

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For Christmas and the Octave, 2022.



Sunday, December 25: *"How lovely on the mountains the steps of the bearer of good tidings, announcing peace, heralding good things, announcing triumph, saying to Zion: Your God reigns. Hark! Your watchmen raise their voice, together they sing gladly"* (Is 52:7-10, Hebrew translation).

Merry Christmas!

Something I love about Advent, and miss throughout the year, is the frequent readings from the prophet Isaiah. The author(s) tend to swing back and forth between doom and redemption, and it seems like that is how many of us live our lives in relation to God: "I sin, I say I'm sorry, and God forgives me." But of course, we learn today, through the Incarnation, that's not how it works. God is with us with bountiful mercy all the time. God's compassion never wavers and is not taken from us just because we sin. It is always with us. Our God reigns. Sing gladly!

Today's provision: Be a bearer of good tidings! As I was reflecting on these uplifting words from Isaiah, the Spirit moved me to ponder: instead of lamenting the close of Advent and Isaiah's hopeful prophecies, I am called, we are called, to do the same—to be prophets of hope. After all, hope is what being a Christian is all about. The past several years have been difficult and sorrowful for so many people, and still, many suffer. Our hope has been challenged and we are careful to give real-life comfort to God's people, not just platitudes of good times to come. But let's renew our faith and hope this Christmas Day that when people encounter us, they see in us the light and peace of God alive today. *"For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay"* (Hb 2:3).

Monday, December 26: *...people came forward and debated with Stephen, but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke...they were infuriated, and they ground their teeth at him* (Acts 6: 8-10; 7: 54-59).

I'm always caught off guard by today's readings. We hear about Stephen's stoning, and Jesus tells us we will suffer because of him. It's jarring right on the heels of Christmas. It's warm and wonderful to think about being a bearer of Christ's light, but we will encounter people who want nothing to do with that light; or more likely, those who are quite content with the light they already know. Most people, like those debating Stephen and those who condemned Christ, do not like change. They don't want to hear what they have been doing or believing all these years can be expanded upon or improved. We see that playing out today in the Roman Church by those who oppose Pope Francis, and in several other denominations as well. Jesus did not abolish the law, he fulfilled it. And how we fulfill the law grows and changes as our world grows and changes.

Today's Provision: Be open to all things new in Christ. As we get older, we are more likely to be set in our ways. Change seems to happen for the sake of change, and admittedly, some change is nothing more than planned obsolescence of the Christmas gifts we have just received! But when it comes to our faith, we need to be open to change, to the movement of the Spirit who makes all things new. God is not static but alive and active. Pray to be open to the freshness and renewal of faith. Embrace the radical call to be a disciple (which means a learner). Don't be afraid.

Tuesday, December 27: *Then the other disciple...saw and believed; so the other disciple...saw and had faith* (Jn 20:1, 2-8; NABRE translation; literal translation).

"Faith is to believe what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe" (St. Augustine).

Subtle difference in these two translations: the beloved disciple "believed;" the beloved disciple "had faith." The Greek word used in both translations is from the same root, but let's ponder this a bit. What did John believe? St. Augustine suggests an interpretation that John believed Mary of Magdala's story. Other scholars say that since this was the last gospel to be written, the author, a disciple of John, added this (and the term beloved) as a way to honor his mentor.

I like the idea that John had faith in what he did not see. He might not have understood any more than Peter or Mary did at the time, but his faith in Jesus did not allow him to lose hope despite what he was witnessing.

Today's Provision: Have faith. *"Just have faith,"* Jesus tells the gravely ill girls' parents (Lk 8:50). So easy to say, so hard to do when faced with illness, tragedy, or the seemingly impossible thing occurring before our very eyes. Let's pray today for the gift the Spirit gave to John at the tomb: the faith to believe what we do not or cannot see.

Wednesday, December 28: *“He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world (1 Jn 1:5-2:2).*

The whole world. Not just my denomination, not just my faith, not just my nation. The whole world. No exceptions. He is the Universal, the Cosmic Christ. Man, that’s a lot to take on! Jesus, would you like a little help?

