

THE DRAMA OF CHRISTMAS

THE SETS

For years, my wife has wanted Calvary Chapel to have a live nativity scene on the lawn of our church.

She'd love to see us build a stable, and import some livestock - a couple of cows, a few sheep - *no big deal*.

Then she wants to recruit some able-bodied actors, who don't mind withstanding a few chilly nights.

Finally, we could wire up a star, and borrow a camel or two from the Yellow River Game Ranch - go all out! It all sounds like a piece of cake? *But I know better!*

This morning I've got a Top Ten List. It's entitled, "**The Top Ten Problems With Live Nativity Scenes.**"

10) Kids, live animals, straw, and torches are a combustible combination.

9) Wal-Mart doesn't carry myrrh.

8) You have to watch your step around nervous farm animals.

7) No one wants to play the innkeeper.

6) Church pyromaniacs fight to see who gets to rig the Star of Bethlehem.

5) Shoving matches break out between new moms over whose baby gets to play the Christ-child.

4) Camels can spit.

3) Kids in the youth group think it's cool to burn the frankincense.

2) Chilly north winds cut through those white sheets worn by the angels.

And the number one problem with having a Live Nativity Scene, “It is the pastors, not their wives, who have to shovel up all the cow chips.”

There’re certainly a lot of details that go into pulling off a live re-enactment of the Christmas drama, but imagine the work God put into the original nativity.

This was **the drama of the ages**.

Almighty God invaded planet earth... Centuries of preparation and prediction had set the stage. Precise timing led to the crucial moment. The scope of the drama was breathtaking - played out on 3 continents.

It’s hard enough to get paid actors to perform on cue, but God manipulated unknowing, earthly players from His director’s chair in heaven. *Specific props were prearranged - backdrops were ordered ahead of time - even spectacular special effects were added.*

And that doesn’t even mention the miracle that was at the center of it all - a virgin named Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit, and God became a human being.

Hollywood’s big budget blockbusters pale in comparison with the effort, and time, and cost God spent to create and produce **His** Christmas drama.

Last time we were together we looked at *the cast of Christmas* - **the characters**, both *the good guys and the bad guys*. And we learned how to tell them apart...

This week we want to examine **the sets of Christmas** – the *backdrops, props, and special effects*.

The Christmas drama occurred *on location* in diverse and numerous places. **Sets** were scattered across the ages, and around the world... *From the halls of Gentile power, the capitol of Rome - to the mysterious land of Persia, where the star first appeared in the night sky...*

To a stable in an obscure Jewish village called Bethlehem... To a simple house that's only apparent distinction was the same star over its roof... These were the sets and scenes for God's Christmas drama.

It's funny how most of the images that come to our minds when we think of the Christmas season really have very little to do with God's nativity drama...

When we conjure up Christmas we envision a snow-blanketed New England countryside, with decorated Victorian homes, and *one-horse open sleighs*.

Or if we're in a religious mood we imagine a cozy stable built with pressure-treated pine, covered with sanitized straw, and occupied by vaccinated animals.

But that's not where God's Christmas drama begins.

Luke opens His Christmas narrative in 2:1, **“And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.”** God's drama begins with a ruler in Rome.

To appreciate the first Christmas, forget the snow-covered meadows and the horse-drawn sleighs - and think instead of marbled-halls and a Roman palace.

Palatine Hill in Rome, was just off the famous forum. It was the seat of power for most of the known world.

The home of the Caesar overlooked an avenue of temples and shrines to countless Greek gods. The temples were interspersed with arches, each one bearing tribute to another of the conquests of Rome and her generals. *What is God doing in the center of pagan power? Why go to Rome for Christmas?*

I'm not sure it's theologically correct to say it, but God had a problem... Micah 5:2 predicted the Savior would be born in Bethlehem, yet the pregnant virgin was in the Galilean town of Nazareth, 100 miles north.

How could God convince a prudent man like Joseph to take his expectant wife on a marathon walk south to the town of Bethlehem? *And it was not an easy walk...*

The pictures you see of Mary on the back on a donkey are probably not very realistic. Donkeys were scarce at the time, and available only to the rich.

