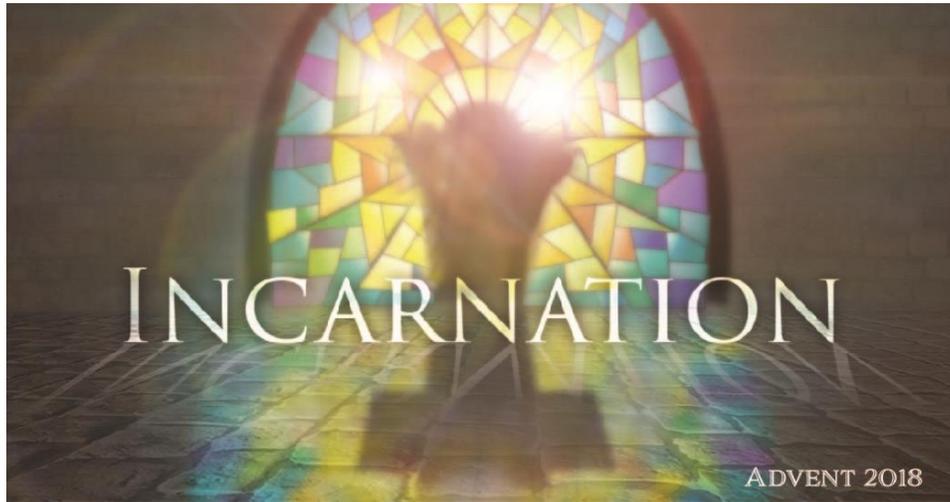


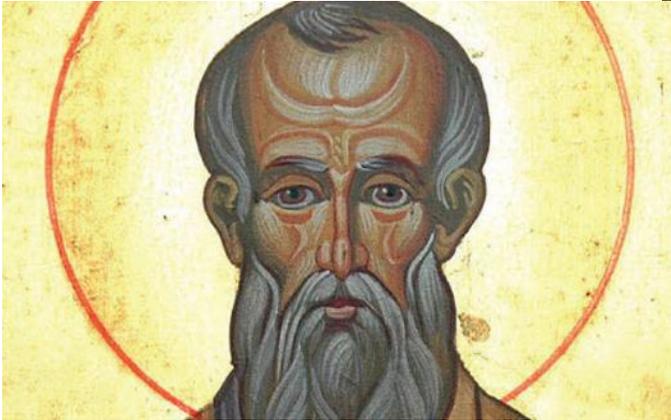
***ADVENT 2018: The Incarnation***  
Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series  
Pastor David Palmer  
December 2, 2018

**TEXT: John 1:1-14**



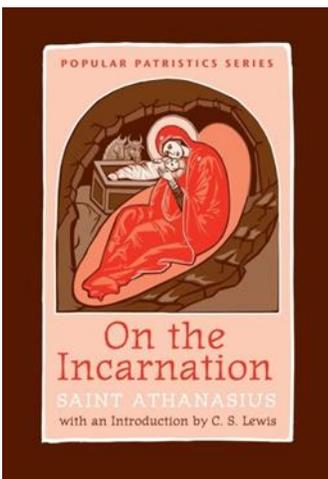
It is with great joy that we begin a new series this morning as our Advent series. We are going to be focused on the incarnation. The joy of Christmas rises from this unique Christian conviction that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, became a human being. This conviction separates Christianity from all other faiths. It has generated questions from skeptics and believers alike: How is it possible for God to become a man? Why is it necessary for Jesus to be both human and divine? What would motivate God to come to this world in this way? What does the incarnation mean in my life and for our world today? This Advent season, this Christmas season, this time of joy and celebration, we are going to try something never before attempted at Kenwood Baptist Church. It's a high-risk, pastoral endeavor, and we are going to need everyone's participation. The incarnation is so important to our faith that it needs to be understood and explored in depth. If this belief that God, the eternal Son of God, took on humanity, this is a truth that we need to understand well. It's a truth that we need to understand even at a basic level in order to become a Christian. It's a truth that as we understand the depth, it fuels and ignites our worship for Christ, and so, this Advent season, we are going to need some help to do that. This is the never before attempted portion. We are going to bring in an older brother in Christ. I mean a much older brother—like about 1600 years older. We are going to read this together, the Advent series: *On the Incarnation*. We are going to use the help of an older brother in Christ named Athanasius.

