

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 2020.



Sunday, December 20: *King David said to Nathan, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!" (2 Sm 7:1-5, 8-12, 14-16) "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son...and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father." Mary said, "How can this be...?" (Lk 1:26-38)*

Things have quieted down for King David. There are no enemies to fight right now. He's lounging around in his palace, confident in his relationship with God when suddenly it dawns on him: "The Ark of the Covenant is outside -- IN A TENT! What's wrong with this picture?!"

Mary is going about her daily morning routine when suddenly an angel appears with the most unlikely and truly frightening message. Mary wonders aloud, "How can this be?" Perhaps she too, in her own way, asks: "What wrong with this picture?! Why me? Who am I to be called by God?"

We ask: "How can it be that the Almighty wants to dwell among us wherever we go, no matter what battle we are fighting?" "How can it be that the all-powerful God of our ancestors chose to be born to a humble young woman in the simplest of settings?" Might it be that both David and Mary had impressions and expectations of God that God wanted to dispel? Might it be that God wanted—and wants—humanity to understand that the Divine resides right here and within us? How might our lives, how might our world be different if we could understand and accept this truth?"

Today's Provision—Be a Place Where God Resides: The Incarnation is the most compelling evidence we have about God and how God wants to be with humanity and creation. Albert Nolan, OP, the author of a book I've quoted often through the years, *Jesus Before Christianity*, reminds us, "We cannot deduce anything about Jesus from what we think we know about God; we must now deduce everything about God from what we do know about Jesus... To say now suddenly, that Jesus is divine does not change our understanding of Jesus; it changes our understanding of divinity." What expectations and impressions do you have of God that might be keeping you from being a place where God resides? Is there some refurbishing to be done that might help you create a comfortable space for God to dwell?

Monday, December 21: *"Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Lk 1:39-45)*

Blessed indeed is Mary for believing what was spoken. And blessed is she, as well, who chose to listen, to be present, to pay attention, to be open. And blessed are we too, who are open and listen to, who believe the Good News even in the midst of confusion and uncertainty. Blessed are we when we can be bearers of hope and light to those in need.

Today's Provision—Listen and Believe: The words of the treasured carol -- "Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy: Do you hear what I hear?" Imagine Mary asking that of you, of her turning to you as the angel speaks: "Do you hear what I hear? Will you too stand with me and believe? Will you let the Spirit come upon you so that you too may bear Christ in the world?"

Tuesday, December 22: *"I prayed for this child, and the LORD granted my request. Now I, in turn, give him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he shall be dedicated to the LORD." (1 Sm 1:24-28)*

Hannah prays that God will take away her shame over the fact she is childless. God answers her prayer and she commits to give this child back to God to serve in the temple. I look back on prayers I have uttered in my life – prayers for specific things like the health or peace of a loved one or a good result on some test or interview. I think of the prayers for guidance I pray each week when I sit down to write these reflections! What do I do to thank God for the answers to my prayers? Hannah makes a really big sacrifice by dedicating this precious child to God's service. What sacrifices have I or am I willing to make in order to properly thank God for all that has been given to me?

Today's Provision—Thank God by your Witness: We hear in Psalm 116, "How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up, and I will call upon the name of the Lord."

God doesn't ever say, "You owe me!" The psalmist tells us today that just our willingness to witness to God's primacy in our lives, to attest to all the good God has done for us – that will be enough! But I've mentioned before that I think God really likes specific thank you notes! Not just a general "thanks for the money, or the lovely gift," but thanks for: "giving me the grace to be aware of that person in need and for the courage to help them;" "for the time I get to spend with my grandchildren when so many are separated." Thanks for: "helping me to get all these presents wrapped and in the mail. Please bless each person who helps deliver these gifts." "Thanks for guiding and inspiring me today."

