Prayer:
God, we anticipate your holy presence this morning. May we be receptive to your word and give honor and glory to you. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be a testament to your work in and through me. And may we, above all else focus all we have on you, sacrificing all we have for your holy and precious name. Amen.

Sermon:
If you have your Bibles turn to the Gospel of John. It’s not, oftentimes, the Gospel we turn to this time of year when we’re going to go through the Christmas Story. John gives a little bit different perspective on the birth of Christ. But over the next five weeks we’re going to be using this as the Gospel that we’ll base most of the messages out of—although I am sure we’ll pull in from Matthew, Mark and Luke as well.

Every year at Christmas, especially growing up, there are some gifts that you need but you don’t get too excited about. We all have the presents, as children, that we’re desperate for. We beg Mom and Dad for it. You know, we sit on Santa’s lap at the mall and we tell him, “This is what I’m expecting this year at Christmas.” We look underneath the tree and we see the different boxes that may fit the shape of the present that we’re hoping to get, and we pay attention to the wrapping paper as we’re trying to guess, “Is this what I’m really wanting?”

For me, as a kid growing up, I wanted the original Nintendo. How many of you had the Nintendo...Classic Nintendo? Mario Brothers, Duck Hunt...that one...the real one. Yeah, you know, kids today with their technology...they think that their game systems are pretty impressive, but really the Classic Nintendo...it’s hard to beat. They had some cutting edge technology that still hasn’t been matched. Like, in the real Nintendo when the game would freeze up, you’d take it out. Do you remember this? You’d take out the cartridge and you’d blow on it, put it back in and it would work perfectly. It recognized your breath somehow. I wish everything could be fixed that way, don’t you? You just blow on it and... I don’t think gaming systems these days have that blow feature to it, but that is what I wanted. I wanted the Classic Nintendo. For awhile I wanted the coolest shoes, Nike high tops, I wanted Lite Brite. Do you remember the Lite Brite?

Some of you...some of you little spoiled brats got exactly what you wanted. I know that. I had friends like you. That’s not how it worked out in my home. Now we got some money to go towards the Nintendo, but we had to save up for the Nintendo. And I didn’t get the cool Nike’s that I wanted. My mom got me the knock-off version from Payless because she couldn’t tell the
difference and she didn’t think I’d be able to tell the difference either. Really, Mom? I mean, I blame my entire basketball career, or lack thereof, on that moment.

But there is also…I think there is one gift growing up that most of us, I think, can relate to. It is a gift that looks like every other gift. It is wrapped up impressively. The expectations are set high, but then you open it up on Christmas morning and it is socks and underwear. Did you have this growing up? It was something that you don’t really want but you could use. Typically it is Mom or Grandma that get you the socks and underwear. As soon as you start opening it, your Mom...before you even see what it is your Mom is already trying to help you, you know, appreciate the gift. “Oh, this is exactly what you need. You really need some of these.” So you open that present and...maybe you need it but you’re not going to get too excited about it. It’s not what you want for Christmas. And it’s misleading. It’s cruel. I feel like something should be done about this, parents, because the wrapping paper is so promising. I mean, you think it’s going to be something you really want.

One year, it was around the same time I wanted the cool Nike’s because there was a number, perhaps three or four years I wanted those and it never quite worked out for me. But one year in particular my mom had a present. I blame it on my mom. It could’ve been my dad. Probably my dad. He had the present wrapped up as a shoebox, right? It looked like Air Jordans. I had to go through it and you’re just hearing about it. But I opened it up. They’re socks. Just a bunch of socks in a shoebox. And there is just this disappointment. My expectations were high. I thought it was going to go one way and it turned out going a different way.

Some presents are like that. You may need it but you don’t get too excited about it. If we could hit rewind and go back to the first Christmas, the first Christmas was a lot like that. When Jesus came, He was the present. He is this gift that the world desperately needed but, largely, it went unnoticed. No one seemed to get too excited about Him. The Bible says in John 3:16, of course, that “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” Here is this incredible gift that God is giving to this world of His love for us, but when Jesus was born most of the world didn’t even notice that a present had been placed underneath the tree. So why was that? Why was this most pivotal event in all of human history...why was it, at the time, so unnoticed? I think it was because it is just not what people were looking for. It came in some very unexpected ways.