This is a statue of Athanasius outside of the church in Denmark depicted in a heroic pose, but he probably looked more like this next image which is a painting done of him closer to the time. Athanasius was an Egyptian. He was dark



skinned, and he was short. His theological enemies called him “the black dwarf.” He had a penetrating gaze. He served as a pastor for 45 years during a very tumultuous fourth century in Christian history. Even though our older brother in Christ, lived 1600 years ago and closer to the birth of Christ than we do, he lived at a moment in time where the world was changing rapidly. There was both explicit persecution of Christians in an empire-wide, systematic way and the moment when the first emperor of Rome becomes a Christian. A time of dramatic change. There was a time when there was a violent movement that was hostile to Christian teaching—Christian teaching that proclaimed that Christ was the eternal Son taking on real human flesh. Another very popular teacher named Arias was teaching that in fact Jesus was a created being, that He was something like the angels, that He was the first of God's creations but certainly not to be equated with God Himself. This teaching resonates in our world today in the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormon church and certain features of Islam that share the same view that Jesus is something less than the eternal Son of God. So, even though

we look back, we look to someone God used in this moment in a very dramatic way to help us understand the beauty and the glory of the incarnation. Athanasius says: “That which is made of earth can now pass through the gates of heaven in light of Christ’s coming.”



I know that all of us, myself included and even our pastoral staff, if we are honest, are intimidated. That is why we need the preface to this short book. It is written by C. S. Lewis. In this preface, Lewis says this:

“There is a strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books. The

student is half afraid to meet one of the great philosophers face to face. He feels himself

inadequate and thinks he will not understand him. But if he only knew, the great man, just because of his greatness, is much more intelligible than his modern commentator.”

One of the striking things about Athanasius is the clarity with which he writes and thinks. Lewis recommends for us:

“It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.” (12)

We are immersed in a moment in time, and Lewis says that there are benefits for believers to read old books, and if you identify this morning as a Christian, this is Lewis's counsel to you. He says:

“Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. . . .The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds.” (13)

Every time has its own perspective, ours included. There are things we take for granted, assumptions that are givens. If you are a believer this morning, I promise you that Athanasius is going to help the clear sea breeze of the centuries move through your mind and you are going to be stirred to wonder at Christ in some fresh ways.

Lewis also gives a benefit for unbelievers, and if you are not a Christian this morning and you are here because it's Christmas time, I'm thrilled that you are here. I have sat in your seat, and Lewis says that when you read old books:

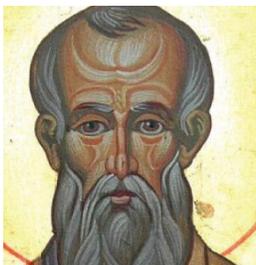
“In the days when I still hated Christianity, I learned to recognize, like some all too familiar smell, that almost unvarying something which met me. It was, of course, varied, and yet so unmistakably the same; recognizable, not to be evaded, the odor which is death to us until we allow it to become life.”

In other words, what he says is that he kept picking up this mere Christianity, this common Christianity, in all these different writers and in all these different places, and those eventually helped lead him to saving faith. Are you willing? I know it's a big ask. It's a busy time of year. Are you willing to engage with an older brother in Christ? I hope so.

What we are going to do each of the weeks of Advent is follow this book, *On the Incarnation*, by Athanasius. It is organized into four sections, and the first section, which is our subject today, is that Jesus, as the Incarnate Son, brings the dead to life. That is what we celebrate at Christmas time. Many of our familiar Christmas carols have this very language in them. Did you hear the

lyric in *O, Come All Ye Faithful* where we celebrate “Word of the Father now in flesh appearing”? Or in *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. What does that lyric mean: “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity”? This is truth that we need, so let us plug in and follow our older brother. Let me say one more thing about him or why I have found him so helpful to me personally. This was the very first theological book I ever read as a Christian. I stopped in at the Huntington Bookstore in California on my way to live in China for two years. I thought I probably needed a couple of books since I would be there for a couple of years. So, I stopped at this bookstore and saw a a book with a preface by C. S. Lewis and thought that must be something good. I pulled this out and it stirred my heart more than 20 years ago. It stirs my heart today. It has also really challenged my heart, because Athanasius writes, speaks, and thinks as a church leader addressing a pagan society, and that's our world. We need his perspective because he thinks deeply on the incarnation, and in the next two weeks, we will see that he then turns to engage his world, and he does that throughout.