Wednesday, December 23: *"Lift up your heads and see; your redemption is near at hand."* (Lk 21:28, refrain for Ps 25)

When I read this, the image of people looking forward to the COVID vaccine comes to mind. People eager to be "redeemed" from having to stay inside, away from family, and from going about their normal routine. I wonder though, what have we learned from this experience, and how long will that knowledge and wisdom last? Will we continue the age-old human tendency of quickly forgetting the lessons of the past? Or will we finally understand what redemption really means? It doesn't mean we go back to our old ways, our normal routine—not at all! Redemption means becoming a new creation. It means moving forward in hope with a new sense of our unitedness as a species and with all of creation. It means we accept that we are not in control, that human ways and principalities will rise and fall, just as they always have. Only God and God's redemption remain.

Today's Provision—Make a List of What You've Learned; Pray: Experts warn us not to pin our hopes on the vaccine as a panacea. We will still need to mask up, still need to be cautious. But gosh, I hope I remember at least some of the lessons from this time about not taking things for granted! Why don't you consider writing down what you've learned? Include family members or friends in the activity if you can. Compile a list of things you've learned about yourself, about others, about God. For some, this will no doubt be a painful exercise. Pray for comfort and light as you look for graces hidden in the sorrows and loss. Try keep perspective -- a God's-eye-view—and, if you can, a sense of humor as well. Pray for help to incorporate these lessons into your life as you move forward in hope.

Thursday, December 24: *"For you have said, "My kindness is established forever."* (Ps 89)

The Hebrew translation is "forever will kindness stand strong," with "stand strong" using the Hebrew root, נבנה "banah," meaning to be built up. Yes, God's kindness is established forever, but the psalmist calls on us to continue the work of building it up. God's kindness is forever, but it is revealed today in how we treat each other.

Today's Provision—Be Kind: Unfortunately, we don't often get to see or hear about the random of kindness that take place every second of every day all around the world. I'm convinced God sees each one of them and that's why God still has hope for us! Let's commit on this Christmas Eve to be kind, not just to those we love or who love us; not just to the poor and lonely we may encounter this season. Let's commit to be kind in all we say and do, even when we are talking with (or about!) those with whom we disagree. Let's be especially kind to those who serve us, who care for us, and even to those who might be unkind to us. Kindness and truth...justice and peace: these things are not mutually exclusive. Let us be the ones to build and reveal God's unending kindness to the world!

Friday, December 25: Christmas Day: Depending on the lectionary you use, there are at least 12 and up to 16 different readings for Christmas Day. You'd expect a lot of coverage for such a big event! There are lots of people in these readings as well... and not just Mary and Joseph or the cast of thousands from Matthew 1:1-25. These are mostly unnamed people who play various roles. There's the messenger whose "lovely, beautiful feet" run over the mountains in Isaiah 52, hastening to proclaim the glad tidings; the sentinels in that same reading who shout for joy to alert all the people of the coming of the messenger. "A man named John" is mentioned in John's Gospel, "not the light" himself, but the one who would testify to the light and prepare the way; and we hear too about people who accept that light and those who do not. Then there are the shepherds hastening to the stable. Oh, and Paul shows up as he always does to remind us how the Incarnation fits into the whole story of the Jews! But most are nameless, faceless people who play small, but important roles in sharing the Good News.

Today's Provision—Share the Good News! We're not talking about the Christmas pageant here. You don't get to be the innkeeper's wife or one of the Magi. Are you willing to take some risks, to stumble and stub your toe on rocky obstacles among the hills and valleys of life in order to bring glad tidings? Are you willing to be a sentinel, to announce the coming of good news, but also to serve as a lookout, to warn others of threats and storms approaching? We know we are not the light, but we can be lantern bearers to help others prepare -- those who accept the light and those who are not so sure. We can be the simple shepherds who overcome our fear and rush to seek out Emmanuel in the most unlikely of places. And yes, we need the Pauls of the world to help us understand the bigger picture and to light a fire in us with their commitment and zeal! What role will you play this Christmas Day and into the new year?

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

Today is St. Stephen's Day in several Christian traditions. He is considered the first martyr for Christ. Couldn't we have a reading that's a bit more cheery? The angels and shepherds have hardly exited the stage before we hear about 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.