Joseph and Mary more likely hoofed it down the Jordan valley to Jericho; then climbed the 4000 foot incline to Bethlehem. To give you an idea, imagine an expectant mother in her ninth month of pregnancy hiking to the top of Pikes Peak - *that's when you begin to understand the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.*

Let me suggest that nothing short of a royal decree from the Caesar himself - could've prompted such a trip... *and that's exactly what God engineered!*

The Christmas drama begins when God goes to work in the heart of the Emperor in Rome. "*Octavian*", was his given

name, but he took the title “Augustus” which means “revered one” or “worshipped one.”

Hey, let you in on a little secret - when a person calls himself the “worshipped one” - it’s usually a dead give-away that he has a slight problem with pride.

Augustus wanted to showcase the vastness of his empire, and demonstrate the extent of his power - so he ordered a census. He could boss around the world’s citizenry. Force everyone to return to their hometown.

This showed-off his muscle, and created some fresh data to enhance his boasts. So he penned a decree, but little did He know *God was at work on the end of his pen.* The “August One” in Rome - the single, most powerful individual in the world - became God’s pawn.

The Caesar in Rome was actually a puppet on a string - “**God’s marionette!**” God manipulated the emperor so Mary’s baby would be born in Bethlehem.

The world had bowed to the emperor, but though He didn’t know it the emperor was bowing to God’s will.

The drama of Christmas was initiated by a work of providence. “**Providence**” is the overarching, prevailing, sovereign will of God. It’s been said, “**God’s ways are behind the scenes, but He moves all the scenes that He is behind.**” None of us are the captain of our own ship - master of our own fate. God works in our lives, whether we know it or not, carrying out His purposes.

When Augustus died in 14 AD his final words were the last lines from a popular Roman comedy, “**Since well I’ve played**

my part, clap now your hands, and with applause dismiss me from the stage.” Staring death in the face, Octavian admitted the truth - he was not his own god. He was a mere actor on the stage of life.

The true God had been directing the drama!

Realize, wherever you find yourself this Christmas: *the circumstances you're facing - the people you're with - the place you're at - it's no accident.* God has at the very least allowed your life to gravitate to this point.

From your perspective, you might think your situation makes no sense, but God has a definite plan.

I heard of an educational toy that was marketed one Christmas to children. It came disassembled, and no matter how hard you tried to put the pieces together they were deliberately designed to never fit.

The toy was supposed to teach a child how to approach life when circumstances don't make sense.

That's how life can be at times - events don't always fit neatly together - some situations don't seem logical.

But God is at work! He's behind the scenes putting the pieces in their place - for the good of those who love God and who are committed to His purposes.

It reminds me of the family who bought a nativity set for their front yard. When they unwrapped the package they found it had two “*baby Jesuses.*” This concerned the mother. She was convinced one of the other sets had to be missing a baby

Jesus, and some poor family would end up without Jesus in their nativity scene.

She returned to the hardware store where she bought the set, and posted a sign by the remaining boxes, “[Anyone missing baby Jesus call 472-7162.](#)”

But she never received a call. She figured the incomplete set had to have gone to another store.

Then on Christmas Eve her phone rang... a young mother was on the other end of the phone. Her husband had recently left her and her three kids.

She had been cleaning the hardware store at night trying to put bread on the table. That morning she’d awakened to a frigid house, and a broken heater.

The young, single mom had jotted down the number she’d seen on the sign in the store. She figured it had to have been written by someone who might help.

Suddenly, it all made sense... why the family got the two babies in their nativity set... why the lady had felt so compelled to post the sign... God had orchestrated another Christmas drama. He had arranged events and people to make sure an abandoned mother and three kids didn’t miss the love of Jesus that Christmas.