So, let's begin. Let's start at the beginning. He begins this work on the incarnation with an invitation to us as his readers and listeners, and he says:



“Come now, blessed one and true lover of Christ,  
let us, with the faith of our religion,  
relate also the things concerning the Incarnation of the Word  
and expound his divine manifestation to us.”

*On the Incarnation, 1*

What he says this opening sentence is that the subject of this short treatise is to talk about the incarnation, *in carne* means, the taking on of flesh, that when we see Jesus born in Bethlehem, we are seeing the divine Son of God who has willfully chosen to appear in this way and to be born as a real human being. He is taking on a flesh, and when we see the baby Jesus, we are seeing God Himself present in this world. Athanasius promises that those who read and listen will benefit from this purpose: “. . . so that you may have an even greater and fuller piety towards him.” *Piety* is his word for devotion. I long to have more love for Jesus Christ. Do you long for that? How do you get more love for Jesus? You can serve Him; you can be around His people; but in my life and experience, the greatest swelling of love that comes in my heart toward Jesus Christ is when I see Him just a little bit more clearly. When you see Him as He is, it is impossible not to love Him. Athanasius also knows that the birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God, is something that is absurd to some people, the subject of derision to others in our cultural context, a moment of apathy: “What difference does that make for me?” Yet, Athanasius says: “Even for unbelievers, the more Christ is mocked or derided—or in our context, maybe ignored—the more he evidences the proof of his divinity.”

Why is this necessary? Why do we need to explore the incarnation? How do we understand it? What are the implications for us? Athanasius says we have to go back to the back story, the beginning, and just as our Advent reading for Christmas went back to creation, Athanasius begins his work in addressing his world by going back to the very beginning. He says: "Creation is controversial." Some people in Athanasius' day, in the fourth century, actually believed in a "spontaneous generation of the universe." He says that was what the Epicureans were teaching in his day. He says other people teach that "God made the universe from pre-existing matter," following Plato and others. But, he says, the Scriptures teach us instead that "God brought the universe into being through the Word." Genesis 1:1: *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."* How did God make this world? How did He do it, according to the Bible? God, the all-powerful God, just said: "Let there be light," and all of a sudden there was light. Was it a wave? Was it a particle? Whatever it was, it was moving at 186,000 miles per second, and God just said it. I want to know that God. That's amazing, isn't it? Psalm 33:6 says:

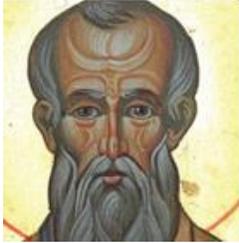
*"By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host."*

Genesis simply says: *"...and He made the stars."* Hebrews 11:3 is my favorite:

*"By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible."*

I was teaching this fall at Gordon-Conwell, and we were talking about how in 2 Corinthians Paul was saying that the *"god of this age, that is the devil, has blinded the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the glory of Christ."* I asked the people in the class: "How does it make you feel when you see someone who's blind? Do you get angry at them?" We feel compassion for them. I was ready to make the point that when people don't believe in Jesus, it's because they can't see Him. We have one student in the class who is visually impaired in a severe way. He raised his hand. He has to read everything with a special device. He is almost totally blind and makes a tremendous effort to do graduate studies. I called on him, and he said: "May I share one of the one of the blessings of not being able see?" He said: "If you're blind or almost blind, you are used to knowing that there are things that are real that you can't see." Jesus Christ is real, and we need help to see Him vividly.

