

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Week of the Epiphany



Sunday, January 2: *Behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star...having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.* (Mt 2:1-12)

I'd like to add a subtitle to Epiphany: "The Feast of Paying Attention." We hear about wise men from "the east" who come to pay homage to the newborn king of the Jews. What is it that makes them wise? Well, they pay attention—to the stars, their journals and historical writings, to their dreams. They are inquisitive, open, and aware. They listen and are not afraid to engage the Mystery they encounter, even though it is not of their tradition or belief.

Epiphanic events are graces, gifts from God; they cannot be earned. But the grace of awareness and the ability to see the Mystery that surrounds us—these are gifts we can pray for and cultivate. We just "*raise our eyes and look about*" to become aware of the glory of the Lord alive in our world! And we shall "*be radiant at what we see,*" and others "*shall walk by our light,*" the reflected light of God. What a wise and wonderful gift we will have to give!

Today's Provision—Pay attention: Paying attention is active, not anxious; it is engaged, not on edge. It is openness to experience whatever is given as gift, so it is also without judgment. Buddhists call this grace "mindfulness." Set aside a few minutes around lunchtime to take a nonjudgmental look at how you paid attention that morning. Where did you encounter God in the ordinary, the mundane, the joys, and the difficulties? Be thankful. Consider what's ahead that afternoon and evening and when you may be challenged to remain aware, and then ask for the extra help you need.

Monday, January 3: *...they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him.* (Mt 4:12-17, 23-25)

Imagine this scene. Try to put yourself there. Would you be willing to be part of the great crowds, especially crowds full of sick people and lunatics? (Sounds like some concerts and sporting events held during COVID!) Not only would I refuse to go to such an event, but I probably would also side with the powers that be to break up the crowd and arrest the instigator—who in this case is Jesus. By his words and actions, he created a great following from all over the region, particularly the poor and oppressed. So, where would you be in this scene?

Today's Provision—Get more comfortable with discomfort: No, I'm not suggesting you go to a concert! Nor am I saying you should take unwise risks. But this scene plays out in our everyday lives, and it doesn't have to involve sickness or mental illness. Maybe you are uncomfortable welcoming new neighbors who worship and dress differently from you, or you avoid folks at church whose political opinion differs from yours. Perhaps you avoid driving a certain route home for fear that the homeless guy will be there again, or maybe you don't go visit your friend at the nursing home. Take a look at what kind of situations make you uncomfortable and dig deeper to learn more. Then ask Jesus to cure you of your fears so you can reach out from a place of compassion and comfort to others.

Tuesday, January 4: *He asked them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see."* (Mk 6: 34-44)

In chapter 1 of John's Gospel, we remember Jesus invites the disciples to "come and see," to get a taste of his life and hear his message. Here, they have been following him for a while, seeing him preach and work miracles so he now directs them to "go and see." Scope things out. Find out what you are working with. Consider the possibilities. Of course, we know the disciples are slow to accept what they can do in Jesus' name, but really, are we any different?

Today's Provision—Consider the possibilities: Perhaps you've spent a lifetime learning from and loving Jesus but are still doubtful of what you can do in his name. You've accepted Jesus' invitation to "come and see," to experience his love. Now it is time for to "go and see" how you can share that love in the world. Spend time today considering the possibilities. Is there an opportunity to serve that's been popping up again and again? Is it to teach children the faith or to work for more just laws? To work with the poor or those who are grieving? Perhaps you hear a call to try to make a difference for Mother Earth and God's creatures. Spend time discerning where Jesus is inviting you. Seek advice from a trusted friend or wise minister to help you sort out where you are called. (A note to parents of young kids: The ministry of parenting is the most important in the world. It's your call right now. Don't try to do too much other than to set a good example of service and generosity for your kids.)