If you have your Bibles and you’re in John chapter 1, then here is what you’re going to see as John begins to tell us the Christmas Story. He begins it in a way that is different than the other gospel writers. Each gospel writer puts his own emphasis on different aspects of the person of Jesus. Matthew, for example, is writing to a mostly Jewish audience so he is presenting Christ as the Messiah, as the One who has fulfilled the prophesies. Matthew 1 begins with the genealogy of Christ, establishing His bloodline as the promised Messiah. Mark is an action-packed gospel where he uses the word “immediately” over and over. It is one of his favorite words. He picks up in Jesus’ life, for the most part, from the time he met Jesus and then he just tells us one moment after another after another. There is lots of focus and emphasis on the power of Christ and the miracles of Jesus. It is shorter. It is an action-packed gospel.
Luke is a doctor, of course, so he writes us a more historical account. He pays attention to some
details and tells us things like, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree,” but Luke’s
emphasis is on the humanity of Jesus. He presents Jesus as the Son of Man. That is why, we
typically would turn to Luke around Christmastime. That is because he gives us different details
of the story—like, you know, Mary and Joseph and the inn. There was no room in the inn and
she laid him in a manger. And he shows Jesus to be human. John takes a different approach
altogether. He emphasizes the deity of Christ, and he wants us to understand that Jesus,
though fully human, is also fully God. While Luke looks back to the birth of Christ, John looks
back to the beginning of the world (before the world even began) to tell us the Christmas Story.
So John 1 begins this way. It says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.”

John is using the word Word as a reference to Jesus Christ. Now in the Greek this word is Logos,
and probably the most basic definition for Logos is “the expression or declaration of a thought.”
So think of it this way. John is saying that Jesus is the expression of God. He is God in the flesh.
He is the declaration of God. Even a stronger word would be, “He is the manifestation of God.”
So he begins by saying, “This is not just another prophet. This is God in the flesh. This is
Immanuel, God with us.” So he says, “In the beginning was the Word.” Jesus has always been.
“The Word was with God.” Jesus was right there alongside of God when this universe was
spoken into existence. And then here is what he says: “And the Word was God.” The Logos was
Theos. Jesus is God. So he is putting the emphasis on the deity of Christ and showing us that
this is the Son of God.

And if this is the Son of God and He is coming to earth as a baby, then it seems like this is a
pretty big deal. I mean, we see it as such in hindsight but in the moment it seems like it
should’ve been a pretty big deal, that all of the world should’ve stood still for this one moment,
that it would’ve been just this spectacular event. Yet, as you read through the story, the
wrapping paper doesn’t seem too impressive. It seems to me that if this is God’s great gift to
man that there would be some details in the story that would’ve been more carefully thought
out.

I am not trying to be critical of God’s gift-giving because I, in fact, am quite an impulsive gift-
buyer. I don’t plan ahead on these things. I have good intentions...mean to. Some of you are
this way, so don’t judge me. I think I’m going to do well with it, but it just doesn’t work out
oftentimes. So it is the 24th of December and I still need to do some Christmas shopping. But
even then it doesn’t take me too long. I don’t know what I’m going to get when I walk into the
store. I go up and down the aisles for just a couple of minutes. I pick out what I want. It is taken
care of.

It is interesting, too. I would say this. It is kind of a fun sociological study to sometime go
through a store on Christmas Eve, because the male/female ratio is quite out of balance. The
male species tends to dominate the shopping on Christmas Eve. And you might have good
intentions but a lot of it is last minute. What about the wrapping paper? The greatest gift to
man...and by “man” I mean man...is certainly the move towards gift bags. Amen? I mean, is that
not a beautiful thing? Right about the time that I was going to have to start wrapping presents on my own the gift bags came along, and those are great because it is much easier. And that is how I tend to give gifts. You know, it is simple. It is last minute. It’s not necessarily well thought out but my heart is in the right place.

I think that is oftentimes, as you read through...certainly the Gospel of Luke...there is that sense that God has given this great gift to man but there are just a lot of details that haven’t been...well, from my perspective...haven’t been thought out that well. It just seems a little bit haphazard. Yet we know that from the beginning of time this has been planned. The first prophesy of Jesus comes in Genesis chapter 3. Adam and Eve sin and it is at that moment that God promises to send a Savior. So thousands of years have led up to this moment. You have the Intertestamental Period between Malachi and the Gospels. Four hundred years there where they don’t hear anything from God. No prophet, no word from the Lord. And my guess is that, generation after generation after generation, eventually a number of people stopped looking, but those who were still looking surely thought, “When He comes we will know it. It is going to be a pretty big deal. It is going to be a pretty significant event.”

