

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 2017.



The Second Week of Advent, we focus on peace: Peace can be a source of hope, and hope, a source of peace. Try to find some moments this week to be at peace in God's embrace.

Sunday, December 10: *"I will hear what God proclaims, for he proclaims peace to his people. Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him...Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss." (Ps 85)*

We hear a lot about truth, or the lack thereof, these days, especially in the US. Alternative facts, fake news, half-truths, blatant lies being presented as truth...the list goes on and on. And from what I see in the media, truth is being challenged across the globe. It seems the more we get away from the real truth God proclaims, the less peace we have, the less we trust each other and even ourselves. And yet "truth" is complicated. There are those destroying whole countries and millions of lives in the name of God; those whose narrow view of God excludes anything outside that view; those who condone despicable behavior for the sake of political expediency. Peace is harder and harder to find.

Today's Provision—Be Kind. Foster Peace: "The truth hurts," we hear said. But does it have to hurt? Can we be kind and by our kindness, share the truth that is Christ's message of compassion? Fighting for justice does not mean violence. Peaceful protest is how Jesus lived. Can we allow for peaceful dialogue and respect of others to help bring about justice? God's truth does not hurt. It may be difficult to live, but it is never hurtful. Be kind today, particularly to someone whose ideas and opinions differ from yours. Foster justice through peace in Christ's name.

Monday, December 11: *"A highway will be there (in the desert), called the holy way...It is for those with a journey to make." (Is 35:1-10)*

And that journey is called "Life." By virtue of our birth, we are all called to this journey, no matter how short or long it may be. Sometimes our way through the desert is peaceful and calm; other times, it is fraught with fear and loneliness. But Isaiah says it is called "the holy way"--not just parts of the highway--the whole thing. How's your life going these days upon the holy way?

Today's Provision—Walk in Holiness: The word "holy" weaves its way back to the German, with a stop in Old English from the word *hālig*, meaning wholeness. Holiness is not about following rules or being perfect or pious. It is about being whole. *"Holiness is loving unity with God. It's an ever-expanding openness to the divine Center...In holiness, we become the persons we were created to be."* (Richard Foster) Stop today and look around inside your soul to see where you are on this holy way called your life. Are you aware of and open to God, our divine Center? Does the way you treat others on this highway speak of the person God created you to be?

Tuesday, December 12: *"Blessed are you, daughter, by the Most High God... Your deed of hope will never be forgotten by those who tell of the might of God." (Judith 13:18-19)*

It's interesting to read through Scripture during Advent to compare and contrast the images of God's power in the Old and New Testaments. This passage from Judith about her "deed of hope" refers to how she uses her beauty to seduce Holofernes, the enemy general, get him drunk, and cut off his head! It's quite a riveting story, not unlike some dramas we see on TV. Now truly, it took great courage for Judith to risk her life for her fellow Jews, but as is so often the case, the Old Testament portrays God's might through destruction and violence. Regardless of whether it is the Jews themselves or their enemies that are getting blasted, God's displeasure or protection is seen in quaking mountains, furious floods, parted seas, seraph serpents, beheaded generals, and the like.

In the gospel, we hear of the quiet simplicity of Mary and the great courage it took for her, not to end a life to help save Israel, but to risk and give her body to bring forth new life, new life that will be the Savior for the whole world!

Today's Provision—Practice Hope: Think about your plans for the day ahead. Are there situations or events on the calendar that might challenge you to remain hopeful? Christmas shopping, perhaps? ☺ Are there people you know who could use some hope for the future? This season of hope and good cheer can be very grim for those who are suffering. What deed might you do in a quiet, simple way to bring life to someone lacking in hope?

