

On the Incarnation

SPEAKER Wes Neely

DATE Sunday, November 30, 2025

PASSAGES 2 Peter 1; John 1; Ephesians 5; Hebrews 2; Exodus 20; Exodus 25

MESSAGE Begins at 1:15:03 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The son of God became man so that men might become sons of God. That is the sentence Wes spent the morning unfolding — not adoption as a legal formality, but a real joining of natures, the church wed to Christ. And underneath the theology sits the simpler reason: he came the way he came because that was the most loving way it could be done.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ If you grew up in church, the incarnation stops sounding strange. It is strange. Wes deliberately made it strange again before he explained it.
- ◆ Human language assigns words to things we can interact with. God stands outside that, so parts of this will not fit in a sentence — and that is not a failure of the preacher.
- ◆ Athanasius' line "God became man so that man might become God" is better heard as: the son of God became man so that men might become sons of God. It never means we supersede the creator; the creator-created relationship cannot change.
- ◆ Biblical adoption is not paperwork. Scripture says *born again* — the way a child is physically half of each parent.
- ◆ Hebrews says he had to be made like his brothers in every respect. That includes infancy, dependence, and a childhood we know almost nothing about — one story before he turned thirty.
- ◆ Death is the one experience no human escapes. Jesus did not escape it either. He conquered it.
- ◆ The second commandment is one command, not two: do not make an image *and bow down to it*. Exodus 25 has God himself commanding images of heavenly things.

- ◆ Because God took a body, he can be depicted. The live question is not whether, but whether a given depiction is worthy of him — and Christians can disagree about that with grace.

► 1:15:03

It was the first Sunday of Advent and, as Wes told the room, his first Advent sermon ever. So he went looking for the thing the season is actually about: God the creator becoming flesh. “If I made a little Lego kingdom, I wouldn’t then become a Lego person later on. As cool as that’d be, it would be frankly weird.”

1. Make it strange again

► 1:15:57

Grow up inside the church and the claim goes down easily. Stand outside it and someone will put it back to you unkindly — the creator sent himself to his creation to save creation from himself, and sacrificed himself to himself. Wes named that caricature rather than dodging it, granted it was an oversimplification, and still insisted we sit with the oddity: God himself became a little baby.

Two questions organized the morning. Why did he come at all, and why like this — infancy, childhood, the slow ordinary years — rather than simply appearing one day to get the cross over with? And then, for the last stretch, what the incarnation changes about how Christians worship.

2. Why we run out of words

► 1:18:13

Wes was candid that weeks of thinking had produced answers that ran a certain distance and then hit a wall. His diagnosis was about language itself. Human speech works by assigning value, emotion and action to words for things we can handle and observe; God, by definition, stands outside all of that. There is no vocabulary shaped to hold him. So the mystery is not a gap in the argument. It is where the argument was always going to end.

3. “God became man so that man might become God”

► 1:19:46

The provocative quote came from Athanasius — a fourth-century bishop exiled and recalled and exiled again as power changed hands, sometimes preaching for a matter of weeks between banishments, on

one side of the fight over whether Jesus is God himself or something God made. Wes offered the reading that keeps it orthodox: the son of God became man so that men might become sons of God.

Irenaeus said the same thing at greater length, and the logic is worth following: for by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality — and we could not be joined to it unless it first became what we are. The Eastern tradition calls the resulting process *theosis*: not the loss of your individuality, but a real joining of natures, on the pattern of the one person who was fully human and fully God.

4. Four ways scripture says it

► 1:21:38

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.”

2 PETER 1:3–4 ↗

Before Christ, Wes said, whatever we were bound to in spirit, we were bound to sin. Now we can be bound instead to the fountain of everything good.

► 1:25:52

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”

JOHN 1:12–13 ↗

Here is where he pushed hardest. We hear “adoption” and think of a legal status that leaves biology untouched. Scripture does not talk that way. It says *born* — and a child is fifty percent one parent and fifty percent the other, physically part of them. Not sons and daughters in the loose sense that God made everybody. Part of the family, not merely part of the creation. And how could that happen unless God took on our nature himself, so that our nature could be the thing adopted?

► 1:27:33

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

EPHESIANS 5:31–32 ↗

His favorite of the four. Spouses become one flesh without anyone imagining they now see through each other's eyes; individuality survives, oneness is still the point. Extend it and you get the church wed to Christ — “not like the imperfect marriages that we have in our world where we fight and bicker,” but an effortless love between the body and its head (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Then the caveat, twice underlined: we do not become God, nor gods with a small g running creations of our own. Creator and created is a relationship that never reverses. And the process is gradual — baptism is a starting line, not the high-water mark, after which grace and joy and knowledge increase into eternity until God's will becomes ours. Wes said it backwards first, caught himself mid-sentence, and thanked the man who called it out.

5. Why he had to be a baby

► 1:32:25

The second half of the answer, and the one Wes called more important, is not mechanism. It is love.

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, 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 of death were subject to lifelong slavery... Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.”

