

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
For the Octave of Christmas 2021, 2022.



Sunday, December 26: *After three days (his parents) found Jesus in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. (Lk 2:41-52)*

A few weeks ago, I posed a question as to whether people in the "great crowds" following Jesus were among those that showed up in the crowd that condemned him. I wonder that same thing here: were some of the teachers "astounded" by young Jesus' knowledge and understanding of Jewish law among those who brought him before Pilate to be crucified? Were they oh so impressed at the young man's ability to discourse and debate, only to be aghast and alarmed when he began to live out what he understood so well? Might I too be guilty of this same thing?

Today's Provision—Walk the walk: *"Love your enemies." "Do good to those who persecute you." "Forgive 70 x 7 times." "Pick up your cross and follow me." "Sinners will attain the Kingdom of Heaven before you."* We may quote the words. We may believe in them, aspire to them, but when push comes to shove, we do what's most expedient: We follow the crowd. We protect our egos. We opt for the status quo. Jesus' yoke is easy, his burden light ONLY if we walk side-by-side with him, allowing him to shoulder the load with us. If you find yourself in a situation that challenges you to stay true to the Word, be conscious of Jesus' presence by your side. Invoke his strength.

Monday, December 27: *"The LORD is king; let the earth rejoice; let the many isles be glad. Clouds and darkness are around him; justice and judgment are the foundation of his throne. (Ps 97) What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life—for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you..." (1 Jn 1:1-4)*

God is a mystery. The clouds and darkness that surround God are not the same kind of darkness we read about in John's letters this week, but instead a veil, a "dense fog," as in the Hebrew translation, the God that led the Israelites in the desert. A God that could never be seen.

Until now. No, we have not heard with our own ears, seen with our own eyes, or touched with our own hands the human body of Jesus as John did. We may feel we still live in mystery shrouded by clouds of unknowing. We may lament the state of our world and pray that Christ makes his dramatic return as described in Revelations. But I wonder: perhaps Christ is waiting for us to truly realize he does indeed walk among us today. We *do* hear his voice and see him with our own eyes—in the hungry, the poor, the naked, the prisoner (Mt 25:31-46). Perhaps Christ is waiting for us to touch with our own hands his suffering Body right here and now, to testify to his presence among us.

Today's Provision—Look for Christ in the faces of those who suffer: Maybe you are not ready to touch Christ's suffering body. Start by listening with open ears and looking with open eyes and see Christ in the faces of refugees, the homeless, the mentally ill. Don't impose upon them what you think is right or "for their own good." Find out what "their own good" means to them. Don't judge. Allow your heart to open to the Life, to God made visible. Then let your open heart lead you to seek justice for Christ living among us today.

Tuesday, December 28: *"If we say, 'We have fellowship with him,' while we continue to walk in darkness, we lie and do not act in truth. ...If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing." (1 Jn 1:5-2:2)*

When I read this, I ponder what John means by "walking in darkness." Life has been pretty dark as of late. Aside from the ongoing pandemic, natural disasters, and unending political strife, over the past weeks, two friends have died suddenly and we received bad news about another. There is also great light in my life. My children are home and we are together as a family for the first time in two years—I give thanks to God for this wonderful blessing!

But I wonder: when we hear about walking in darkness, does it mean volitional acts of sin, of "wrongdoing?" Or, does being challenged to live in hope mean we walk in darkness? Of course, we have good news! When we bring our pain, our hopelessness to God, God's mercy will heal and cleanse us, giving us courage to move beyond the darkness.

Today's Provision—Acknowledge your emotions: This is more than half the battle. In counseling, there's an adage: "If you can name your pain and claim it, you can tame it." (In pastoral counseling, we add, "with God's help!") Being able to voice your feelings and your sins to God comes from that intimate fellowship John speaks of in his letters. (Also, remember feelings are neither right or wrong—they just are. It is what we do with them, how we act upon them that can cause us to sin.) So give it a try today. Express to our loving, merciful God any darkness you feel.

Wednesday, December 29: *"Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness... Whoever hates his brother is in darkness; he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes."* (1 Jn 2:3-11)

Gee, we are just past Christmas and all this talk of darkness! The word appears ten times in the readings this week! Can we get a breather? I think the reason for these readings at this time of year is to remind us how easily we can be blinded by darkness, particularly after a big or festive event. The "same old, same old" that follows can turn to apathy which can take a darker turn into hopelessness without us even realizing it. Disagreements can turn to anger which can then turn to hate, blinding us to the importance of family and community and leading us further down the path of darkness. Love is the answer, removing the scales of blindness from our eyes.

Today's Provision—"Do the next loving thing:" Good advice from my friend, Nora, when I was sharing with her some darkness I was feeling and wondering about what to do next. "Do the next loving thing:" I think this just might be my mantra for the coming year! What virtue do you aspire to in 2022?

Thursday, December 30: *"I am writing to you, children, because your sins have been forgiven for his name's sake."* (1 Jn 2: 12-17)

These are John's words to the new Christian communities in Ephesus and Asia, but in some ways, I feel they could be my words. I write because I know for myself God's mercy through Christ and I want others to know it as well. I write, not as an elder to children, but as a fellow sinner, a fellow pilgrim and a friend. Thank you for journeying with me. As yet another difficult year winds down, may you know God's mercy deep in your heart and accept God's forgiveness by forgiving yourself.

Today's Provision—Look back and then leave it behind: It's always wise at year's end to take stock in what you've experienced and learned from the past year. (That's why journaling is such a good idea!) There have been good times and bad times, great sorrows, great hope; things that have drained us and things that have given us life. Times when we have been true to the Word, times we have missed the mark entirely. Wrap it all up in one package, give thanks, and turn it over to God. Then look ahead. "Don't look back—you're not going that way."

Friday, December 31: *"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)

Two rooms separated by a solid door. One room in total darkness, the other bathed in light. The door is slowly opened. The light overcomes the dark. The light is not diminished; it loses nothing of its brilliance by sharing its glow. It does not force its way in, but gently illuminates even the gloomy, hidden corners.

Today's Provision—Let the Light in: There is a door knob on both sides of this door. If you are in the dark, pray for the courage to turn the knob and open the door. If you are in the light, pray for the awareness and compassion to reach out, open the door, and welcome others into the light.

Saturday, January 1, 2022: *"The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!"* (Nm 6:22-27)

This reading shows up every year on New Year's Day. I have no idea how long this has been in the lectionary for January 1, but it is so apropos as a blessing for this new year of 2022. As the calendar turns, we will still be facing global challenges of the pandemic, climate change and violence with the resulting refugee and migration crises, political and economic upheaval. We, as always, pray for peace, for health, for continued blessings for ourselves and those we love. So let's make a commitment to expand those last three words and make "those we love" include everyone--all creatures, Mother Earth--no exclusions.

Today's Provision—Broaden your circle of Love! Whether we like it or not, we are a global community, interdependent, and when one part of that community...one part of Christ's Body... suffers we all suffer. We may not see it firsthand, we may not feel it, but it impacts us nonetheless. When we choose to broaden our circle of love, several things happen: We begin to see and feel the real suffering of others, and while some might not think that's a good idea, it is how we grow in empathy. When we take the focus off ourselves and our small circle, our world expands and we are more able to give and receive love. My wise mother would always say, "You are your happiest when you are in service of others." I would add that service that stems not from obligation, not from a desire for happiness or eternal life, but service that comes from our hearts. Consider how you will broaden your circle of love this new year. I wish all of you health and the blessings of love and peace in your lives this year. Happy New Year!