MONDAY

SCRIPTURES:
"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.' Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'" (Luke 2:8-15 - NIV)

KEY POINT:
God was very excited to bring you the good news of Jesus as your Savior!

READING:
Have you ever noticed that at Christmas time, there are some people who just cannot keep secrets? Have you ever bought someone a present and you were dying to give it to them... but you had to wait? The suspense and thought of joy they will receive from the present is felt more by the giver than the one who will receive the gift, isn't it?

Well, I think about that sometimes when I think of the Christmas story. That God - when He sent His son, Jesus, down to this earth to be the Messiah - for good reasons, had to send Jesus in an obscure way. The world was expecting the kind of Messiah who would come in power and glory. But Jesus was going to be a different kind of Messiah - a suffering-servant kind of Messiah. So, in order to introduce people to this concept, He chose to come incognito.

But I think God was so excited about His gift to the world, He couldn't keep entirely quiet about it. So God thinks: *I've gotta tell somebody!* And He tells Mary and Joseph. But that's not enough. And then it's like God thinks: *'I've gotta tell someone else. I'm going to tell those shepherds down there.'* And you can picture Heaven going: *'Well OK, but keep it subtle.'* So we read in Luke 2 that God sends an angel to say: ***"I bring you Good News of great joy."*** Then: ***"suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel."*** It's like God gets so excited, He says: *'OK. All you angels, go on down there! Let those shepherds know!'* Inside God, there's something like the heart of a child, that is so full of love and excitement, He just can't keep it in. Of course, God's greatest excitement is to tell *you* that... ***"a Savior has been born to <u>you</u>; He is Christ the Lord."*** It's Good News for you. And on the day you understand and believe that, God is so excited.

QUESTIONS:
- Have you felt just how excited God is or was for ***you*** to "open" His gift of salvation?
- Does that change the way you see yourself, or how you think God sees you?

APPLICATION:
Spend time letting His excitement sink into the way you think about yourself and Him.

TUESDAY

SCRIPTURE:
"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' - which means, 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:22-23)

KEY POINT:
The virgin birth may be difficult for some to believe, but it is central to the Christian faith.

READING:
The Christmas story begins with God sending an angel to a woman named Mary, telling her she would have a child, and she was to name Him *Jesus*. What made this unusual, though, was the fact that Mary was a virgin. She was not married and she had never been with a man. So God was going to do a big ol honkin' miracle. And that's what we sing about and celebrate at Christmastime. Now the question I want to pose to you is this: *Do you think that really happened? Seriously? Do you think a baby was really born to a virgin? And if so, what are the implications of that?* Because a lot of people don't think it happened.

A few centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson said this: "The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being as His father and the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva and the brain of Jupiter." Thomas Jefferson believed that Jesus was a good man, very influential. But unfortunately, a lot of fables grew up around Him in the centuries after He died, and it would be a good thing for those fables to be detached from the things that Jesus actually taught.

So Thomas Jefferson took it upon himself to write his own version of the NT Gospels - with all of the accounts of the miraculous (the Virgin Birth, Jesus' miracles, the Resurrection, everything) taken out. It's a pretty short version of Jesus' life.

Sometimes people**,** as well as religious institutions, become fuzzy on this subject. This happens a lot in our culture. The Virgin Birth is thought of as a metaphor, a nice story that makes people feel more hopeful – but most people are embarrassed to examine it as an historical claim that actually happened in time and space. For example, this is a verbatim quote from an official of a major denomination. I'll keep the denomination anonymous, but it's one you would be familiar with. The statement refers to the Virgin Birth and offers an explanation of what the leaders and theologians of this denomination actually believe. **"Did the Virgin birth actually take place? There is a diversity of opinions on the issue, but there remains a diversity of opinion over whether there should be a diversity of opinion."** How's that for driving a stake in the ground? Doesn't that give you something to sink your teeth into?