Wednesday, January 5: *"The fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them."* (Mk 6:45-54)

Why is Jesus going to pass by the disciples, especially when he sees them struggling in the storm? Is he mad at their hard-heartedness? The phrase "pass by" is significant in Scripture. It indicates a "theophany"—the appearance of God to a human. We hear God "passes by" Moses in Exodus 33. In the First Book of Kings, 19, God "passes by" Elijah after the wind and storm. Given this interpretation, it appears Jesus' intent is to show the disciples, yet again, his divine nature. In their fear and astonishment, they fail to grasp the message. It makes me wonder: When have I failed to see the glory and wonder when God has "passed by" me?

Today's Provision—Pay attention, take 2: We discussed this on Sunday, but it bears repeating—honestly, every day! Often, we make New Year's resolutions to try to improve whatever we see needs improving in ourselves and in our environment. There are several books about tying small changes to current habits to see if we can build new and better habits. Here's one: every time you go to scroll on your phone, stop. Just for a minute, stop. Look around. Find where God is hiding in plain sight!

Thursday, January 6: *"And his commandments are not burdensome..."* (1 Jn 4:19-5:4)

I have a dear priest friend in his senior years that often tells me, "You know, Elaine, it's really hard to sin!" (John elaborates on this in his reading on Saturday.) Most of us muddle around, lying now and then, being envious of someone else, ignoring a person in need, taking the Lord's name in vain (which, BTW, has more to do with taking an oath and swearing in God's name without the intention of following through rather than the occasional OMG!)

God's commandments are not burdensome IF we hold in our hearts Jesus' summation of the law and the prophets: *"Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and others as yourself."* Love God, love yourself, love others. If that is our commitment each morning—to make a conscious decision to love and to try our best to follow through—then, yes, God's commandments are not burdensome at all. And sin...I'd say my friend has it right...pretty hard to do!

Today's Provision—Make a conscious decision to love: Here's another habit we can work on. Each morning, when you are having your first cup of coffee or brushing your teeth or taking a shower (or checking your phone 😊), stop. Say aloud: "I will be loving today." Check in at midday and again at night: "How did I love today? Where did I nail it and where did I miss an opportunity to love?" Don't beat yourself up. Commit to do better tomorrow!

Friday, January 7: *...but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.* (Lk 5:12-16)

I am writing this on Christmas night. It was a joyous, busy day, getting ready to see extended family tomorrow. By the time you read this, the hoopla will likely be over. The decorations may already be packed away awaiting their annual appearance next year. I don't know about you, but I could sure use a deserted place to pray right about now!

Today's Provision—Find some prayerful silence: Perhaps you have been extra busy this Christmas. Or maybe this holiday season has been a continuation of the quiet and loneliness that has pervaded the last two years. Either way, *prayerful* silence is important, a time to sit in God's presence and allow the wellspring of God's compassion to refresh and nourish us yet again. Take 15 minutes. Light a candle and find a quiet place. Ask God to send the Spirit to calm you and then just sit. Breathe normally but be conscious of your inhaling and exhaling. Relax. Repeat each day!

Saturday, January 8: *"So this joy of mine has been made complete. He must increase; I must decrease."* (Jn 3: 22-30)

Aside from our weight and our debt, I'd guess most of us don't like the thought of decreasing. We measure ourselves by our number of friends on Facebook, the value of our investments, how many exercise reps we can do, etc. We risk becoming our numbers. And yet if we stand back a bit and let God increase in our lives, so does our peace, our humanity, and our ability to love. Where will you decrease in this New Year and allow God to increase?

Today's Provision—Decrease so that God can increase: So let's start with our "to do" lists, shall we? Then, let's look at that list of New Year's resolutions. What items on those lists allow God to increase while I decrease? Be honest (and trust me, I am preaching to myself here.) In Ignatian Spirituality, there is a concept called "The Magis" (mah-juss). It translates to "the more" but really means "the better." We may think that in order to allow God to increase, we need to do more, but that misses the point. In fact, to do the Magis--the better--for God usually means taking some things OFF the list. (Note: remember the importance of love of self as a means to love others. Don't abandon the need for selfcare particularly if you are in a caregiving role.)