

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
The Octave of Christmas



Sunday, December 29: *"Put on, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful"* (Col 3:12-21).

In the Roman Catholic tradition, this is Holy Family Sunday. The readings are the same in the Common Lectionary as well.

I remember in a family systems class during my Pastoral Counseling studies when someone brought up the idea of a "dysfunctional family." My immediate thought was, "Is there anything but?!" All families are made up of human beings, and are, as such, dysfunctional in some fashion! Now, in saying that, I surely do not dismiss the fact that many people are and have been raised in very difficult and damaging situations, both in their immediate families and in society. I think we fail to recognize how poverty, violence, and war can have lasting deleterious effects on whole generations of children regardless of their nuclear family. It's hard to imagine a world where Paul's words today could become the template for individual families and the entire human race. But that is precisely God's dream, God's call to each of us!

Provision: Put on love. A "holy family" is not one where everyone gets along all the time and there are no problems. A holy family, a holy nation, a holy world is one that works through disagreements and difficulties with love, patience, forgiveness, and gratitude. The only way we will ever get close is to start with ourselves: be kind to yourself, patient and forgiving of your faults. Be humble and grateful. Then, take those virtues and show them to those closest to you, without exception. We surely will not see far-reaching impacts in our lifetimes, but we are called to start.

Monday, December 30: *"Do not love the world or the things of the world... For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world"* (1 Jn 2:12-17).

I can imagine a child hearing this and asking whether they should love and care for the world! There is nothing unholy about enticement for the eyes in the wonders of God's creation. I've heard in the Kenyan catechism, the answer to "why did God create the world?" is because God thought we would enjoy it! John is telling us the human things of the world can lead us away from God and cause us to destroy the earth through abuses like rampant consumerism, destruction of natural resources, and excessive use of plastics and pesticides—the "throw-away culture" Pope Francis calls it.

Provision: Love God's world. Of course, some of what human hands have made is good and holy, products of our God-given intelligence. But I ask myself: Am I wise in how I use consumer goods or am I pretentious? Do I allow myself to be lured by the latest gadget? Do I allow accumulated "stuff" to get in the way of my relationship with God? Good questions to reflect upon as we head into a new year.

Tuesday, December 31: *"Sing to the LORD a new song"* (Ps 96).

There are four psalm readings this week about "singing a new song to the Lord" (this one and three from Psalm 98). Hebrew Scripture scholar Robert Alter quips that the poet often started a psalm this way to proclaim it is a "fresh and original composition," while in reality, "it is just a weaving together of phrases and whole lines that appear elsewhere." Sort of the "new and improved version" to remarket the same prayers! It makes sense for these words to appear as we are perched on the beginning of a new year.

Provision: What's the title of your new song? Instead of putting together a resolution list of action steps that will likely be defunct by February, why not instead consider a song or a song title that sums up your new song for the year. "I Will Always Love You" would be a good one, but maybe something more specific. Is there a word or phrase that sums up what you would like to focus on with God this year? In the Roman Catholic church, the theme for the 2025 Jubilee year is "Pilgrims of Hope." Hope wouldn't be a bad choice. We sure could use more hope. As I write this, I haven't come up with mine yet, but I am hoping it won't be "The Same Old Song!" 😊

Wednesday, January 1: *The LORD says to each one of us: "This is how you shall bless each other—those closest to you and those you do not like, even those you consider your enemies. Say to them: 'The LORD bless you and keep you! The LORD let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you! The LORD look upon you kindly and give you peace!' So shall they hear my name expressed in your words and see my face shining through yours, my kindness and peace by your very presence. I will bless them and bless you as well"* (adapted from Nm 6:22-27). Happy New Year!

Thursday, January 2: *"Let what you heard from the beginning remain in you"* (1 Jn 2:22-28).

In my work as a spiritual director and retreat leader, I often sit with people who are burdened by unhealthy, even disturbing images of God they heard about as children. One tendency we humans have is to hold onto ideas, thoughts, or feelings that present a threat to us. Or, we never had explained to us that the "fear of God" we read about in scripture refers to being in awe of God, not afraid of God. In fact, while we can be moved to amazement when we see God's majesty in nature, the real awe comes when we experience for ourselves God's mercy and unconditional love. I, of course, don't know the mind of God, but in my heart, I believe that's the kind of awe God wants us to remember from our divine beginnings, the kind of overwhelming amazement and gratitude at God's unending love!

Provision: Read Isaiah 43:4 and Jeremiah 31:3. *"You are precious in my eyes, and I love you." "With age-old love I have loved you; so, I have kept my mercy toward you."* You can get whiplash reading the OT prophets. They will go on about how sinful we are and how angry God is with us, only and always to circle back to God's promise and mercy. We may fail and we may suffer, but God is true to the covenant. God keeps God's promise. Remain in that knowledge.

Friday, January 3: *"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is"* (1 Jn 2:29-3:6).

Is it that we will see God as God is, that God will be revealed to us? (Remember, we've seen God in Jesus.) Or is it that each will have revealed to us what needs to fall away, what we need to "purge," so that we can become like God? I grew up with the image of a judging and damning God, but my thought now is more that I will be looking in a mirror. I will see myself as I am, with my faults and sinfulness on full display. That's pretty scary too, but I just have to look more closely. There behind me are Jesus and the communion of saints to support me as I let my imperfect humanity fall away.

Provision: Practice looking in the mirror. C.S. Lewis said it this way: *"You don't have a soul. You are a Soul. You have a body;"* Teilhard de Chardin: *"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."* The author of Ecclesiastes, Qohelet tells us: *"The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it"* (12:7). What would it be like if we stood in front of a mirror each day, not focused on our physical bodies (which many of us find fault with), but instead, if we were to focus on and give thanks for the beauty of our spirits: "I am kind and compassionate;" "I have a good sense of humor and make people smile;" "I radiate joy." One interesting thing about our spiritual gifts—they can also have a flip side that exposes a weakness as well. You know, we might as well be honest and real. That's the way God sees us and loves us unconditionally!

Saturday, January 4: *John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God."...So, they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day* (Jn 1:35-42).

It sounds like Jesus was alone as he walked by John and his disciples. I don't know this for sure, but other than when Jesus went off to pray by himself, this might be the only time we read in Scripture about Jesus walking somewhere alone. In Luke's version of the call of Simon Peter, we hear "the crowd was pressing in on Jesus" (5:1). Imagine how it must have felt for Andrew and the other disciple to be able to spend the day sitting around with Jesus, listening, discussing, maybe debating—after all, his message was new. I like to think they laughed and enjoyed each other!

Provision: Put yourself in the scene. This is a great reading for imaginative contemplation. Picture the scene: perhaps it is close to the River Jordan where John is baptizing. Or consider a more modern setting if that makes it easier for you: maybe a coffee shop. Imagine John's thoughts as his disciples move on to engage Jesus. Consider yourself as one of these disciples. How do you feel walking away from John? What are your feelings when Jesus asks you to "come and see?" Are you eager, hesitant, embarrassed about following him? Imagine spending a whole day listening, laughing, talking and enjoying Jesus' company with a fellow seeker. (Don't forget, Jesus' invitation to "come and see" is always open to you too. Use a bible that has his words highlighted, then pick just one discourse or paragraph. Talk to him.)