HEBREWS 2:14–17 ↗

Watching his son Silas, or the middle schoolers, Wes finds himself wondering what Jesus was like at that age. Did he cry, and was it annoying crying? Did he ever draw on a wall? He was clear he has no answer: the gospels give us one story of Jesus before he turned thirty, and the apocryphal childhood tales are wild enough to dismiss on sight. But he pressed the real question underneath — whether being truly human includes being the infant who can do nothing, whose parents give up their own sleep and lives for him.

► 1:36:30

The contrast he drew was with the older appearances. Angels arrive and depart; God speaks from a bush (Exodus 3:2–6). Nobody thinks the visitors at Abraham’s tent (Genesis 18:1–2) were born and raised first. Jesus was — the child phase, the young adult phase, the figuring-yourself-out phase — and that is what stands behind the claim that “he himself has suffered when tempted” and so “is able to help those who are being tempted.” Temptation, Wes noted, is sometimes the worst suffering there is. And then death, the one experience every human shares across every culture. He did not escape it. He conquered it.

► 1:38:48

Could it have been done another way — a ledger, a debt paid off elsewhere? Wes said he is not convinced it could, and that even if it could, it would not have been the loving way. He asked himself what the maximally loving rescue would look like and could not improve on the one that happened. His picture for it came from every sports movie ever made: one kid is sentenced to run laps, and the team runs them with him. That is the move. Christ is not the coach assigning the laps; he is the one who steps in alongside, undeserving of any of it, and runs.

“To truly understand how little he needed to do that, how unnecessary his suffering was, I think would humble all of us.”

6. May we depict him?

► 1:41:52

The last stretch turned practical. There is a movement, old and recurring, that says images of Christ — paintings, films, *The Chosen* — are simply out, and it reaches for the second commandment.

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.”

EXODUS 20:4–5 ↗

Stop at verse 4 and it looks open and shut. Wes’ argument is that verses 4 and 5 are one command, not two: do not make an image *and bow down to it*. The internal evidence is a few chapters later, where God commands images of heavenly things for the mercy seat — “you shall make two cherubim of gold, of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat” (Exodus 25:18) — and Solomon’s temple carried the same imagery (1 Kings 6:23–29).

► 1:44:18

The history is the eighth century, and Wes was careful to flag that he was summarizing. Islamic rule had spread across the east; Jerusalem had fallen. Some Christians, losing on the battlefield, went looking for the difference between themselves and the people beating them, and landed on images — so the iconoclasts went about destroying them. John of Damascus, who lived his whole life under Muslim rule and is a saint of the church anyway, wrote the book against it, and the Second Council of Nicaea settled the matter.

Wes quoted him conceding the premise before turning it: God forbids image-making on account of idolatry, and it is impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, invisible God — true, and true. But when the one who is without form or limit takes upon himself the form of a servant, in substance and in stature and a body of flesh, then you may draw his likeness. God the Father is not a man standing about in heaven; there was never a human Jesus walking around up there waiting for his cue. But people saw the incarnate Christ. If we had cameras then, we would have photographs.

► 1:50:40

Which moves the question from whether to how well. Is a given depiction worthy of who God is — does it teach, does it show something we would not otherwise have seen? Wes has friends for whom *The Chosen* made the humanity of Jesus real for the first time, and that he counts as good. He also has a nominally Christian friend who was delighted by the friendship between Peter and the centurion and crushed to learn it is not in the Bible. Confusion is the failure mode. For most of church history, art was how people who could not read learned the stories at all.

So: if you watch it, watch it well; if you don't, don't be a snob about it. This is Christian freedom, and it is a place to disagree with grace — talk it out, and the conversation itself may draw both of you closer to God.

7. Sit with it

► 1:54:30

He ended with an assignment rather than a summary. Over the coming weeks, take ten minutes or half an hour, sit in silence, and try to hold the thing in your mind knowing you will not manage it — that the person who created you became like you and shared your sufferings so he could say he knows what it is to be human. Part of it is a mystery and we can leave it that way. “That’s all I’ve got for you guys. I didn’t have 42 points.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [2 Peter 1:3–4](#)
- [John 1:12–13](#)
- [Ephesians 5:31–32](#)
- [1 Corinthians 12:27](#)
- [Hebrews 2:14–17](#)
- [Exodus 3:2–6](#)
- [Genesis 18:1–2](#)
- [Exodus 20:4–5](#)
- [Exodus 25:18](#)
- [1 Kings 6:23–29](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. When did the incarnation stop sounding strange to you, and what would it take to hear it as strange again this Advent?
2. Wes said parts of God cannot be fitted into human language. Where have you treated a mystery as a problem to be solved rather than something to sit in front of?
3. If adoption is more like being born into a family than a legal status, what does that change about how you think of yourself on a bad day?
4. Where in your own suffering does it matter that Jesus was tempted and died rather than being rescued from either?
5. Wes asked us to take ten minutes to sit in silence with the incarnation. When this week will you actually do it, and what will you have to move to make room?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely serves at Hope Chapel and spends time with the church's middle schoolers. This was his first Advent sermon, and he chose to spend it on the mystery of the incarnation itself. He described himself as a reader rather than a specialist — quick to say that people far smarter have worked these questions over — and he has a young son, Silas, who has him wondering what Jesus was like as a small child.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9aUz9uDMV7o&t=4503s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.