

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the Fourth Week of Advent and Christmas 2017.



This last week (day!) of Advent, we focus on love. Love. The one thing that as Christians, is our true focus and main purpose. Love made manifest *for all*, living and breathing in the person of the Child Jesus.
A Merry and Blessed Christmas to you!

Sunday, December 24: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."* (Lk 1:26-38)

Overshadow. The Greek word "episkiazó" means just that: to cast a shadow over something. When we think of shadows, we tend to think of darkness or something ominous, something hidden that might jump out and scare us or worse! But in Scripture, it is the overshadowing cloud that leads the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, that encircles the tent of the Ark of the Covenant, that envelopes Jesus and the disciples at the Transfiguration. It signifies God's presence, power, and protection. It represents the mystery that, like Mary, we are called to accept in faith. *"Never fear shadows. They simply mean there's a light shining somewhere nearby."* (Ruth Renkel)

Today's Provision—Be Fearless in Faith: Fearless, as I am using it here, represents our modern interpretation of the word. In the biblical definition, perhaps we would have to say "Be Fearful in Faith!" Be overshadowed by the awesomeness of God! Allow your "fear" of the Lord to make you fearless! That is exactly what Mary does. She is bold and unafraid to declare, "Yes, I am the handmaid of the Lord" and to accept all that statement entails. Meek and mild Mary, the first disciple, is our awe-filled, fearless model of faith.

Monday, December 25, Christmas Day: *The angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* (Mt 1:18-25)

When my daughter was young, she had a special fondness for St. Joseph. She always thought he didn't get enough credit, with all the focus being on Mary and Jesus instead. I guess, as the younger sibling, she was particularly aware of second billing! Indeed, after the story of Jesus being lost in the Temple, we hear nothing of Joseph again, other than an occasional reference to Jesus as his son. But Joseph's unspoken declaration of faith shown by his actions: "I am the servant of the Lord. I will do what is asked of me," are, like Mary's, seminal statements of faith despite doubt and confusion. Let us celebrate Joseph in a special way this Christmas by praying for all those that have supported our faith journey by their quiet, humble presence in our lives.

Today's Provision—"Joseph's Canticle: 'To Be God's Father Here'" words by Roy Tolentino, music and arrangement by Norman Agatep https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_dGoRMbBVU (performed by Bukas Palad, a Catholic Filipino music ministry. Enjoy!!)

(REF) *Glory to the Lord! God's name be praised, for You chose to save Your servant's heart from fear. Dream in me, O Lord, grant me the grace to be God's father here. (I) Open my heart, which by Your Spirit stirred receives the Holy Word: the promise my bride has heard. We hope and trust, surrender to Your plan: You've sent the Son of Man. Salvation is at hand! (II) Lend me Your love, to raise Him as my own, provide Him with a home, where justice and peace are known. God from above becomes Emmanuel: Our restlessness dispel! In God, teach us to dwell. Hallelujah! Praise the Son! Hallelujah! Holy One! Hallelujah! Child most dear, I'll be Your father here.*

Tuesday, December 26: *"I will rejoice and be glad because of your mercy."* (Ps 31)

Today is St. Stephen's Day in several Christian traditions. I sometimes wonder why the Church chose to put the story of the first martyr for Christ on the day after Christmas. Couldn't we have something a bit more cheery? The angels and shepherds have hardly exited the stage before we hear the story of a young man being stoned to death. The readings today have to do with the more difficult ramifications of choosing to embrace the Christ Child, but they also point to the real reason God came to dwell among us in the first place: Mercy.

Today's Provision—Rejoice in God's Mercy: It's easy to rejoice in God's mercy when we imagine the little baby Jesus, newly born, innocent, and gentle. But it's very difficult to even see God's presence, much less mercy, when we visualize someone being stoned to death. And, how about when we realize the Jewish leader sanctioning the murder—Saul—will soon also be a recipient of not only God's mercy, but his mission as well. We rejoice because God's mercy is for all who seek it. How can we best express our appreciation for God's mercy to us? By being merciful ourselves.

