

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the Octave of Christmas 2023.



Sunday, January 1: *"Brothers and sisters: When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law...As proof that you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts"* (Gal 4:4-7).

"Before you judge someone, walk a mile in their shoes." Is that what Paul is getting at when he says "born of a woman under the law." No. Let's set the record straight here: the Incarnation did not occur so that God would understand what it is like to be human! Christ became human to help us understand who our God really is. For many of the Jews of his time, and frankly, for lots of people of monotheistic religious practices today, the "LAW" is still paramount. We control God's favor and punishment by how closely we adhere to the rules. (I am convinced that at least part of "original sin" is really our human need to be in control!)

When Paul says Christ "ransomed" us, he is not discounting the law and its importance, but explaining that instead of the law being the end all, be all, it is the tender compassion and mercy of our God that will have the last Word. This is not about having carte blanche to do what we wish; it is being so confident in God's unconditional love that we desire to keep ourselves always close to the Source of the Love.

Today's Provision: Know yourself as a sinner loved unconditionally by God. Really—I mean it. Start this new year anew by understanding that if we have sinned in the past and even as we sin now—and let's face it, we do every day in big and small ways—God's love for us never changes. One of the great gifts of faith is being aware of the Spirit of Jesus in our hearts, so that when we do turn away, we can be assured God's mercy is ready and waiting for us to return. *"Turn back from all your crimes, that they may not be a cause of guilt for you. Cast away from you all the crimes you have committed, and make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit...for I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies. Return to me and live!"* (Ez 19:30-32)

Monday, January 2: *So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?" He said: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert"* (Jn 1:19-28).

John the Baptist doesn't give himself a prestigious title or a new name. We know Jesus says John is Elijah (Mt 17:11-13), but John is happy to downplay his role to "one crying out in the desert" amid the dryness and desolation of a people caught in a cycle of captivity. And by saying, *"there is one among you whom you do not recognize,"* he turns the attention away from himself and onto Jesus.

Today's Provision: Find your voice. Each of us has a calling, each of us has been given a voice to comfort, to console, and yes, to cry out at the injustice we see and experience. But our voice is not about us and what we think. When we use our voice, it should always be for God's greater glory, to turn the attention away from ourselves and onto Jesus. There is plenty of dryness and desolation in our wilderness today. Find your voice and give hope to those caught in their own cycle of captivity.

Tuesday, January 3: *"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is"* (1 Jn 2:29-3:6).

But we do know! It has been revealed! We have seen him as he is. Our destiny as God's children has been revealed in the person of Jesus. Our goal is to be like him. Yes, we are God's children and our earthly task is to model our lives after his. We pray for the grace to follow Jesus' example of compassion and love to all we meet, of being willing to stand up for justice and righteousness in the face of hypocrisy and lies. It has been revealed—in the face of the man from Galilee. Let us look to him for courage and strength to live as he lived.

Today's Provision: Which of the attributes of Jesus would you like to model? I'm not a proponent of New Year's resolutions. I prefer New Day resolutions (which sometimes turn into New Hour resolutions)! Who is Jesus to you and what is it that you love most about him? Try not to take this from the angle of where you feel you are most lacking, but from the virtue or aspect of Jesus' character that is most comforting to you. Consider your own life and where you can model this virtue as you go about your day.

Wednesday, January 4: *"No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God"* (1 Jn 3:7-10).

John's letters are filled with declarative statements like this. There's little gray area or explanation. One might take this verse in one of two ways: "Hey, I'm begotten by God, so no problem—I can't sin!" (I don't know many people who think that.) More likely, it is, "Yikes! I sin all the time. I must not be begotten of God." But it is neither of these interpretations and goes back to our reflection on Sunday. Do we have faith in God's mercy?

Today's Provision: Have faith. *"And this is one of the most crucial definitions for the whole of Christianity; that the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith"* (Søren Kierkegaard, from *The Sickness Unto Death*). Looking upon ourselves and our sinfulness as unredeemable contradicts God's promise to all of creation, and unchecked, can become a perverse source of pride, that somehow we are beyond God's reach. No one, not any one of us is beyond God's mercy. Allow God the opportunity to breathe new life into you. Call upon his name each and every time you withdraw from his presence. *"The Lord does not delay his promise, but he is patient with you"* (2 Pt 3).

Thursday, January 5: *"Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.'... Philip said to him, 'Come and see'"* (Jn 1:43-51).

In yesterday's gospel, we hear Jesus invite Andrew and his companion, both disciples of John the Baptist, to "come and see" where he was staying as a way for them to learn about him and listen to his teaching. Jesus then invites Philip, likely a relation of Andrew and Simon Peter, to come along too. Philip joins the group, then goes and gets his buddy Nathanael. Nathanael is a bit skeptical, but Philip invites him, using the same words that Jesus used: "come and see."

Today's Provision: Be a disciple. Invite others to be disciples too. From Mary, Jesus' first disciple, John the Baptist, through the shepherds on Christmas night, to Symeon and Anna, to Andrew, to Simon Peter, to Philip, to Nathanael, all the way down...to us. It is as simple as an invitation to come and see, to learn about the love and mercy of God. And what is the best way for us to invite others? Through our actions, our openness to everyone, our love, our joy. Be a disciple.

Friday, January 6: *"He sends forth his command to the earth; swiftly runs his word!"* (Ps 147)

God's word runs "swiftly?" I see pretty much everything else around me running swiftly, but God's word? I'd venture to say a lot of us feel God's word cannot run swiftly enough at this point, such is the need of global salvation. But then I think about Jesus' three years of ministry. Three years! In such a short period of time, the carpenter from Nazareth set a course to change humankind. When you consider this, even if you are not a believer, it is just amazing! Perhaps the world was ready back then and the time was right. Perhaps the hearts of enough men and women were open for the word to take root and grow. But it was on the backs and through the hard work and sacrifice of the early disciples that the message of God's Word took hold.

Today's Provision: Open your heart Do you feel bitterness at the state of the world? Are you skeptical about the future? All you have to do is read the gospels to get an idea of what Jesus saw around him: *"this is a corrupt generation;" "how long must I endure you?"* He wasn't too impressed with the state of the world in which he lived. But he gave his life for it, as did many of the small band of men and women who took his message and ran with it. Let's work on opening our hearts and minds and not abandoning the mission to which we are called. *"Finally, brothers and sisters, pray so that the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified, as it did among you...May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the endurance of Christ."* (2Thes 3:1-5)

Saturday, January 7: *"And we are in the one who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Children, be on your guard against idols"* (1 Jn 5:14-21).

John comes to the end of his first letter with a flourish, a dramatic statement about the importance of the truth of Jesus Christ. (At the time, there were missionaries showing up in the new communities who were not following the Kerygma—the original teachings of the Apostles about Christ.) Then, almost as a postscript, he adds this comment about being on guard against idols.

You'll see this warning pop up in many letters written to the new communities, particularly those made up of Gentile converts. The temptation to fall back into the rites and rituals and gods of the past was always present, and could become more attractive if they were receiving mixed messages about Christ—not a bad warning for us these days as well.

Today's provision: Be on guard against idols. I am sorry to say I hear lots of mixed messages about Christ these days, at least in my country. Some people seem to be making idols of political or religious leaders, willing to "throw their gold" into the fire; what emerges often turns out to be a golden calf. Others struggle with the idols of popularity, riches, fame, control, and the like. For most of us, though, it's the day-to-day distractions that can become idols without us even being aware. Make a habit of stopping for 30 seconds in the middle of your day to ask: "Where is God? Where am I?"