Larry King was once asked who he would most like to interview, if he could choose any one person in history. His answer was Jesus Christ. The interviewer asked Larry: *'What would you like to ask Jesus?'* And Larry said: *'I'd like to ask Jesus if He was indeed born of a virgin. The answer to that question would define history for me.'* Now Larry King was a famous interviewer. *'One guy you would interview?' 'Jesus.' 'One question you would ask?' 'Were you born of a virgin?'* Think about it. That's the hinge of history. Did that really happen?

QUESTION:
Has the concept of the virgin birth become "fuzzy" in your own thinking?

APPLICATION:
Spend time considering just how earth-shattering it is that Jesus was born of a **virgin!**

WEDNESDAY

SCRIPTURE:
"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." (Luke 1:1-4)

KEY POINT:
The virgin birth is not a myth or fable, it's grounded in human history.

READING:
Why does it matter that the Christian faith presents as an historical claim, that Jesus was born of a Virgin - that this was a special Being who came in a special birth? What is at stake in this question? And what does it mean for you and for me? These are crucial questions. Sometimes people think that it was probably easier for people in those pre-scientific times to believe in a virgin birth, and that we're more sophisticated nowadays, so we know better. Well, in the first place, I think that's a little arrogant. People in ancient times were very aware of where babies come from.

Beyond that, this is not a story that God told casually. In ancient religions, there were stories of heroes like Hercules or Perseus, who were the result of one of the Greek or Roman gods getting together with a human mother. And people have sometimes thought that the story of Jesus' birth was borrowed from one of those stories to give it a little more credibility in the ancient Mediterranean world. But the reality is - the presentation of the story of Jesus' origins was *nothing* like any other story that had ever come before.

In the myths, the stories are about gods like Zeus, who would fall in love with a woman he saw on earth. If you've read much mythology, you know that Zeus was not exactly a poster boy for impulse control. He's always falling in love with women on earth. And Hera, his goddess wife, is always jealous. The gods in those stories are a lot like human beings… kind of super-heroes with all the same flaws as ours, just larger than life. But the story of Jesus is a whole different genre. We read the story of the Virgin Birth in both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke.

And Luke writes explicitly as an historian. He writes within a generation of Jesus' actual life while there are many eyewitnesses still around - eyewitnesses who could challenge any inaccuracies in Luke's account. And both Matthew and Luke include in their story the historical details of Jesus' birth. It's geographical setting: ***"in Bethlehem of Judea."*** (Matthew 2:1). Its chronological setting: ***"in the days of… Caesar Augustus… while Quirinius was the Governor of Syria."*** (Luke 2:1-2) They also include other details like the naming of Jesus by His father, Joseph, the circumcision of Jesus, and the purification rites that Mary went through after birth. Those are the kind of details that none of the ancient mythological accounts of people like Hercules ever went into.

QUESTION:
How does your understanding of Jesus and His miraculous birth compare to the way you think about mythological characters such as Zeus or Hercules?

APPLICATION:
Spend time dwelling on what the Bible says about Jesus, and let that elevate your understanding of Him and His birth to it's rightful place in your thinking: As an historical and miraculous **fact**.

THURSDAY

SCRIPTURES:
"I tell you the truth... 'before Abraham was born, I AM!' At this, they picked up stones to stone Him..." (John 8:58-59)

"...I am the light of the world..." (John 8:12)

Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" (Luke 7:48-49)

KEY POINT:
Jesus was no ordinary man. He made claims that could only be made by the Divine Son of God.

READING:
Jesus was absolutely unique. As He grew up, according to Luke and the other authors of the New Testament, He did and said remarkable things that no other good man or teacher had ever done or said before. One time, He was in a controversy with some religious leaders and He said this: ***"I tell you the truth... Before Abraham was born, I AM..."*** **(John 8:58).** As some of you know, in the Old Testament, that little 2-word phrase *'I AM'* is the Name by which God named Himself. It was so revered by Israel that they would never even pronounce it or write the letters down. Jesus applied that Name to Himself. And what does the Bible say happened after that? ***"At this, they picked up stones to stone Him..."*** *No wonder!* Everybody understood what He was saying. A good man would never say a thing like that. Good men don't walk around claiming to be the One True God who created the entire universe.