Today’s Provision: Lighten up. When I was a child, my formal religious education focused almost exclusively on all the things I did every day to add to Jesus’ burden. I don’t remember anyone ever telling me I could lighten Jesus’ load by resisting temptation or by the things I do to help others.

If you find yourself focusing too much on sin, maybe it’s time to change your lens. As you enter into this new year, think instead about what you can do each day to help Jesus. Reflect each night, not just on the things you could’ve done better, but also on the grace that enabled you to shoulder just a tiny bit of the weight of the world. Lighten up.

Thursday, December 29: *“Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother remains in the light, and there is nothing in him to cause a fall. Whoever hates his brother is in darkness...and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes”(1 Jn 2:3-11).*

Hate is antithetical to the Light. Anyone who preaches Christ but also preaches hate towards anyone for any reason is blind. The darkness has caused them to fall. John makes this crystal clear. But here’s another take: Whoever *fears* his brother is in darkness. I wonder how many people we label as “hateful” are actually fearful: fearful of losing power or control, scared of people whose language, customs, religion, or gender and sexuality is different from theirs. It can be hard to reach people who are afraid. But those who live in the Light must find a way to bring that Light into the lives of others, being careful too, that we don’t allow ourselves to fall into the darkness through our own fear.

Today’s Provision: Be courageous. It takes a lot of courage to call out hypocrisy. Just ask the prophets. Just ask Jesus. I tend to curl up in my little echo chamber and avoid dialoguing with people who hold vastly different opinions. And while I can say there is no one I “hate,” there are some people I fear. I need to recognize the risk of falling into a dark sort of apathy. Let’s work to “Keep Christ in *Christiar*” by calling out the words of anyone who preaches hate or hateful activities, particularly in Christ’s name.

Friday, December 30: *“And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection”(Col 3:12-17).*

Still searching for that perfect gift? Paul has something for everyone on your list!

Today’s provision: Give the gift of love. I’m writing this about 10 days before Christmas. In the US, we’re bombarded with ads, catalogues, and emails asking the same question: “Still searching for the ‘perfect’ gift?” And in two weeks or so, we’ll be reminded that if we didn’t receive that “perfect” gift, there’s hope to be found in the after-Christmas sales!

Paul talks today about “the bond of perfection” being love. Typically, when we hear the word “perfect,” we think of other words like flawless, complete, and accurate, exact; everything fitting, neat and tidy and put together...perfectly! Yet I’d guess most of us have had experiences in love that were (are) not exactly neat and tidy. Love seldom is, mostly because we are imperfect human beings. Lord knows Jesus’s human life, from its humble beginning to its violent finish, was far from what we would define as perfect. But love calls us to be like Jesus: compassionate, kind, gentle, patient, and forgiving. The perfect gift we seek is the love of God, the gift we give, albeit imperfectly, to ourselves and one another.

Saturday, December 31: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”(Jn 1:1-18).*

“Each Advent, I pick a theme that speaks to something happening in our world, something moving within me. This year, we focus on a topic...the universality of the Christ.” This is what we set out to learn about this season, so I hope this concept of the Universal Christ is a little more accessible to you. After all, it is based on John’s very words: The Word, the “Logos,” the Christ is *“as it was in the beginning, is now, and evermore shall be.”* *“And the Logos became flesh and pitched a tent among us and we saw his glory”(v. 14, literal translation).*

Today’s provision: Be filled with wonder. This season never fails to amaze me. Doing the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises some 20 years ago brought me so close to this God who chose to take human form and pitch his tent among us; this God who chose to be vulnerable so as to teach us how to live. The transcendent, ineffable God’s willingness to do that for me and for you fills me with wonder and spurs me forward with hope and determination that God’s will be done. And I will do what I can to have God’s will done in me. Let’s move ahead into 2023 with a renewed sense of wonder and hope! HNY!