But in large part, what we read just doesn’t seem to match up with this. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Really? Then why Mary and Joseph? Mary and Joseph were not just poor. They were so poor that they couldn’t afford to buy the sacrificial lamb as required by Levitical Law for the birth of their son. They didn’t have enough money. Think of the irony of this. They can’t afford to buy a lamb for the Lamb of God. So they had to buy two doves. That is the best they could do. Is that how you planned it out, God? It just seems like a present such as your Son...it seems like that should be carefully delivered to just the right people.

Then, of course, there is the whole Christmas journey. We kind of romanticize this journey that Mary and Joseph took. I don’t... I mean, she was nine months pregnant. We assume she was riding a donkey because surely she would not have walked that kind of distance. And they get there and there is no room in the inn. It seems like if God was going to plan this ahead He probably would have made some reservations, right? He’s got some connections. I think something could’ve opened up. If we were telling this story then perhaps the people in the presidential suite would’ve canceled last moment and Mary and Joseph would’ve gotten a free upgrade. At least some things like that... But there is no room in the inn and they go to this shed, essentially.

And why the evil king during this time? Why not remove Herod from the equation? He’s trying to kill all the boys two and under. It certainly made things much more difficult on Mary and Joseph. It just seems like for such an event like this that some of these details...that God could’ve taken care of them a little bit more carefully. But perhaps the most unexpected part of this Christmas Story comes in Luke 2:7. It says, “And she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths...” She wrapped him in rags. That is what she did. “…and placed him in a manger.” Really? The Creator of the Universe—“In the beginning was the Word”—and she placed him in a feeding trough. It’s not surprising to me that John leaves this little part of
the story out. He was writing mostly to Greeks and for the Greeks this whole idea of this being God and then God coming to earth and this is how He comes... It would’ve been too much for them. They probably would’ve stopped reading because it just didn’t match up. There was just too much of a disconnect. I mean, how do you go from, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” to, “She wrapped him in rags and she laid Him in a feeding trough”?

And is there a reason behind it? That is what I want us to talk about. See, we see all these details of the Christmas Story. We see them each year, and we’re so familiar with them that I’m not sure we stop and ask ourselves, “Why did it happen the way it did?” I mean, we see it with kind of this Norman Rockwell quality to it. Jesus was born to this young, poor girl named Mary, and she gave birth in this stable, and she laid Him in a manger. We see it that way but it really is quite unexpected, if you think about it. So is there a reason behind it?

So as we approach the Christmas season and we kind of think through this mystery of the manger, I just want to give you a few things to think about as you’re setting out your nativity scene this year. The first is this: We expect the Christmas Story to be comfortable and trouble free, but it is not, far from it. That is what you would expect because this is the Son of God. I am sure that when Mary was told she would be giving birth to the Son of God, she just assumed that would come with its privileges: that God would work out the details that the birth would be labor free and pain free and some sort of supernatural epidural would probably be involved. If you’re giving birth to the Son of God, you expect it to be comfortable and you expect it to be trouble free, because God is going to work things out.

But here is the thing: God wanted to identify with us in our struggles. And this is an unexpected gift of Christmas. You would expect a story where Jesus would be born into a wealthy, prominent family and have a pretty comfortable existence here on earth, but He was born to a poor family and there were a lot of struggles because He wanted to identify with us in our struggles.

I had one friend, Ben Zydel. He grew up pretty rich, had everything he ever wanted. It’s never been an issue for them. If you know someone like this, then you know it’s not really their fault but some of them have a hard time identifying with people who are living paycheck to paycheck. They’ve never known what it is like to struggle with the bills or to pay the mortgage. They never had to really say “no” to things that they’ve wanted. They’ve just always had money, and as a result, it is hard for them to identify with those who have these challenges, who have these struggles in life.

Oftentimes I think some see God that way. As He sits up in heaven on His throne, streets of gold...you think He can’t understand what we’re going through. That He just doesn’t quite get it because He hasn’t been through what we’ve been through. Well, yeah, He has. And this is the unexpected gift of Christmas: That Jesus says to you, “I know what it is like. I know what it is like.”
Are you struggling financially? It is kind of a tough Christmas Season for you because, frankly, you don’t have the money for the presents and... Jesus knows what it is like to be poor. He grew up in a very poor home. As an adult, He didn’t have a place to lay His head. He was homeless. Maybe you have some family and the relationships are pretty strained right now. And you’re not really even looking forward to the holidays because you know it’s going to be tense. And you might have a family member and you know they’re going to disappoint you. Jesus knows what that is like. When He began His ministry, His mother and His brothers thought He was crazy. They tried to have Him committed. That hurt.