Not only was the universe made, but there was something else that was made within that universe, according to the Bible. You and I are made uniquely. Athanasius says, addressing his world that does not know this—and our world increasingly does not know this—that we are very different from rabbits and golden retrievers; we are different from the trees; we are more important, not because of ourselves, but because of Who has made us and the way that we have been made. Athanasius says:



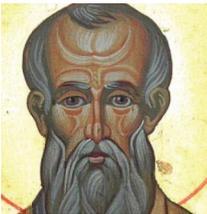
“Among these things, he had mercy upon the human race, creating them not like all the irrational animals upon the earth but making them according to his own image.”

*On the Incarnation, 3*

Man is made in the image of God to know God, to respond to Him in praise. According to the Bible, we are made in His image, and we are created to live with Him in paradise forever—if we watch over the grace that God has given us and obey His command. As we heard in our Advent reading, the first command given to humanity in the garden of Eden, after the commission to fill the earth with His image and likeness, was God’s command in Genesis 2:16-17:

*“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*

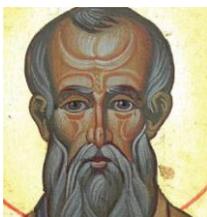
This is the back story, if you will, to Christmas. We can’t understand Christmas if we don’t know that God made the world and that He made you and me in His image and likeness and that He gave us a command to obey Him. Athanasius knows that his Roman readers and readers like us are probably wondering why we are talking about this. Isn’t it Christmas time? Athanasius brings this up, addressing the reader:



“Perhaps you are wondering for what reason, having proposed to talk about the Incarnation, we are now expounding the origin of human beings. Yet this too is not distinct from the aim of our exposition.”

*On the Incarnation, 4*

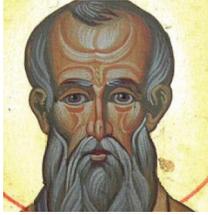
This is not separate from the topic because God created because God created you and me for eternity, for eternal life. There is a longing for eternity within us. We are made for this. We seek this; we long for this; we pursuit paths by which we can obtain it. We wonder, we seek assurance because it is inside of us, all of us, that were made to live forever. The important truth of Scripture is that we all will live forever, but where we will live and with whom we will live will be greatly different. This is important because we were given a command back in the Garden of Eden, and yet this command was disobeyed. Athanasius says:



“When human beings despised and overturned the comprehension of God, then they received the previously threatened condemnation of death, and they thereafter no longer remained as they had been created, but were corrupted as they had contrived; and, seizing them, death reigned.”

The disobedience in the garden lead to the right decree of God: “You will surely die,” and we do die, brothers and sisters. Have you noticed? We die. The condemnation of death came upon

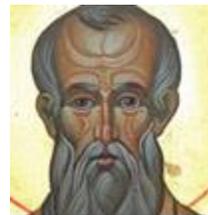
human beings, and not only did condemnation come, but Athanasius describes that corruption spreads dramatically. We are not living as we are created to. We do not seek to honor God in all of our ways. He says:



“When this happened, human beings died and corruption prevailed against them, becoming stronger than its natural power over the whole race, the more so as it had assumed the threat of the Deity against them.”

*On the Incarnation, 5*

This is not a death like how the animals or the plants die. In other words, it's not a natural thing that we die. We don't just die because our bodies wear out, we die because our ancestors disobeyed God, separating us from fellowship with God, and we have a divine decree of death against us. We have a serious issue. He goes on to say:

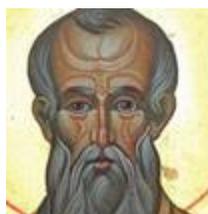


“With death holding greater sway and corruption remaining fast against human beings, the race of humans was perishing, and the human being, made in the image, was disappearing, and the work made by God was being obliterated.”

*On the Incarnation, 6*

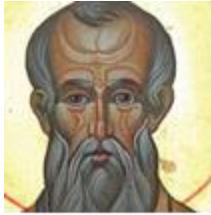
With death holding sway, humanity is perishing; God's works are being obliterated. So, he asks the question: “What should God do? Should he do nothing, like a deadbeat dad?” Athanasius says that would be “unworthy of the goodness of God.” It would be unworthy of God to see the works of His hands with death seizing them and perishing and to do nothing. I hope we can all agree with that. “What else could God do?” he asked. “Could God just dismiss the decree and say: “You know what? Forget what I said in the garden. I love you so much that I'm willing to represent Myself to you as a liar”? No! “It would be absurd that God, the Father of truth, should appear to us as a liar.” God is truth and He cannot just push His Word to the side. If He were to do that, that momentary relief would bring with it a tale of sorrows, because we would never be able to trust God. Could He just demand repentance? Athanasius says: “If there were only offense and not the consequence of corruption, repentance would suffice.” But he wisely looks at the world, looks at himself looks at us, and sees that it's not just that we've offended God, but that death and corruption has gripped us, and so repentance is insufficient to restore us to our created state.

