

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

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



Sunday, December 15: *"Whoever has two cloaks, share with the person who has none...whoever has food should do likewise." He answered [the tax collectors]: "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." Soldiers also asked him. He told them, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages"*(Lk 3:10-18).

I'm tempted at times to stop writing based on the lectionary and instead use the verses that immediately proceed them, in this case: *"He said to the crowds who came out to be baptized, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire"* (Lk 3:7-9). You can imagine the people trembling and asking, *"What then should we do?"* They cower as he lowers the boom: Share what you have. Don't throw your weight around. Stop stealing, lying, and whining!

Expecting something more dramatic? We may think we must go to great lengths for salvation: extreme acts of contrition, beating ourselves up for our all-too-frequent lapses. But in reality, it's about two things: what we do in our daily lives and *"not only what we do, but where we do it from"*(John Shea, *Starlight*, p. 103).

Provision: Do everything with love. The crowd is concerned with their own salvation. Based on John's words, that's not surprising. There's nothing wrong with that goal but note what John says about the people just relying on their status as children of Abraham. Note what he says about producing good fruit. Remember, the word "repentance"—*metanoia* in Greek—has to do with changing, not only our actions, but our minds and hearts. If we are doing works of charity and justice based solely on obligation or for our own salvation, we are missing out on the joy of true repentance. God looks into our hearts and sees our motivation. Let's try this week to do what we do with love from our hearts.

Monday, December 16: *"I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel"*(Nm 24: 2-7, 15-17).

This passage is part of the oracle proclaimed by the pagan prophet, Balaam. It's not referenced in the New Testament but is considered a messianic prophecy and was used in early Christian writings. It speaks of experiencing "him," seeing and beholding a star from Jacob's lineage, but in a far-off, incorporeal way. The Incarnation changed all that—God coming in the flesh—but there have been times in my life when I've felt God was distant. I imagine this happens for most people. We cognitively acknowledge God's presence, just not right now and not right here. Find hope in Balaam's words.

Provision: Look for the star of God's presence. Maybe the star is a memory of a time when God was with you. (I recall God's presence being so real for me as I accompanied my father when he died.) Try to recapture that feeling of God's closeness and savor it. Tell God your desire to feel that closeness again. Perhaps you can find the star in the eyes and the smile of a loved one, or even a stranger. *"Rise up in splendor! Your light has come... raise your eyes and look about"*(Is 60:1,4). Raise and open your eyes, open your heart. Look for God's star in the darkness.

Tuesday, December 17: *The genealogy of Jesus Christ...Abraham became the father of Isaac, father of Jacob... Salmon was the father of Boaz, father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed, the father of Jesse, father of David the king, father of Solomon...After the Babylonian exile, Eliakim, the father of Azor, father of Zadok...Matthan, father of Jacob, father of Joseph, husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus"*(Mt 1:1-17).

Genealogies can be pretty dry. What makes them interesting are the back stories. Take those in Jesus' family tree: We see the faith of Abraham as well as the deceit of Jacob; the loyalty of Ruth and the cunning of Tamar. The sinfulness and the humility of David; the wisdom and the weakness of Solomon. The unconditional trust of Mary and Joseph. Through nature and nurture, customs and traditions, Jesus became the person he was, just as we become who we are through the love and trials of generations past.

Provision: Accept the past. There's an Irish proverb: *"If there are skeletons in your family's closet, you might as well learn to dance with them."* Our lives are a tapestry woven with threads from the past, some strong, some frayed. It's what makes us so wonderfully, so utterly human. The holidays can be a time of family joy, but they can also be difficult. If you can't celebrate the past, at least try to accept it. If there are wounds from deceit, sinfulness, and weakness, pray Christ's Christmas gift to you is a forgiving heart. And then learn to dance!

Wednesday, December 18: *"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary into your home!"* (Mt 1:18-25).

In the book I've been referencing, *Starlight*, John Shea has an interesting take on this story: *"Mary is found to be pregnant before she has lived with Joseph. Joseph, a just man, decides to divorce her quietly. ...He is not open to scandal. The angel entreats him not to fear scandal. ...What looks like scandal is really the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a truly appropriate conception story for a man who, when he grows up, will scandalize everyone"* (pp. 54-55).

Provision: "Do not be afraid." We talked last week about putting aside the romanticized images of the infancy narratives. While Bible stories are not looked at as factual history (we don't know the actual story of Jesus' birth, but we embrace the mystery) still, there are many traditions and legends that have arisen that teach us important lessons. One lesson is to know that doing God's work, bringing God's living presence into the world can be very messy, even scandalous at times. We pray for the clarity with which Joseph discerns, but sometimes, we just need to trust the voice we hear in our hearts. If it speaks to us of love and compassion, of being fearless for God, it's likely an angel of the Lord.

Thursday, December 19: *"So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit"* (Lk 1:5-25).

Those who've lived awhile know from experience: God does not work on our timetable. Or, to put it more bluntly: God is not a vending machine. The fact that God does not heal the sick relative or arrange the prayed-for acceptance at a job or school, or on a global scale, stop the slaughter of innocents can cause people to reject God. If we are aware, we can see God's living presence everywhere, but the real test comes when what we pray for, long for does not come to pass.

Provision: Reflect on God's hand in your life. Spend time today looking back on your life. Are there difficult things that happened to you, disappointments and losses that occurred that you are ready to look at from another vantage point? This can be hard but try to look for God's hand in what has happened. Has past sinfulness or loss led you to a closer relationship with God? Did something you hoped for lead you in a different, more fulfilling direction? *"God's presence is not discerned at the time when it is upon us, but afterwards when we look back"* (John Henry Newman).

Friday, December 20: *"Nothing will be impossible for God"* (Lk 1:26-38, NABRE). *"Because nothing, of all the things I have said, is impossible with God"* (literal Greek translation).

In the first translation, the angel states the obvious: *"Nothing is impossible for God."* We get it. God can do whatever God wants. I may be reading more into the second translation, *"Nothing is impossible with God,"* but let's consider it. Mary has free will. So do we. And as the Bible tells us over and over, God, for some reason, seems to prefer to work **with** us. This is God's chosen way. *"Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours"* (Teresa of Avila).

Provision: "May it be done unto me." Mary has a choice. She agrees to be God's servant and, in a real sense, sacrifices her body to have something "done" to her. What if we arise (after we've listened to the words God speaks to us—see tomorrow's provision) and say, "I consciously give my "Yes" to God today to be God's servant, willingly sacrificing my own desires, plans, and needs to be able to bear Christ in the world.

Saturday, December 21: *"Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one and come! Let me see you, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and you are lovely"* (Sg 2:8-14).

*Nobody in the hospital could tell the age of the old woman who was called Susanna. I knew she spoke some English and that she was an immigrant out of a little country trampled by armies. Because she had no visitors, I would stop by to see her, but she was always sleeping. All I could do was to get out her comb and carefully untangle the tangles in her hair. One day I was beside her when she woke up. Opening small dark eyes of a surprising clearness, she looked at me and said, "You want to know the truth?" I answered, "Yes." She said, "It's something that my mother told me: 'There's not a single inch of our whole body that the Lord does not love.' She then went back to sleep. ("Susanna," by Anne Porter, from *Living Things: Collected Poems*. © Zoland Books, 2006, pp. 51-52.)*

Provision: Know you are beloved. There are four days until Christmas, four probably very busy days and you might just not take enough time for prayer 😊. So, do this: imagine each morning hearing God call to you, *"Arise, my beloved, my beautiful one."* And then, in ten days, make a resolution to hear God's call to you every day of 2025!