Jesus would also say things like: ***"I am the light of the world..."*** **(John 8:12)** We lose sight of what a staggering thing it is for a human being to say: ***"I am the light of the world."*** You ever tried that one at home? If you're married, have you ever tried that one on your spouse? *'Don't argue with me! I'm the light of the world.'* Or if you're not married, put that on your eHarmony profile: *'Single. Attractive. Enjoys good restaurants. And one more thing - I'm the light of the world.'* See how many dates you get.

And that's not all. Jesus went around claiming to forgive sin. Now just think about that for a second. How weird would that be if He wasn't God? If the person next to you were to smack you, and I said to that person: *'It's OK. I forgive you.'* You would be thinking: *'Wait a minute! Time out. That's not right. Who do you think you are? What does this have to do with you?'* People don't walk around forgiving people for sinning against other people. But Jesus did… all the time.

His followers came to realize that this was no ordinary man. What God did, Jesus did. What God claimed, Jesus claimed. Who God was, Jesus understood Himself to be. There had never, ever been a man like this before. The people who followed Him, followed Him not because they thought He was a great teacher (although He was a great teacher). They came to realize that He was something more.

QUESTION:
How frequently do you consider the claims Jesus made about Himself, how controversial they would have been, and how clearly they prove that He is God in human form.

APPLICATION:
Become deeply familiar with the claims Jesus made about Himself so you can confidently proclaim Him to others.

FRIDAY

SCRIPTURE:
"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8)

KEY POINT:
Jesus had to be born as the God-Man in order to stand in our place and forgive our sins.

READING:
Let's talk further about why the Virgin Birth matters so much. Believe it or not, the Qur'an actually speaks of the Virgin Birth of Jesus. Many Muslims affirm that Jesus was born of a virgin. As the story goes, God promised Mary a 'perfect child.' But they believe he was just a perfect human child, not divine. This is where the Qur'an and the Bible are at odds. In Islam, Jesus is understood to be simply a prophet, but not God. In Islam, Allah is *'the God above us,'* or '*the God up there.'* He sends prophets and angels - but *'the God up there'* is understood to be too holy, and the earth is in too much of a mess for Him to come down here. In other words, God could never come down to earth.

In fact, in Islam, anyone who says that Allah (God) touched the earth or became human would be associating God with what is gross, and would therefore be accused of blaspheming His glory. That's an unforgivable sin in Islam. Islam agrees with Christianity that there is a chasm - a 'holiness gap' between God and us. But the story of Christmas is all about God filling that gap between an infinitely perfect and holy God, and imperfect, screwed-up, fallen human beings. It was the most incredible, mind-boggling, humbling act in the history of the Universe. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, being born as a lowly human baby in a stinky manger. Speaking of Jesus, Philippians 2:6-8 says: ***"Who*, [Jesus] *being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature[h] of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!"***

You see, there was no other way. We could never work our way up to a perfect, sinless, holy God. But then one day, one day, some angels came to a few shepherds in a field and said: *'Here's the good news… Jesus, God, has come down to earth. And Jesus, born of a virgin, took on our humanity. And then, on the cross, where Jesus died, he bridged the infinite chasm between us and God.*

So now, everything changes. It used to be we couldn't even live in the presence of a perfect and holy God. But now, because of Jesus, we can be friends of God. Jesus said: ***"I no longer call you servants. Instead, I have called you friends…"*** Wow! We all think we need to do more and serve more and give more and do better. But Jesus said: *'I did all that for you on the cross. And now, I'm offering you a chance to be in a relationship with Me. But the choice is yours.'* Have you ever done that? Have you ever said *'yes'* to God's offer of friendship in Jesus?

QUESTIONS:
Have you believed that Jesus, without any help from you, has bridged that great chasm between you and God? If so, do you see yourself as Jesus' beloved friend?

APPLICATION:
It's never too late to put your faith in Jesus. And it's never too late to reach out to someone you love, and offer them an invitation to trust in Jesus. What better Christmas present could you give someone than an opportunity to trust in Jesus? Pray about who you might invite to join us for our Christmas Eve services this Saturday… and then invite them to come along with you.