don't." You don't judge Jesus Christ on the basis of everything that's done in His name. We're embarrassed by the things some Christians do or say. But you've got to get rid of your fears. The angel said, "Fear not; I bring you good news -- a Savior has been born for you." What is a Savior? I'm sure you've seen this quotation.

"If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator.
If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist.
If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent an economist.
If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent an entertainer.
But our greatest need is forgiveness, so God sent a Savior."

I know that I don't measure up to my own standards, much less God's. I know that I "fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) God says, "I'm a Savior." Now, you lose your fear when you understand what Christ came to do. What did He come to do? Look at His own words in John 10:10, "I have come so that you may have religion, rules, restrictions and rituals." No. He said, "I have come that you may have life, and have it to the fullest!"

If you remember nothing else from this sermon, remember this - - Christianity is not a religion; it is a lifestyle. Christ came that we might have life. Jesus has nothing to do with religion except that He was against it. Why? Because religion, properly defined, is man's best attempt to get to God. Religion is -- "how many brownie points do I need to accumulate so that God will accept me?" The Bible says that God came to earth to say, "I love you and I

want to save you and have a personal relationship with you. I want you as My child. You matter to Me." God has a plan for your life, but you must accept His gift of life as it is offered to you in Christ.

So, there is no need to be afraid. Look at John 3:17, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it, but to save the world through Him." Christ came not to scare us but to save us. He did not come to condemn us; He came to help us change. He came to give life, not death.

Now, which of these three things can cause you to miss Christ at Christmas this year? Are you too busy? Are you indifferent? Or are you afraid?

Let me close with two questions:

1. Have you received God's Christmas gift? "...for unto you is born this day a Savior..." You need Christ. There's a God-shaped vacuum in every person's life. You may try to fill that vacuum with lots of things -- work, family, money, popularity. But there's still that gnawing emptiness inside. God wants to come into our life and make you a new person; and this personal relationship with Christ is the greatest blessing you and I can ever enjoy.

2. What are you going to give Jesus for Christmas? It is His birthday, remember. Whoever heard of having a birthday party where you give gifts to each other and forget the birthday boy? So, what are you going to give Christ for His birthday? What do you give the person who has everything? But God doesn't have everything. He doesn't have your life unless you give it to Him. He will never force you to love and follow Him. You and I may choose to accept Him or reject Him; but you've got to be willing to live with the consequences.

So, choose life!

AMEN.