Or maybe you've had some friends or somebody that you really loved and trusted and they’ve let you down in a pretty significant way. They’ve hurt you in a pretty significant way. Jesus knows what that is like, because He had one of His closest friends betray Him with a kiss. And He had His close friends abandon Him when He was going through the toughest part of His life. Jesus knows what it is to face injustice. Some of you could tell me a story of being treated completely...completely in unfair ways. You’re innocent. You were taken advantage of. You were abused. Some way you were treated in a completely unjust way. So was Jesus. He was innocent. He never sinned. He was tried for crimes He didn’t commit, and He was nailed to a tree. He came into this world the way He did because He wants to say to you, “I know what...I know what you’re going through. I know how this feels.”

So when you read this story and you see these different circumstances that don’t seem to match up with, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” understand that Jesus went through this life in such a way that He could be able to identify with your struggles. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 4:15 that He is able to sympathize with us. He is able to understand what we’re going through because He has gone through it. And the gift of that is in Hebrews 4:16. Now because God can identify with our struggles, then Hebrews 4:16 says, “Then let us approach the throne of grace with confidence.” Because God knows what it is like to struggle and to hurt, let us go to Him with confidence, “so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” So that when we are in need, when we are struggling, we can go to Him with a sense of confidence because He knows what it is like. He knows what it is like. This is who we have in Jesus. This is this unexpected gift of Christmas. Because Jesus came the way He did, He knows what it is like, and we can turn to Him in all things, when we need strength, when we need peace.

Another thing to think about as we look at some of these unexpected pieces of the Christmas Story is that we expect the Christmas Story to be this royal extravaganza, right? It should shame any presidential inauguration. This is the Son of God coming to earth. We expect it to be a royal extravaganza, but God wanted to set an example of humility for us to follow. So even with His birth—even with His birth—Jesus is already beginning to show us how He wants us to think of ourselves, in this selfless, sacrificial way.

The surprising part, if you think about it, of the Christmas Story is not that the angels announced the birth of Christ. I mean, you would expect such a thing for the Son of God coming to earth. The surprising part is who they announce it to—people like the shepherds, the lowly
shepherds. The surprising part of the Christmas Story is not the miraculous virgin birth. You would expect a miracle to accompany the birth of the Son of God. The surprising part is the poor, unknown, uneducated, unconnected mother, Mary, was who God chose. You see, God came into this world humbly so that He could set an example for us to follow in how we live. And with His birth He turns the value system of this world upside-down.

A great way to think of this is when Jesus was born He was about three miles from the palace of King Herod. And the palace of King Herod was an incredible piece of architecture. If Mary and Joseph would’ve stood outside, which I’m sure they did, they would’ve been able to clearly see the palace from wherever they were, because it was built upon a hill and was some 90 feet tall. It covered around 45 acres of land—the palace did... palace walls. It was surrounded by around 200 acres of gardens, swimming pools and... So here is King Herod and the Son of God is lying in a feeding trough. But God is coming to earth humbly as a way to show us how He wants us to live, the kind of attitude He wants us to have.

Listen to the way Philippians 2 puts it. It is how Paul challenges us: Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

So Jesus doesn’t tell us how to live...doesn’t tell us to live in this humble, self-sacrificial way from His throne room in heaven, but He comes down to here to earth and He demonstrates it. He shows us how. And I don’t know about you, but that is a message that we need to hear around our home this time of the year. Because we just have a tendency—don’t we?—to look out for ourselves. You see this with kids. They’re counting the presents to make sure everyone has the same amount, and if one of the presents is bigger than the others they wonder, “Whose is that?” and “Am I being treated unfairly?” We’re not much different as adults. We’re a little more passive aggressive with it. You know, you might say to your spouse, “Hey, let’s just buy stuff for the kids. ...I don’t want you to buy me anything. Don’t...you don’t even need to buy me that sweater that we saw the other day at the mall.” You know, we say, “Don’t buy me anything,” but we mean, “You better buy me something,” right? I mean, we’d be hurt if they didn’t. We’re just kind of always looking out to make sure our needs are getting met.