He asked what else is needed to happen, or better put, he says:



“Who was needed for such grace and recalling [of humanity] except the God Word who in the beginning made the universe from non-being? For his it was once more to bring the corruptible to incorruptible and to save the superlative consistency [and righteous character] of the Father.”

To the question: “Who is needed to remake the universe and who could possibly come to bring the preservation of God's righteous character?” his answer is to say that the only One, the only one who could put joy into Christmas, is the Word of the Father, because:



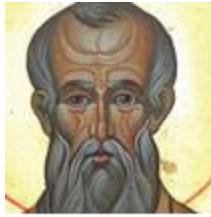
Being the Word of the Father and above all,  
he alone was both able to recreate the universe  
and was worthy to suffer on behalf of all  
and to intercede for all before the Father.”

*On the Incarnation, 7*

This is so incredible. Someone to recreate the universe is just what we need, and He alone can do that. Did you know you know that's what we need? Did you know this morning on your way here that you need to be re-created? We need to be re-created and Athanasius says that only the Word by which God made the world in the first place could re-create it. Not only could He re-create the world, but He would be worthy to suffer on behalf of all and intercede before the Father. In other words, the Word of God, the eternal Son, would be a worthy offering, and so, he says, He comes.

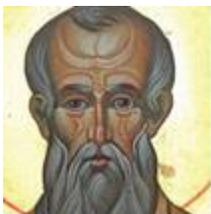
The season of Advent means *arrival*. It is when we celebrate Jesus' coming into the world. Athanasius says: “He comes, condescending towards us in his love for human beings and his divine manifestation” (*On the Incarnation, 8*). *Condescending* is a big word meaning *He makes the trip down*, in other words. He comes down to us in this world, towards us in His love. At the heart of Christmas is the love of God that sends His beloved, His one and only Son, into this world. The love of God, we read in John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world.*” He loved the world in this way: “*that He sent His one and only Son*” into it. Out of God's love for human beings, He comes and we see His divine manifestation. So, when we see Jesus, we see the eternal Son, truly human, truly God. What would motivate such divine love? What stirs you to action? What do you see in this life, a situation or a circumstance, that compels you and moves you from being an observer to an actor? Sometimes, when we see someone in danger, we go through a complex process, don't we? Sometimes, when you see someone in danger and you're trained to help, then you respond immediately. For example, if you're an EMT and you see someone at Starbucks keel over, you spring into action and do a finger sweep to dislodge what's in the person's throat. On the other hand, the person right behind you may have been thinking: “Wow, this can really slow down my holiday latte. I've got shopping on my list to get done. This is really going to interfere. Can I mobile order in front of them?” We have really different reactions, don't we? Sometimes we look at a situation and assess: “If I were to get involved with that situation, would that put me at risk?” Sometimes we make the judgment to hold back. Sometimes we decide not to get involved because it might put me or my family at risk.

What kind of love is divine love? What does God see that motivates Him to send His one and only Son into this world? For me, the greatest sentence in the first section of the book is the next one. Athanasius describes what God sees that motivates and launches Christmas. He says:



“For seeing the rational race perishing,  
and death reigning over them through corruption,  
and seeing also the threat of the transgression giving firm hold  
to the corruption which was upon us,  
and that it was absurd for the law to be dissolved before being fulfilled,  
and seeing the impropriety in what had happened,  
that the very things of which he himself was the Creator were disappearing,  
and seeing the excessive wickedness of human beings, . . .  
and seeing the liability of all human beings to death  
having mercy upon our race,  
and having pity upon our weakness,  
and condescending to our corruption,  
and not enduring the dominion of death,  
lest what had been created should perish  
and the work of the Father himself for human beings should be in vain,  
HE TAKES FOR HIMSELF A BODY AND THAT NOT FOREIGN TO OUR OWN.”

