Christ is born!

1. Read Luke 2:1-7. Note the specific, historical references that Luke supplies to pinpoint the Savior's birth in time. This was a real event, not made up for one reason or another. Caesar Augustus actually ruled over the Roman world from 27 BC to AD 14. There is a secular reference dated AD 14 that Quirinius ruled in Syria. A "Registration" or census is a normal part of a government's administration, necessary for establishing a basis for taxation.

   Ceasar Augustus was the nephew of Julius Ceasar and one of the most powerful Ceasars. He transformed not just Rome but the entire known world with his roads and his armies. At his funeral, his mourners comforted themselves in thinking that he was a god and therefore immortal. But how ironic that the man who was believed to be a god actually intercepted in time and space the God who became man. This mighty ruler was used by God like a servant. Through his decree that a census should be taken, the events of Christmas are set into motion. Agustus brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

2. What's so significant about Bethlehem? See Micah 5:2-5.
   It was the ancestral home of David. Micah 5:2 prophetically speaks of Bethlehem as being the place where the Messiah would be found. The Messiah was to be born of the line and lineage of David. While Joseph was from that line, he was hardly from the lineage. Who would have ever thought that some disconnected branch of King David's family would end up traveling to Bethlehem to give birth to the true king.

3. Luke also includes an interesting detail about availability of rooms at the inn in Bethlehem. What does this detail foreshadow about Jesus' later in life and ministry? He will be rejected. Do we make room for Him in our lives and in our hearts?

   But even more beautiful still is that the unavailability of a room in the inn, means that the Word of God made Flesh makes His Advent into this world in the most unlikely and unthinkable of spaces—a place where stinky animals are housed and fed. What an incredible and almost incomprehensible thought. Yet how beautiful and comforting for sinners like us, for what a mess our lives usually are because of the stain of sin, but we should never fear that Christ would abide with us.

   And yet, despite our unworthiness, tonight, as we read the Christmas story, we hear twice a wonderful word: The word "favor." The Angel Gabriel said to a young virgin named Mary: **"Greetings to you who are highly favored! He Lord is with you."** And then a little later, we heard angels speaking God's favor when they burst into song over the quite fields of Bethlehem singing, **"Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace to men on whom his favor rests."**

   Truly there was nothing special about these simple nativity characters: the young Mary and some dirty shepherds. They were unlikely recipients of amazingly good news. And yet, I think that is the best part of what Christmas is all about… It is the good tidings that God doesn't just give good gifts

to the people that seem worthy in this world. No… in fact, the scriptures tell us you can't even earn God's favor. Instead, the good news is that God comes to us, unlikely people in the most unlikely times… even when we are doing everything wrong… even when we are doing nothing at all. God comes. Whether we are being naughty or nice. And Why? Well… because God loves us and we are highly favored. And truly, I think it is that part that really causes people problems…some have a hard time believing it, because it sounds too good to be true.

4. Read Luke 2:8-20. Luke takes meticulous care to root the story of Christ's birth in historical context, yet he seems to pass over the actual moment of Jesus's birth with just a brief mention in Luke 2:7. Yet, this moment is pivotal, it's the whole point of everything—isn't' it?--representing the culmination of the entire Old Testament, and yet, here it is condensed into a mere 30 words. Why do you think that is?

We love the imagery of quaint songs like "Away in a Manger" which tell us that in the moment of Christ's birth "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes." We practically assume that's exactly how it was. However, Luke provides no elaborate details of this. Nor does he give us any information about Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem or the heartfelt exchanges they might have had during such an extraordinary event—the birth of God among us. Instead, he swiftly moves to the shepherds and the angelic announcement, rich with description and even an exact transcript of the dialogue. Similarly, Matthew's account is comparable in it's sparseness of detail surrounding the birth of Jesus.
What might be the significance of this? Why do you think Luke shifts away from the birth itself to the announcement of the angels and the response of the shepherds? What might this reveal about the nature of this holy event and its implications for us?

Almost any and every movie or book about Christmas spends the majority of it's time focusing on these very details that the Gospels say nothing about. In many Christmas movies, the events at the stable are the main focus. Most moves barely even show a scene depicting the Angels' announcement and song. Maybe it's a financial thing—the stable scene is probably more budget friendly than a CGI angel choir.