Wednesday, December 13: *"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...you will find rest for yourselves. (Mt 11:28-30)*

Many years ago, in a fit of temporary insanity, I found myself at a mall right before Christmas. As I turned a corner, I came upon a long line of kids waiting to see Santa. Many of their parents were balancing packages, strollers, and crying babies. The noise was deafening. Then, out of nowhere this scripture passage popped into my head. I imagined Jesus setting up a booth for people to come and sit on his lap! While this may sound a bit irreverent, I felt a wonderful sense of peace imaging that scene. So, each year when things start to get hectic—like around now—I think about being close to Jesus and talking to him about my list of hopes, fears, wishes, and regrets. And I find rest for myself. How about you? Where do you find your rest?

Today's Provision—Rest with Jesus: This is exactly what Jesus is inviting us to do: to come to him amid the clamor and the noise and lay down our burdens. Take some time today to do just that. If the image above works for you, adopt as your own. Or find another image that brings you rest and peace. Go back to your image every day. Rest.

Thursday, December 14: *"I am... your God, who grasps your right hand; 'Fear not, I will help you.'" (Is 41:13-20)*

Anyone who has cared for young children has likely experienced grasping the hand of a toddler before crossing a street, only to have the child try to wrench it away. At a young age, kids seem to have no fear and crave independence. This drive for independence is important in human development and shouldn't be stifled unless safety is at risk. But even more important to that development is the assurance that there is someone we can trust, someone who is always there for us. This basic knowledge sets the tone for how we approach the world and our life ahead.

God does not stifle our independence or free will, nor does God think we are incapable. Note the passage doesn't say, "Fear not, I will do it for you!" No, God tells us, "I will help you." I will be by your side when you need me—"fear not."

Today's provision—Be Humble: Being willing to ask for and accept help requires humility, a virtue not valued today. Is there an area in your life where you could use some help? Pray for the strength to be humble. Ask for help. Allow God to grasp your hand through the outstretched hand of another.

Friday, December 15: *"To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who...call to one another, "We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn." (Mt 11:16-19)*

Jesus lives in a turbulent world. There is great unrest over Roman taxation. Radical Jewish groups are engaging in acts of terrorism. Most of the Jewish leaders, while also unhappy under Roman rule, try to maintain the status quo. Their lives are comfortable and they have much to lose from outright rebellion. The messages of Jesus and John the Baptist require too much change. John preaches dramatic repentance of sin, Jesus preaches the saving mercy of God. Instead, the elders just want silence. And so that's exactly what happens to John and Jesus. They are silenced.

Today's provision—Self Examination: I realize I am, at times, right where the elders are. Let's just keep things the way they are. The status quo doesn't require much of me, and my life is pretty comfortable as it is. But apathy and indifference always support the powers that be, and for me right now, that is cause for great concern and self-examination. Take some time today to reflect on your status quo. Step outside yourself. Are there things you accept as "givens" you would change you thought you could or had the energy? When Jesus looks at your life, what does he see? Are there things for which you need to repent? Joy and gratitude for God's mercy which you need to express?

Saturday, December 16: *You are destined...to turn back the hearts of parents toward their children. (Sir 48:10)*

There's a Native American philosophy called the seventh generation principle. When one is making decisions that affect the community, he or she must take into account the impact seven generations hence. According to the Natural Resources Conservation Service's website, "Seventh generation (planning) requires each generation to be fair and humble. Fairness means not imposing risks on future generations that we ourselves would not accept. Humility means that we would consider the quality of life of future generations as important as our quality of life."

The words we hear today—"you are destined to turn back the hearts of parents toward their children"—are words for the future and of hope. Seventh generation planning is a philosophy of hope. But it can seem like our immediate gratification culture belies our vision of hope based in Christ. We are so focused on the short-term, we fail to consider our own futures much less those of the generations to come.

Today's Provision—Turn Your Heart towards the Future: Now, more than ever, we need to focus on the future, to look beyond our own self-serving interests to see how our living impacts our children's children and our planet. It is a constant, conscious balance: living in the sacrament of the present moment and taking the long view through lenses of hope. Pray today for a clearer vision of how you can make tomorrow better for everyone.