In David Heller’s wonderful little book, “[Children’s Letters to God,](#)” Heller shares a letter sent by a seven year-old girl named Wendy. The little girl writes to the Lord, “[Dear God, did you think Christmas would turn out like this when You started it? - Love Wendy.](#)”

When you look at the props and backdrops of the Christmas drama it'll make you ask the same question.

“God, why was Jesus born in a stable and not in a hospital? Why did you choose peasants for parents, instead of millionaires or movie stars? God, you didn't do it the way we would have - *did an angel bungle the preparations?*” And the answer would be an emphatic “**NO!**” My point is that every detail in God's Christmas drama was there for a very specific reason.

And what's even more startling is that God has likewise carefully arranged the details of every Christmas since... *even your Christmas, this year...*

Perhaps, He's at work right now providing you an opportunity to help a person who's *missing Jesus*.

Just maybe, *there's a divine reason you can't go home this year for Christmas... or you're unable to get the vacation days you wanted... or your rotation at work will fall on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day...*

Perhaps, God is producing another Christmas drama...one that involves you and folks around you!

Well, there's another set we need to explore.

This time we jump continents - from *European Rome* to *Oriental Babylon*. We're in the mysterious land of Persia in a middle eastern court - and there before us are a host of bizarre characters known as “**magi.**”

Why would God go to Babylon for Christmas?

Yet these were the first people to notice the strange star that appeared in their western sky. They follow it and arrived in the Jewish capitol of Jerusalem. And there they tell King Herod in Matthew 2:2, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? We have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

Even the drama of Christmas came complete with special effects. Not a *lazar show*, but a *celestial sign*.

Another Babylonian, an earlier ancestor of the magi, a soothsayer named, Balaam - had been hired by the king of Moab to call on his God to curse the Hebrews.

But every time the Prophet Balaam opened his mouth to utter a curse, the Lord filled it with a blessing.

In Numbers 24:17, Balaam prophesied, “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”

Fifteen hundred years earlier Balaam had pointed his future colleagues to the eternal King that would rise out of Israel - and the star that would identify Him.

Daniel, the Hebrew prophet, who joined the ranks of the magi while the Jews were in Babylon, predicted the exact day Messiah would present Himself to Israel...

This made the magi aware the time was drawing near. They had one eye in the Jewish Scriptures and one eye on the night sky. But what was it they saw? What shone in the sky that pointed the way to Jesus?

In 1603 famed astronomer, Johannes Kepler, was in Jerusalem when he observed an interesting alignment of Saturn and Jupiter in the heavens. From Jerusalem the planets aligned in the direction of Bethlehem.

Kepler recalled a prophecy by a Jewish rabbi named Abarbanel. The rabbi predicted a conjunction would occur between Saturn and Jupiter in the constellation of Pisces just before the coming of the Messiah.

Kepler did some calculations and discovered the particular alignment he had observed occurred once every 800 years. This was in 1603, which meant around the birth of Christ such a phenomena would've been visible in the night skies over the land of Israel.

Kepler's theory is possible, but I wonder how an alignment of the planets gave the wise guys precise enough information to navigate to the exact house.

To me, it's more likely that the star the wise men saw was a supernatural GPS - a miraculous phenomenon.

Perhaps the wise men were led to Bethlehem, as the Israelites were led through the wilderness - a cloud by day, and a fire by night. *No one knows for sure.*

But I have no doubt, if Steven Spielberg can fill the silver screen with special effects, then the Almighty God can work a few across the celestial canvass.

Another truth I know for sure is that the star still shines! In one way or the other, God still leads and draws men to His Son Jesus. I love these words by author John Wallace, [“The message of Christmas is that we should never give up on](#)

God. Look for Him anywhere, but especially in your worst of times. God's message at Christmas is that help is on the way."

Christmas teaches us that God is not beyond using special effects when necessary. Whether the star shines through a *friend*, or a *sermon* - through a *neighbor's generosity*, or a *little child's hug* - through a *supernatural encounter*, or a *verse of Scripture* - God is drawing you this Christmas to worship His Son Jesus!

Yes, in a million different ways, the star of Bethlehem still shines brightly every year at Christmas time.

