

"The Real World and Christmas"

Sometimes there is so much sugar around this time of year that we fail to see the spice. Christmas is often so sweet that for a short time, the sour of this life is overlooked. But then Christmas is soon over and it's back to life as it's usually lived. The "real world" comes back all too quickly with its sorrows and stresses. And yet, we need to see that this is the reason why Jesus came – to address our needs; and tackle the problems of this world as real and as large as they may be. There's definitely a connection between "The Real World and Christmas."

See the real world to which Christ came. Soon after Jesus' birth an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and commands him to flee to Egypt because evil King Herod desires to kill the Christ. When King Herod heard the Magi asking where the King of the Jews had been born, Matthew says, "He was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him." That's like saying that, when Herod sneezed, all Jerusalem caught a cold. The people had learned that Herod's moods had an impact on their own lives. Herod was troubled and, as a result, so were the people.

Herod the Great was a non-Jew who had been chosen to rule the area where Jesus was born. Herod had been appointed the king of the area of Judea by the Romans who controlled that part of the world at that time. Herod was called Herod the Great. But not because he was great in piety. In his old age Herod had become a murderous old man. If he suspected someone was a challenge to his power, he had that person killed. He murdered his wife and her mother, in addition to his three sons. Augustus, the Roman emperor, said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. You can see why the people became disturbed when Herod became disturbed.

To Herod, the Christ-child was another threat who needed to be eliminated. That's why, Matthew tells us, he called "together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law and he asked them where the Christ was to be born." We know what Herod did in a desperate attempt to kill Jesus. He had all the male children in Bethlehem, two years old and under, killed. He viewed the Savior born in Bethlehem as a threat to his rule and therefore didn't hesitate in killing babies.

So, the Christmas scene which is often filled with soft and endearing images also has in it this dose of reality. But the real world with its sin and sorrow and murder and intrigue has always had a connection to Christmas – this is in fact, why the Christ came to our world! Many choose to let Christmas be a birthday party for a cute little child and let it go at that. But such a view of Christ and His coming really misses the point about why He came. He came to rescue and redeem a fallen world, a world which had become so estranged from God and His will that there are deranged old men who think it's to their advantage to kill little children. Jesus came here because he knows that there is sin, sorrow and death and so he willingly came to do battle with the devil and die for sin – yes our sin too – so we might find in Him forgiveness, hope and life.

This is why Christ came. He came to deal with your sin. He came so that when you experience loss and sorrow and even death, there's forgiveness and real hope that you can hold on to as you see that God has given you a real Savior to meet your greatest needs since the real world is so often about sin and sorrow and death. I read this week about the dying wish of an 8-year-old in Pennsylvania who wanted a group of carolers to sing outside her home before she died. Thousands of carolers sang outside her home on Saturday last week. They sang on Saturday – she passed away on Christmas morning. Has Christmas this year brought you closer to God or did you experience just a fleeting moment of joy? When God says, "A Savior is born for you," he means what He says – you needed saving, you cannot save yourself. Without Him you will be overwhelmed by your sin and the troubles of this world. Without Him there is no lasting peace or joy and no hope in the face of death.

Christmas and the real world need to go together. Only then will we truly appreciate God's great Gift. Christmas becomes a living and lasting event as you realize that you were headed for hell but

was that little baby who was going to change the way you were going. Christmas becomes a living and lasting event as you realize that the Bible is speaking specifically about you when it says that Christ died for your sins. Christmas becomes a living and lasting event as you step back and look long enough to see the Christ-child become the Savior who rose from the dead and conquered death for us.

It's because of the Savior's work that we can celebrate a joyful Christmas even though we acknowledge that these are troubling times. Yes, there's trouble even at Christmas! Yes, there are Herods who trouble even today. But the joy of Christmas continues even after Christmas is over for the child of God as he sees that this is why Jesus came to this earth – to rescue us! Someone once said, "We should put Herod back in Christmas." It's hard to know what was exactly meant by that remark but I think I know. Herod belongs in Christmas because that is the real world. And Jesus has come to give us hope and peace as we live our lives in this real world.

We live and work in a fallen world which tries to celebrate Christmas with us. But now Herod has returned! Christmas is soon over and the real world with its stresses and sorrow returns all too quickly. Herod is everywhere today and it is to the world of Herod that Christ has come. Christ has come into this world where many husbands and wives aren't getting along very well these days. He has come into this world where having a credit card enables you to get just about anything but you still have to pay for it! Jesus came into this world where someone's mother or father spends the holidays alone. The holidays for some are more about the contents of a bottle rather than a family feast. And Christ has come into this world where some will associate Christmas with the loss of a parent or spouse.

It was to this troubled world that our Savior came. But that's why he came – to rescue us and give us hope! This is why we ought not ignore the Herod trouble that is still in our world. This is, after all, why Christ came. The prophet Micah had predicted: "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." In the midst of all this madness, our risen and living Savior came in order that he might now rule us and protect us as a shepherd rules and protects his sheep. I suppose we could try and drown out the realities of this world by playing Christmas music 365 days a year. There is, however, a better approach. We don't have to like the way things are in the world but we ought not ignore them. Christmas becomes real as we see that Christ is ruling in spite of the evil in our world. Everything was being "fulfilled" according to God's plan. Notice how Matthew emphasizes God's control over the events that were taking place at that time and how the Scriptures were being fulfilled and how God's purpose was being totally accomplished in the Christ who had come to save this world. He came in order that he be our loving shepherd and guide us now and into heaven.

This is where you are to find your lasting peace and joy also – in knowing Him who works out everything according to His saving purpose. As evil as King Herod was – and as powerful as he was – the Lord made sure he carried out His purpose to save the world in Jesus. And God wants us to live with faith trusting that, despite all the evil and uncertainty of our world, He is carrying out His purpose in the lives of all who are in Christ Jesus!

The famous expert in the law, Oliver Wendell Holmes, once boarded a train and couldn't find his ticket. While he rummaged through his pockets and his bags, Holmes was recognized by the conductor who told him not to worry about his ticket but to send it to the company later when he found it. The justice replied, "My dear sir, the problem is not 'Where is my ticket?'; the problem is 'Where am I going?'" It's to eternal shame of most these days that they do not associate Christ's birth with where they're going. In fact, his birth is more of a pleasant little insignificant stop along the way.

God would have you make this season more than that. In the Christ-child, born in Bethlehem, God has given you the answer to the question, "Where am I going?" As you look in faith to Him and trust in His guiding hand, Christmas will be a living and lasting event for you, too!