I read a story about a survey that was given. It said, “Two out of five men will buy a present for their wife this Christmas that is really a present for them.” They give it to their wife knowing they’re going to be the ones to use it. Have your husbands done this to you, ladies? Maybe you haven’t even noticed. I don’t want to blow your cover, men, but ladies...if you get a Blu-ray Disc player for Christmas...yeah...you know that is probably more for them. If you get anything like an iPod, iPad, if you get a round of golf, chances are that is going to be a little more for them right? a power drill. On that survey they said that one of the top ten gifts that men give their
wives every year for Christmas is a game system. Who are the men that get away with this and how can you teach me?

Sort of in the back of our minds, though, if you think about it, oftentimes, men and women are the same way, I think. We can’t help but just think of how we’ll benefit from whatever gift that we give. And amazingly that is so not what God did through Christ. God did not send his only son to this world to die a sinner’s death in order for us to be redeemed in order to get something in return. Jesus was sent here for us. He was sent here so that we would not receive an eternity without God, not because God was getting something in return. And when Jesus came to earth He came in such a way as to show us how to live. He says, “I have not come to be served,” which is what you would expect of the King, “but I have come to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many.”

One other thing that we see as we look at some of these surprising details of the Christmas Story is that we expect the Christmas Story to be a demonstration of His supremacy, but God wanted to make a statement of His incredible love for us. Ultimately, when you look at all these details surrounding the Christmas Story that do not seem well thought out, they are, in fact, a demonstration of God’s love for you because they speak of sacrifice. God had the world at His feet but He came down here in the form of a helpless baby. He was born to a poor family and was laid to rest in a feeding trough. And that sacrifice is a statement of His love for you. There is a sense in which the greater the sacrifice the more clearly we understand the love.

I put on my Facebook page…I asked for some examples of people demonstrating love through sacrifice and I got a lot of different little stories. A mother takes extra shifts so she can support her three kids. A husband works extra hours so his wife can heal from cancer. An adult child gives up a very prominent and promising career so that he can take care of an aging and sick parent. Parents giving money they did not have in order to put their daughter through dance classes. A family, who had three weeks between when they needed to leave one living place and their new place, and did not know what to do, they were met with friends who put them up in their own home. So when we see these great sacrifices of Jesus, things that in some ways seem very much out of place, they answer the question, “How far would God go to show His love for you?” He sacrifices. He sacrifices intentionally to make a statement, just to be really clear. I mean, He certainly could’ve had a much easier existence, but He chose to come into the world the way He did as a way to be sure that you understood how far He would go to show you His love.

I know sometimes we think of that first Christmas...we sing about, you know, the silent night. I don’t think that is what Mary and Joseph were singing on that night. There was no heating lamp to place Jesus under. Joseph would’ve delivered the baby with his rough carpenter hands. We sing that the cattle are lowing. I don’t know what a low is but I think mooing doesn’t sound nearly as poetic. But they were mooing more than lowing, I think. “The cattle are lowing. The baby awakes. The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes.” He was crying. There is a cow in the delivery room, right? I mean, He was...I think it is safe to say He was crying.
So here is what I’d love to challenge you with as we approach Christmas this year. As you set out your nativity scene—and I know some of you already have set it out—but as you set out your nativity scene and you’re carefully placing that one piece after another, would you stop and just think of some of the unexpected parts of the story? Would you just see the stable, the size of a small shed? Would you hear the noises of the animals that seem so out of place? Would you smell the aroma that would come in a barn like that? Picture the manger. This is not an ornament, it’s a feeding trough. And would you see the Son of God lying in that manger, and would you just say to yourself, “He did it...He did this for me”? Would you allow the unexpected parts of the Christmas Story to make clear in your own heart and your own life this Christmas Season that God knows what you’re going through, that God has called you to live a life of sacrificial service and that God loves you very much?

If you want to talk to someone about putting your faith in Jesus Christ, about accepting this gift that God has given, after worship, seek Kathy Long out, seek one of the pastors, seek me out and I would love to share with you the gospel. Or maybe you’re ready to make this your church home, your church family. We would love to have you as part of this church. You can meet us for that as well. Friends, expect the unexpected this Christmas. Anticipate the gift that is needed for our eternity. Celebrate the power of God’s love, of God’s grace, and of Jesus’ life, which came in an unexpected package, in an unexpected way, to a world that so desperately needs him. Amen.