Next in God's drama the scene shifts again - from the plains of Persia to a suburb of Jerusalem called "*Bethlehem*" - from a *Persian palace* to a *simple stable*.

Once, a tough guy, from south Philly, was asked where Jesus was born. He said, "I think it was in Philadelphia." He was told to try again, "It must've been Pittsburg." Finally the questioner gave him the answer, "No, it was Bethlehem," The guy replied, "That's right Bethlehem. I knew it was somewhere in Pennsylvania."

But if you'd been around at the time you might not have known where Bethlehem was either. It was an obscure outpost on the edge of the Judean desert. As the famous carol calls it, "**O little town of Bethlehem.**"

A youth pastor once tried to explain to his students that Bethlehem was just a tiny village. He told them, "Bethlehem was so small they didn't have a Pizza Hut." A kid replied, "*What about a Little Caesars?*"

Several years ago the San Francisco Chronicle listed **The Top Ten Tourist Disappointments**. These were the ten biggest bummers in the world of travel.

One of the top two was Plymouth Rock. *Has anyone ever been to Plymouth Rock?* Once I did a mens retreat in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and went to see the landmark. I thought I was going to stand on a cliff jutting out of the coastline. Instead, Plymouth Rock was little more than a pebble - *a definite tourism bust!*

But #3 on the paper's list of Tourist disappointments was the renowned city of Bethlehem. To most tourists, *Bethlehem is also a bummer*. Unkempt buildings, dirty sidewalks, walls defaced with Arabic graffiti, boarded up windows, overflowing trash, hooligans prowling the streets. The whole city is shrouded in a dingy haze.

Today, "*O little town of Bethlehem*" could be more accurately rendered, "**O lousy town of Bethlehem.**" And in the first century day, the city was no different.

There was no room for Jesus in the Bethlehem Inn so Mary was forced to give birth in a stable.

Nowhere in Judea can you find evidence of stables in the form of wooden shelters. Stables in first century Palestine were usually caves. Professor Ray Vanderleen, while teaching in Israel, took his students to a modern day stable just outside of Bethlehem.

It forever shattered the student's image of that first Christmas. Piles of sheep droppings littered the floor.

The ceiling of the cave was stained with the soot of countless fires. A raised platform kept the shepherd's food and belongings away from the hungry sheep.

Vanderleen says what impressed his students most were the smells of Christmas. The fragrance of cinnamon and peppermint were nonexistent in that Bethlehem stable. Rather the odors of the sheep were foul and oppressive. Several students lost their lunch.

On one of our trips to Bethlehem we visited a cave that once served as a stable. It was authentic, and like what Mary and Joseph encountered on their visit.

Luke 2:7 tells us Mary **“brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger.”** This is where I've never seen a nativity get it right. Our mangers are always wooden boxes with fluffy, clean straw. But Palestinian mangers were carved from stone. They were hollowed out rocks that held feed or water, and were stained with drool.

Hopefully, by now you know there's meaning in the scenery God chooses for His dramas. Backdrops and props are used by the director to *create a mood*, and *convey a message* - and God's drama is no exception.

All creation was within God's grasp to create the set He desired, so why did He choose for His Son to be born in a grimy little town like Bethlehem?

Why in a dirty stable? Why would God put His only Son in a cold, contaminated, carved out rock manger?

Here's the good news - *if God visited a city like Bethlehem, and was born in a stable, and laid in a feed trough* - then know for sure that He's a reachable God. He isn't aloof and removed. He's accessible to us.

If God came to Bethlehem He'll visit your neighborhood, or your complex, or your workplace, or the toughest barrio in your town. Jesus will journey to the other side of the tracks to reach someone in need.

Jesus isn't afraid to get involved in *a broken marriage, or a blended family*. He isn't squeamish.

Jesus isn't scared off by hurting people. In fact, He comes to us at our point of deepest need. He doesn't mind getting down and dirty to lift us out of our mess.

Remember the lyrics, "**Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.**" The light of Christmas, the Son of God, shines even in dark places, and on mean streets.