But actually, Luke's purpose is not to fascinate us with obscure details about the animals or what the stable (or cave) looked like. He not so interested in what the casual conversation of Mary and Joseph. His purpose is to how Christ truly is the Messiah and that He is for all people. His birth—as well as his death—is good news that is meant to be announced and proclaimed and shared with everyone.

5. Why do you think the shepherds were chosen to be the first recipients of the angel's message about Jesus' birth? What significance does their societal status have in the context of the Christmas story?

The choice of shepherds, who were viewed as outcasts and marginalized, illustrates the inclusive nature of Jesus' message. It signifies that God values all people, regardless of their social standing or life's circumstances. This choice underscores the theme of hope and redemption for the forgotten and overlooked, making it clear that Jesus came for everyone, not just the privileged. In perfect harmony with Mary's Magnificate. And isn't it beautiful that rather than just focusing on the holy family, the story shifts to a bunch of outsiders, and an invitation is made for the likes of them to be come and be a part of something so private and intimate as the birth of a child.

6. It's becoming increasingly more common for church's not to have worship on Christmas Day. The argument is made that this is a day for "family." And maybe it's assumed that attendance will be light, anyway, and so why bother with all the rigamarole of prepping for worship. However, how might this decision to skip Christmas Day worship actually contradict the very essence of Luke's narrative? What insights can we draw from Luke's presentation of the Christmas story that might encourage us to reconsider the significance of gathering in worship on this special day?

Luke focuses not on the nuclear family, but on bringing outsiders into the family context. Christmas isn't about "my family and me" it's about "me being part of new family—my church." Focusing solely on family celebrations can alienate those who might have no family to spend Christmas with and those who may not fit the conventional family mold. By highlighting Jesus' birth as a gift for "all people," the message is one of inclusivity and community, emphasizing that the church is the family that is for everyone!

7. Consider the Angel's announcement to the shepherds. He highlights the manger. "This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." How does the significance of the manger in the Gospel of Luke reflect the nature and mission of Jesus, and what does this tell us about the humility and accessibility of Christ?

(Luke 2:7). But that makes it sound accidental. However, the way Luke tells the whole story, we know there was nothing accidental about it. Luke assures us that this was no fluke of fate, no random misfortune. God had centuries to get ready for this birth. The prophet Micah lived seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus and prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Not only that, but remember that Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth, two towns 90 miles apart. So how does God get them to Bethlehem in order to fulfill prophecy? Well, Luke tells us that God orchestrates an empire-wide census through Caesar Augustus. And all of this means that if God can disrupt the entire Roman world to move Mary and Joseph from one town to another, He could have just as easily made it work out that a room should be available in the inn in Bethlehem. Or He could have found a thousand other ways to make it work out so that the Son of God wouldn't have a to lie in a slobbery manger.

But what about the sign? Remember how the angels use the manger as the sign that would convince the shepherds that this baby is the Son of God. "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger!" I guarantee you the shepherds could have looked anywhere else in a thousand-mile radius and they never would have found that! What young mother would lay her very first baby in a cattle trough? We all know how over-particular new parents are.

Yes, I'm sure Joseph and Mary cleaned it up as best they could. They, no doubt, padded it in some way to make a comfy little bed. But there is no way to romanticize this bed into anything other than a feeding trough for slobbering animals. **The point is this:** The first bed for the Son of God was not a royal crib or cradle. It was a common corn crib, meant to hold scraps to be eaten. Indeed, Jesus would later emphasis how even "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:19-20).

See, the manger was the sign. The sign that would distinguish this baby from any other. The sign that would herald what kind of king this baby would grow up to be. The sign that would forever after teach you and me and all mankind that there is no place too dirty, messy, and unsavory for this messiah to

dwell and bring His glory, grace and peace. The manger typifies everything about Jesus, as Paul wrote later in Philippians 2 – "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant [starting his life lower than servants — in a feeding trough] . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even *death on a cross*." Yes, the manger was but the first stop on Christ's journey to the cross.