

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the Second Week of Advent 2024—"Embracing Starlight."



Sunday, December 8: *"And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value"* (Phil 1:4-6, 8-11).

That last phrase, "to discern what is of value" caught my attention. In this season of rampant commercialism, in the current political climate that appears to devalue things like education and human rights, it's a good time for all of us to do some real, honest reflection on what we value, and how closely our lives reflect those values. Try as I may, I cannot fathom how Christians, who kneel to worship the poor babe in the manger whose family must flee for their lives from the country of their birth, can turn a blind eye to the poor and oppressed and support the mass deportation of immigrants; how some can be more concerned with their own little worlds than with what ails Mother Earth. I am troubled as I look at my own life and how my habits and behaviors support the status quo. I pray my love and yours may increase ever more so that our eyes may be opened to see beyond ourselves, to live lives that reflect what really matters most.

Provision: What do you value? How does your living reflect what you value? I rarely take time to look at my habits and assess how what I do and what I tacitly support align with what I say I value. Do you? This can become a trap for "analysis paralysis" so we also need to be practical. This can play out in our personal lives as well. We say we value health, but do our habits reflect that? Take time to discern a habit or action that is misaligned with what you truly value. Try to pick one on a personal level and one on a societal level. This week, see if you can adjust the alignment!

Monday, December 9: *Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High"* (Lk 1:26-38).

Several books I use for Advent reflection suggest that, instead of skimming over the all-to-familiar words of the infancy narratives, we take time to imagine what is happening and what the message is for us. In true Ignatian contemplation fashion, we put ourselves in the scene, either as a participant or as an observer. We strip away all the artists' renditions (except for my favorite, Henry Ossawa Tanner's *Annunciation*, which is a more likely depiction 😊). We put aside all the theological justifications and rational refutations to embrace the mystery of God entering into our reality. Even for those who are not Christian, can you see how the Creator desires to be one with their creation?

Provision: Remember—God appears to unlikely people in unlikely ways. This is God's chosen way with humanity: To make the Divine known to simple people, in simple situations. So never discount the possibility that God has and will come to you. Try to simplify your life...even if it's just for today. Set aside time for quiet prayer, but don't necessarily expect God to show up during your "allotted" prayer time! Instead, be aware as you go about the day for moments of quiet peace that seem to appear out of nowhere. They appear from the heart of God.

Tuesday, December 10: *A voice cries out: "In the desert prepare the way of the LORD! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God! Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low; The rugged land shall be made a plain, the rough country, a broad valley"* (Is 40:1-11).

Have you ever considered how this image from Isaiah squares with the journey Mary and Joseph make from Nazareth to Bethlehem? Imagine making the trip with them: You'd likely travel with a group; others must make the same trek, and it is dangerous to travel alone. It is about 90 miles (upwards of ten days), south along the flatlands of the Jordan and west over the hills into Jerusalem and onto Bethlehem. Our tradition says it is winter, so in that part of the Judean desert, it would be in the 30s (F) during the day and very rainy, freezing at night. You'd be wearing a heavy woolen cloak over your long robes (yes, they would get soaking wet) with tube-like socks and enclosed shoes protecting your feet. You'd also be carrying provisions for at least 2 weeks: Water in big skins made from goat hides, wine, flat bread, oil and herbs, dried fruit and nuts... A straight highway? Level hills and broad valleys? Think again.

Today's Provision: Bringing Christ into the world is not easy. Look for support. That's why "traveling the holy way" is always better with companions! Do you have trusted "God friends" who accompany and support you as you strive to bring forth God's peace into the world? I hope so! They make all the difference. If not, start looking for groups of people who value what you value, and make an early New Year's resolution to join them on the journey.

Wednesday, December 11: *"Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these things: He leads out their army and numbers them, calling them all by name. By his great might ...not one of them is missing!"* (Is 40:25-41).

The "army" Isaiah refers to are those stars we read about last Saturday. Huge stars that shine brightly like our sun, little twinkling ones that fill us with wonder, provide us with inspiration, and grant us just enough light to see the way forward!

Provision: Give thanks for the "stars" in your life. Call them by name. Let's spend time today giving thanks for the "stars" in our lives, the great and the small; those who have gone before us who shine in the firmament and those in our communities and neighborhoods who greet us each day. Call them by name, and if feasible, let them know how they brighten your life. If you are out and about, thank the people who serve you. Be a "star" for someone else today.

Thursday, December 12: *A great sign appeared: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ...Then another sign; a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns...Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth* (Rv 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab).

Lots going on here. Good and virtue are portrayed by the woman, adorned simply but dramatically with the Light of the Cosmos; and the frightening image of the evil and violence of the "Accuser" represented by the huge dragon. It is the classic battle of good and evil we see played out in Star Wars movies, TV shows, and, if we are lucky, occasionally in real life. But, given our theme, I'm intrigued by the image of "a third of the stars" being swept away and hurled down to earth. What happened to those stars?

Provision: Light always overcomes darkness. If you read the next verses, it turns out Satan and its angels were also thrown down to earth (v. 7-9) and continue to prowl around. But the heavenly stars are still here as well and continue to burn as brightly. Maybe they appear to us in dreams or perhaps in our memories, when we look back on times when we felt all was lost, only to find a light to lead us forward. Maybe they are the people we honored yesterday, or someone we encounter today! The light of the stars that endure here on earth will always overcome any darkness we encounter!

Friday, December 13: *"I, the LORD, your God, teach you what is for your good, and lead you on the way you should go"* (Is 48:17-19). *"Those who follow you, Lord, will have the light of life"* (Ps 1, Jn 8:12).

There are two essential parts of this equation: first, we listen to God's Word—for Christians, that would be Jesus (so none of the "eye for an eye" stuff!). This is how we learn what is for our good. Second—and this is often the hardest part—we follow in Jesus's footsteps, to put into living practice what we have learned. These two things add up to having the light of the Lord in our lives.

Provision: How's your math? One thing about this equation: if we don't listen well and thoughtfully to God's Word, we will have an even harder time trying to add in the second part. Too often, we skim over the words of Scripture. We have heard the same old lessons and stories so many times that we fail to grasp the meaning for our individual lives. Take the gospel for today (Mt 11:16-19). What is Jesus saying to you about your faith? Take time with the readings today. See if you can read them like you've never heard them before. How do they help you to follow in Jesus' footsteps?

Saturday, December 14: *The disciples asked Jesus, "Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" He said in reply, "Elijah will indeed come and restore all things, but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased* (Mt 17:9-13).

What does Jesus mean by Elijah coming to "restore all things?" There had not been a prophet recognized in Israel since Malachi, some 400 years ago, so what "things" needed to be restored? Fear of the Lord? Prophetic reminders about the need for repentance and God's promises of salvation and mercy? Hope for the oppressed? Israel had become a law-bound, uneasy subject of Rome. You get the feeling there was little Spirit to be found, particularly among the poor. Enter John the Baptist, with his fiery prophecies and burning criticism of the hierarchy, "the brood of vipers." Oh they recognized him, alright. And did to him what they thought was expedient, just like they will do with the Son of Man.

Provision: Look for the light of real prophets. There are false prophets out there today, some who talk about "profits" as being a sign of God's favor. Who are real prophets, those who preach God's mercy for all, God's preferential option for the poor? *"By their fruits, you will know them."* *"Do not be deceived."*