This is why, brothers and sisters, we need the incarnation so much—because God saw our real situation! Who talks like this? That’s why we need older brothers from other centuries. I’ve never read any blog that sounds like this! You can’t think like this today, and that is why we need people from other centuries to fuel and ignite the depths of the compassion and love of God that is behind Christmas. It is not only the fact that God sent the Son, that He did come, that stirs in moves Athanasius’ mind and heart, but it is what Christ did when He got here. He says:



“Although being himself powerful and the creator of the universe,  
He prepared for himself in the Virgin the body as a temple,  
And made it his own, as an instrument, making himself known and dwelling  
in it. And thus, taking from ours that which is like,  
Since all were liable to the corruption of death,  
Delivering [his body] over to death on behalf of all.”

*On the Incarnation, 8*

Christmas is not just about the birth of Christ in the manger, His taking on of flesh, but Christmas signals to us, at the very beginning: “*Call His name Jesus for He will save His people from their sins.*” How will He do that? He will take on a body like our body, and He will offer it

to the Father, doing this in His love for human beings. If you wonder this morning if God loves you, the incarnation of Jesus is strong evidence. If you wonder this day if God is distant from your difficulties, the incarnation is strong evidence that He is not a God who holds back when we are in danger or distress. If this morning your heart is gripped with fear or anxiety or uncertainty, the incarnation is strong evidence that God's love, His appearing, is for our good and to rescue us. He says by offering to death the body He had taken as an offering, holy and free of all spot, He abolishes death from all. Christ, the eternal, incorruptible Son, takes on a human body, offers it for us, and in this way, have death abolished for them. Not only does Jesus in His offering on our behalf satisfy divine righteousness in His death on the cross, but by His resurrection from the dead He then clothes us with an incorruptibility by His resurrection.

Brothers and sisters, the incarnation is a great work. It is a great work that flows from the heart of the Father. Athanasius ends this section, as a good preacher would, with some illustrations. He tells two short illustrations about a king. The first illustration is that of a king who built a city and the inhabitants of the city were afraid and terrified and they were constantly harassed by enemies and bandits. The king came and defeated their enemies and took up residence among them. With the king dwelling among them, the citizens of the city never feared again. I want to tell you that Christmas banishes fear. His second illustration is another one about a king who looks out at a city and the people in the city have found themselves in the circumstance of tremendous need. We often find ourselves in this situation—in a place where we don't know what to do. We are in a place where we tremble, our resources are insufficient for the challenges of the day. Athanasius' second illustration is that the king never abandons what he has made. The Scriptures teach us that God does not abandon us, but He comes, and His coming, taking on real human flesh, is for our salvation. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, we read:

*“For the love of Christ compels us, because One died for all, therefore all have died; and He died that they might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised.”*

Hebrews 2:14-15 says:

*“Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same real humanity that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear were subject to lifelong slavery.”*

Brothers and sisters, the good news of Christmas is that Jesus has come, that He has come into this world motivated by the love of God. We would be perishing without Him, but His coming signals to us the truth of His love. If you know Christ this morning, my prayer in this sermon and in this series is that you would end up having a greater and fuller love for Him. So, I want challenge you to get the book, read the book. I want to give you one concrete piece of help: Read Lewis' short preface and you can skip the 40-page preface. The book is actually very short.

When you start to read it, you'll feel yourself immediately out of step with the author. You will think: "I don't talk like this. I don't think like this. The sentences are a little longer than I could fit in a text message," but hang in there. We are going to be posting some short blog posts on our website to help us along the way, but I want challenge you to give up something trivial this Advent to gain something eternal. So get the book, read the book, talk about the book. If you have not yet trusted Christ, I want to ask you to do the same: Get the book, read the book, and talk about the book, and be here each Sunday and let the truth of the glory of Christ in His incarnation be seen before your eyes. This morning, the incarnate Jesus Christ offers you and me what we really need and what we can get from nowhere else. We need new life; we need to be remade; we need to be forgiven before God, and all of these become possible through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Amen