Wednesday, December 27: "...for the life was made visible...what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us...We are writing this so that our joy may be complete." (1 Jn 1: 1-4)

I totally understand what John says here, of joy being made complete through writing about what we have seen and heard. I am blessed to share the life made visible to me with you each week. But it's not about one person's joy. It's about fellowship. It's about community. It's about building relationships in Christ with people we may never even meet. It is the essence of Christianity and the hallmark of this season: shared joy.

Today's provision—Sharing Joy: When we think of joy, perhaps it's the squeals of excited children on Christmas morning. Heartwarming yes, but if it's the only source of our joy, we (and our kids) are really missing out. Here we are, two days after Christmas, and the novelty of new toys and clothes may have already worn off. Joy about material things doesn't last very long. But the joy of our Savior's birth never gets old. Let's commit this coming year to keep the Christmas spirit alive all year. Share your joy for all to see.

Thursday, December 28: *When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious and ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under* (Mt 2: 13-18)

Today, the Church recognizes the Feast of the Holy Innocents. Matthew tells of Herod's despicable act. It's such a distasteful story, we may be tempted to ignore it. Just like the stories that are commonplace in the news: hundreds of thousands of children all over the world dying of starvation; tens of thousands of poor children sold to work as prostitutes and slaves; almost 1,300 children killed each year by gun violence in the US. These are stories of despicable acts. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "*The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.*" Conversely then, the indictment of society is found in what it does *to* its children.

Today's provision—Save the Children: This is a reality in our world. We are disgusted and dismayed when we hear of children robbed of their innocence and their very lives. We might be tempted to think there is not much we can do. And that is precisely why Herod's slaughter continues. Research local programs to reach out to kids in your area—every county, state, and country has children in need. Contribute to charities whose track records show a strong commitment to child health and welfare. Don't be afraid to speak out against violence. Work to better the lives of parents trying to improve life for their children. And pray, pray, pray, not just for the unborn, but for those living every day under the specter of death. Let's start focusing on our collective future instead of on just our own.

Friday, December 29: "*Whoever claims to abide in him ought to walk just as he walked... Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness... Whoever hates his brother walks in darkness.*" (1 Jn 2:3-11)

Hate is a strong word we hear a lot these days. There are people out there preaching hate, pretending to represent God or calling themselves Christians, or deeming their own countries to be the altar at which they worship. John tells us if we claim to abide in Jesus, we should walk just as he walked. How did Jesus walk? He walked, and still walks, in love. You cannot love Christ and hate another. Period. Hate is darkness, hate is fear, and the God of love banishes all fear. I find it oddly amusing: we also hear a lot these days about keeping Christ in Christmas, but I think we should be far, far more concerned about keeping Christ in Christian.

Today's Provision—Walk in Love: It's easy to understand, but can be difficult to achieve. We encounter lots of potholes, roadblocks, and detours along the way, so it's imperative we keep attuned to love. Each morning, make a conscious commitment to walk in the love that day. Take time out of your daily journey to assess your progress.

Saturday, December 30: *When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.* (Lk 2:36-40)

All the hoopla is over. Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem just in time to fulfill the government's requirement of registering. Their baby is born—not in the most ideal circumstances—but he is healthy and strong. They go to the temple in Jerusalem on the proscribed day to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving required by their faith. They have named him Yeshua as per the instruction of the angel Gabriel. By the time they get back to Nazareth, they have traveled about 160 miles. They must be just exhausted, but all the boxes on the to-do list are checked and they settle into a normal, quieter routine with God in their midst—just like we are called to do as this blessed, but busy season of Christmas winds down.

Today's Provision—Relax and Reflect: As I write this (a week before Christmas), I hope you and I are heeding this advice and taking some quiet time to reflect on God's abiding presence, not just at Christmas or Easter or in the sanctuary, but every day and everywhere, throughout the normal ups and downs, the ordinary but truly holy times of our lives. Don't be in too much of a rush to get back into routine. Give yourself time. Use these waning days of 2017 to review the graces and challenges of the past year: Where or when have I most felt God's presence, and more importantly, where and when did God experience my presence? Were there times I felt God had abandoned me, or that I ignored God? What did I learn from those times? And give thanks for everything, especially for God being born anew every day, every moment in our hearts.