Finally, the Christmas drama shifts to one more set. Several months have past since the birth of Jesus, and Joseph had found his family a house to rent.

Matthew 2:11 tells of the arrival of the star-trailing magi, "**When they had come into the house** (*notice it's a house now, not a stable*), **they saw the young Child** (*not a baby anymore, now He's a toddler*) **with Mary His mother, and** (they) **fell down and worshipped Him.**"

What a scene! What a grand finale to an epic drama.

I say this tongue-in-cheek, but to me the most amazing aspect of the entire Christmas narrative is that the wise men worshipped not an innocent baby, but *a testy two year-old!*

I've wanted to do many things to my kids when they were rambunctious toddlers, but worship them has never been one of them. The wise men obviously were convinced Jesus was special!

Oriental kings and a royal caravan pull up to the rental house on Maple Street. Curious neighbors peer through their mini-blinds. Powerful men are on the living room floor of a 1200 square foot ranch - men who hold the destiny of nations in their hand - are seen lying prostrate in front of a diapered toddler. *Amazing!*

An ordinary house in an ordinary neighborhood with an ordinary set of parents, and what appeared to be an ordinary child - yet, an extraordinary event unfolded.

Mysterious visitors bow to the Child and call Him "King." As Max Lucado writes, "God dances amidst the common. And that night He did a waltz." In the Christmas drama God invaded the commonplace.

God does this again and again at Christmas time.

You think the only thing *remarkable* about your life is how *unremarkable* it is. But if that's the case you're a prime target for God's intervention. He loves to reveal Himself *to ordinary people and in ordinary places.*

And on the floor of this ordinary house in Bethlehem are the three most famous Christmas props... a **chest of gold**, a **vial of frankincense**, and a **vase of myrrh**.

Gold was the treasure of a king... **frankincense** the tool of a priest... and **myrrh** was an embalming fluid. It was the preparation for a man who was born to die.

What strange gifts for a young child... *yet I can't think of three more appropriate presents for Jesus.*

Jesus is King of the universe... He's our great High Priest able to usher us into God's presence... And He's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Here's what we've covered this morning...

God fulfilled a promise... Providence prevailed... A star pointed the way.... God came to a filthy town, a dirty stable, a hollowed out rock - to show us just how low His love will go to lift us up!... He came to an ordinary place, to save ordinary people, and to perform His extraordinary work in our ordinary lives.

There in a house, not much better than the stable, a few early visitors saw what millions since have discovered - the babe of Bethlehem is the light of the world, and worthy to be worshipped with all our lives.

And here's the crux of this morning's lesson - **it all matters**. *The circumstances, timing, props, town, star, house* - they all had a special purpose in the development and outcome of God's Christmas drama.

In the movie biz there's a term used to describe a set ready for filming - it's called **"a hot set."** *On a hot set* everything is important - nothing can be disturbed.

I heard of a movie set that contained an ash tray with ashes. Just before filming, a stage hand emptied the tray... *and*

nearly lost his job. In throwing out the ashes he unknowingly threw away clues pertinent to the story.

My point is that God's Christmas drama was played out on **a hot set**. Everything from the props, to the places, to the special effects - were all arranged by God's own hand for His exact and special purposes.

Here's the thought I want to leave you with this morning - perhaps... just maybe... your life is **a hot set**.

You are where you are... what's happened has happened... you're with who you're with... you're in what you're in... you've got what you've got... you lack what you lack... all for a very specific reason!

And remember **you don't mess with a hot set!**

God is in control! God has you where He wants you. Stop getting in His way. *Let God direct the action!*

Elizabeth Elliot once prayed, **"Lord, please never rescue me from what you know will make me more like Jesus."** If God is currently using your heartaches and hardships to mold you into the likeness of Jesus, be patient. Have faith! Let Him do His work in your life.

Perhaps there's a personal drama God has planned for you this Christmas season? God's drama of the ages began that first Christmas, but who knows if it won't continue this year, in and through your life!