I don’t want to be too existential this morning but I do want to ask this question: What is it that draws us to Christmas? There is no day quite like it on the calendar in terms of the amount of attention and economic activity it garners. If aliens were watching us from their home planet, they would know that something was up this time of year – there are lights, decorated trees, Christmas movies and TV shows, Christmas Markets, inflatable Santas, supernatural livestock and so on. There is something about the day that draws people across all ages and economic circumstances. Sure, we have a few self-righteous scolds who every year tell us that there is something wrong with Christmas and the way it is celebrated. They exist on both sides of the debate, either lecturing us that Christmas is too commercial and we have lost its true meaning or that it is too religious and that we are forcing our religion on the poor oppressed secular humanists. But putting aside the people on the fringes, there is something that we love about Christmas. And sure, there are the greedy parts – people like it because they get stuff. But there is another part, a part that is more public-spirited and benevolent. And this part of Christmas is explained in our Gospel this morning by way of the Prophet Isaiah. It says, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." I think this is the hope that we look forward to on Christmas, the hope that things are going to be a little better. The hope that the rough will be made smooth and the crooked made straight. On Christmas one thing we are looking for is the peace and goodwill towards men of which the angels spoke. There is a desire to see a world that is not torn apart by hatred and acrimony but is rather united and filled with joy.

If you watch many Christmas movies or TV specials, even the ones that are pretty secular, there is always an otherness to Christmas. These shows may be corny and predictable but the overarching theme is that there is something about Christmas that makes the crooked straight. Even secular Christmas is speaking to our better angels. It is telling us that life does not have to be like what we see in the day to day; a life of division and hatred. In William Blake’s great poem *Jerusalem* he takes on the theme of building a better world with Jerusalem representing that something better. He contrasts the England of his day with its “dark satanic mills” with what could be. The poem ends with the stanza, “I will not cease from Mental Fight, Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand: Till we have built Jerusalem, In Englands green & pleasant Land.” That I think is the hope that Christmas stirs in the hearts of all people, the longing that one day we will build the Jerusalem of which Blake spoke.

But this raises the question which is why do we have some notion that this longing can be fulfilled through Christmas? Well, here is the interesting thing, no matter where we look at Christmas, be it the secular or Christian version, we find that this longing is only satisfied via something that goes beyond human limitations. No matter the story, be it Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer or the Gospel something magical and other worldly has to be inserted to make this change for the better a reality. It seems that on some level everyone realizes that the thing for which we long cannot be fulfilled with our limited human capacities. In the secular world this thing from outside might be Santa, a magical train ride, ghosts of Christmas past or something vaguely defined as Christmas Magic. With Christians, this thing from outside is God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Whatever we call it, the stories require something otherworldly to be inserted into the story to change the trajectory of humanity. Now at this point there are two ways we could go. The first is to say that that these are all just myths trying to help us understand why we are attracted to the idea of Christmas or we could defer to C.S. Lewis and say that the Gospel is the one true myth. It explains why we long for something better and why we know we cannot do it on our own. I, of course, vote for the latter and let me explain why.

When St. Paul was in Athens, he made a famous speech saying, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” What Paul recognized in this speech was that the people of Athens had this vague understanding of a god but did not quite know what to call this god. Paul’s approach was not to belittle the notion but rather to say let me explain to you what this really is. I think in our day and age we have a similar opportunity. There is this understanding in this season of Christmas (yes I know technically it is Advent but not in the secular world) to say “People of Delafield, I see that you have an unmoored tradition called Christmas.” All the pieces are there. People realize that there is something special about this season. They realize that part of the specialness of the season has to do with a change in how people live and how we interact with our fellow man. And still further they realize that for this change to happen something has to come into our story. Something from outside that is beyond our limitations. But the thing is, we don’t need to create talking snowmen or the town of Whoville because as St. Paul tells us, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” The story of salvation is out there. The idea that there is something wrong with the world is out there and the idea that something happens on Christmas which helps set what is wrong with the world right is out there also. It is all there. We just need to finish the puzzle. We need to proclaim what we hear in the Gospel today. The world needs to hear the message and to hear the message it needs a messenger. We can dismiss secular Christmas and say it is too commercial or we can embrace it like St. Paul did with the unknown god. We can help complete the story.

We all know that the world has problems and if we are honest, we all know that we regularly contribute to the world’s problems. But today it is announced that this can change, that the crooked can be made straight. It cannot be done through our own power but must rely on Immanuel or God with us. Let me end with a story. In the First World War in 1914 late on Christmas Eve members of the British Expeditionary Force who were dug into their trenches on the Western Front began hearing German troops in the trenches opposite singing Christmas Carols. They responded to this joyous outburst with their own songs. Messages were shouted between the trenches and the next day the troops from the warring parties met in no man’s land and exchanged gifts, took photographs and even played some impromptu games of soccer. It has been called the *Christmas Truce*. It had no organizer, there was no official decree it just happened. Somewhere in the horror of trench warfare a greater light shown. A light that said we can do better. The truce would not last, but for a brief moment, that for which we long was visible in the acts of some humble soldiers who knew there was a better way. May we strive for that better way so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.