

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the First Week of Advent 2021.



Each week of Advent has a theme: Week one -- God's people wait in hope and faith. Week two we focus on words of peace from the Old Testament prophets. Week three is about love and the words of John, the Baptist. Week four we celebrate joy with Mary, Mother of God. But the overriding theme of Advent is waiting and preparing in hope, a grace so essential, so necessary for the whole world right now. Where do you find hope?

Sunday, November 28: *"Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God; for you I wait all the day."* (Ps 25)

How patient are you? There have been lots of studies about the precipitous decline in this virtue and how quickly we lose patience. Waiting all the day? It drives us nuts to even wait in line! The computer taking a few extra seconds to boot up -- "What's wrong with this thing?" Supply chain problems? Horror upon horrors that our over-indulged children might not get the latest fad gift on time!

I like the Hebrew translation of this phrase: *"In you do I hope every day."* Hope is an attitude for living, waiting patiently -- and not for specific things -- and understanding it is not all about us; that God's timeframe is not our timeframe: *"...patience is the gift of understanding that important things need time, that change is organic, that there are limits and we have to work within them while keeping our eyes on the horizon, as Jesus did....God acts in the simplicity of open hearts, in the patience of those who pause until they can see clearly."* (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, pp.43; 61)

Today's Provision—Press the pause button! For those able to gather with family and friends again this year, we are so eager to make up for lost time. We may wish Advent would just speed past so that nothing has the chance to get in the way of our joyous reunions. It's wonderful to be excited, but let's not overlook the need we have to practice waiting in hope. Now, more than ever, let's try to renew our commitment to faith and true hope, not just for the immediate future, but for the long haul. If you find yourself overly anxious or harried during these next few weeks, imagine pressing the pause button on your life. Take some deep breaths. Think and see clearly. Say a prayer to reaffirm your hope in God's providence and presence.

Monday, November 29: *"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again."* (Is 2:1-5)

What are the swords and spears we use today? AK47s? Pipe bombs? Oh yes, some still carry spears as we saw on January 6 at the US Capitol! Many of our weapons are not physical objects but attitudes and societal conditions: Poverty. Racism. Character assassination. Lies. Drugs. Apathy. Beating these weapons into useful, productive things takes strength and fortitude, courage and creativity. As the people of Israel prayed in hope for God's rescue, we too pray for the days to come when all people shall stream towards the house of the Lord. But what can you do to make this real today?

Today's Provision—Be aware of the "weapons" you use: This may be uncomfortable, but pay attention to see if you use things like shame or rigidity to hurt someone else, to belittle them. Do you criticize or judge without listening (guilty as charged) or make snap judgments about someone based on their clothes, their race, their economic condition, political party, or religion? How will you use your heightened awareness to change your "weapon" into a source of growth, hope, and love?

Tuesday, November 30: *"Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life. The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul."* (Jn 6:63, Ps 19)

Do you read Scripture? I mean really read it, word for word, like you've never heard it before, using your intellect and imagination, listening for what a particular passage is saying to you? Sometimes, I read Scripture with a chip on my shoulder, particularly when I read some of the Advent passages from Isaiah. I find myself asking, as in Psalm 13, "How long, Lord?" I don't allow the words to refresh me. I don't let them give me life or hope.

Today's Provision—Find hope in God's word: Take time to read and listen to a few psalms of hope: 3:3-6; 16:7-8; Ps 46, 91, 107, and 121. Write a psalm for yourself, your own situation and feelings. Use your own words and don't worry about poetic images and rhythm. Humbly cry out to God. Let the Spirit guide you to refreshment.

Wednesday, December 1: *Great crowds came to Jesus with them the lame, the blind, the deformed... They placed them at his feet, and he cured them. The crowds were amazed...and they glorified the God of Israel. (Mt 15:29-37)*

When I read passages like this, I wonder: Were some people in the crowd that day the same people in the crowd outside Pilate's balcony when Jesus was condemned to death? How could you, after experiencing your loved ones being cured, not have unshakeable faith? I remember that most of his closest disciples, while not condemning him, ran away, afraid for their own lives. And again, I wonder: With all the blessings I have in my life, the miracles I witness every day, would I too lack faith and just go along with the leaders and the crowd? Would I run away as well?

Today's Provision—Strengthen your faith: "How," you ask? "How do I strengthen my faith when my hope is waning?" Paul gives us the best advice: "Pray always." (1 Thes 5:16) "Ok, how do I do that? I can't stay on my knees all day!" We pray always by living in active awareness of God's presence. The only way we can, as today's Psalm says, "live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life" is to realize the house of the Lord is everywhere, in everyone and in all things. Remember the suggestion from Sunday: press the pause button. Slow down and look around. God is present. God will guide you on the right paths and give you courage.

Thursday, December 2: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father." (Mt 7:21, 24-27)*

"Well, how do I know I am doing God's will?" As a spiritual director, I get this question all the time. People with good hearts, good intentions just want a definitive answer. Gosh, I always ask for the same thing: "Lord, if you would just appear with a sign that read: 'Elaine, go do ...,' I'd do it!" Oh really? Some are called to make great physical sacrifices for God, but for most of us, the sacrifice comes down to our egos. And that can be very hard indeed!

Today's Provision—Seek peace: Notice, this doesn't say comfort or happiness, or even joy. Peace. We can know we are doing God's will when we feel a deep, abiding peace in our souls. We enter the Kingdom of heaven every time we put ourselves aside, not because we are "supposed to" or as martyrs, but out of true selfless love, getting our egos out of the way. Go back to yesterday's reflection. Strengthen your faith by praying always. Pray always by seeing God in all things. By seeing God, make a conscious decision to love in all circumstances. Rest assured. You are doing God's will.

Friday, December 3: *"I believe I shall see the bounty of the LORD in the land of the living." "If I but trust, (I will) see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." (Ps 27:4, 13-14; Hebrew translation)*

Let's talk about the difference between trust and belief. I assume people reading this would claim to believe in Jesus. The real question is "Do I trust Jesus?" I may be a follower, but am I willing to walk side-by-side with him? That level of intimacy requires trust and a willingness to be vulnerable. When I follow, I can choose to take detours and off-ramps and join the crowd later when things are more to my liking. To walk alongside Jesus requires me to trust him.

Today's Provision—Consider what it means to trust Jesus: Pray with this concept. The world would be a much better place if more people would follow the teachings of love and compassion that Jesus demonstrated by his life. There's nothing wrong or even lacking in following Jesus, as long as we are not tempted by the detours life offers us. And two detours quite prevalent today are negativity and lack of hope. This is where trust becomes that much more important. What would it take for you to trust Jesus, to walk side-by-side with him, even through his passion...even through your own?

Saturday, December 4: *At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd...."Ask the master to send out laborers for his harvest." (Mt 9: 35-10: 8)*

I see God looking upon the Israelites in exile, hearing their cries. I imagine Jesus looking out over the refugee camps and immigrant detention facilities all over the world today, hearing their cries as well. Those living in exile today may be safer than they would be at home, but nonetheless, they are troubled, abandoned, lost. Regardless of how we feel politically about this issue, let's not let that get in the way of our being laborers in God's fields, bringing hope to those for whom hope is scarce.

Today's Provision—Bring hope to someone who is lost: Do something. Pray fervently for the peace and safety of all displaced persons. If it is within your means, make a monetary contribution to help feed children in camps and detention centers. Involve young people making cards or sending gifts to those who will have no celebrations this season. Check out local outreach centers for refugees and immigrants. Consider volunteering your time and sharing compassion. Perhaps someone within your own family or community has lost their way. Help Jesus be the Good Shepherd by being there for others in need.