

# 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, 2024.



Darkness. Many of the articles and essays I've read recently use this word to describe the present state of the world. At first, I considered "Embracing the Darkness" as our Advent theme again this year. Then, I picked up the book, *Starlight\**, by theologian and storyteller, John Shea, to read for Advent. Instead, I read it in two days! He provides a nuanced view of darkness: it is neither, as some propose, the perpetual state of sin and evil in the world, nor is it solely the mystics' view of "the positive preparation for the advent of light." Shea suggests it can also be what we need to see "starlight." "The truth," he says, "is we can see what we need to see by starlight" (p.12). So, as the Spirit allows, this will be the basis for our reflections. "Embracing Starlight:" the darkness that allows for the pinpoints of light along the way that, in turn, lead us to the shining Christmas Star. Have a blessed Advent! *Elaine* (\*1996, Crossroad Publishing).

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**Sunday, December 1:** *"Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my savior, and for you I wait all the day"* (Ps 25). *"Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise like a trap (Lk 21:25-28, 34-36).*

What are you waiting for? It amuses me to imagine someone waiting for God "all the day," when in reality, it's the other way around! God waiting for us to rouse from our stupor (caused, perhaps by the carousing and anxieties Jesus talks about in Luke's Gospel?! 😊) Usually, it's not a whole day that we wait: we set aside a half-hour and expect God to show up and guide and teach us, while God's been the one waiting around "all the day" for us to show up!

**Provision: Look for God's light in the little things.** An acquaintance of mine, whose faith was very simple, related a story to me. She was walking on a city sidewalk in early spring when she spied "a flower"—most likely a weed—growing between the cracks in the pavement. Her response (aloud, mind you): "You go, God!" When anxieties and distractions get the better of me, I stop and look around for the little signs of God's light. And, when I find one—which BTW, is not hard at all—I too say aloud, "You go, God!" If you are feeling tired, drowsy from the anxieties of life, don't wait. Go out and look for the little stars of God's light right in your own neighborhood!

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**Monday, December 2:** *"I rejoiced because they said, 'We will go up to the house of the LORD'"* (Ps 122).

This psalm is the prayer of a pilgrim. A pilgrimage to the Holy Lands or on the Camino in Spain is on my bucket list, and I'm not getting any younger, so I better start planning soon. Sadly, a trip to the Holy Lands these days is fraught with risk. It was full of risks in ancient times as well. Pilgrims confronted wild animals, harsh weather, and rugged terrain—not quaint hostels or local eateries and vendors that offer rest and refreshment. And, at night, as everyone did at that time, they plotted their next steps based on the stars.

**Provision: Pray for enough light to guide your next steps.** Many people feel off-balance, unsure of what the future holds. For some, the threat of government job loss or deportation is very real. Others are hesitant to plan too far in advance. As we talked about last week, pray each day for the light you need to do the next loving thing. As pilgrims, we place our trust and hope in God to guide and protect us as we journey through some rough terrain and harsh realities.

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**Tuesday, December 3:** *A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse: from his roots a bud shall blossom (Is 11:1-10).* Growth begins in darkness. *"In the beginning, the earth was a wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss"* (Gn 1:1-2). A child is nurtured in the darkness of a womb, a seed digs its roots deep into the dark, rich soil. The mystics tell us to do our best to be still and allow for times of spiritual darkness, remembering that roots grow deeper when its dry. The Jewish people of old, through their trials and tribulations, were promised a shoot from Jesse that will grow and blossom. That promise is fulfilled and alive, blossoming for us this very day.

**Provision: Allow for darkness so that you can see the Light.** It's important to remember psychological darkness, depression, or deep spiritual angst requires help. The Lord does not want us to suffer in darkness alone, so seek out wise pastoral companionship—someone to sit in the dark with you—or professional counseling. But if your darkness is not the absence of hope, but confusion or disillusionment, wondering where God is in the mess, don't be afraid to embrace the dark in prayerful silence. Pour out your heart to God and ask for God to make you aware of the Light that may be hidden today but is always present. *"Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the Spirit who know that without darkness, nothing comes to birth, as without light, nothing flowers"* (May Sarton).

**Wednesday, December 4:** *"On this mountain God will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, The web that is woven over all nations"* (Is 25:6-10).

This image portrayed in Isaiah of a veil and a web that ensnares people disturbs me more than the image of darkness. I guess it's the idea of being trapped, trying to free myself from the web, surrounded by others trying to do the same, all the while being able to see just enough through the veil to know there is light and restful waters on the other side. I worry: Will my need for control make me despair? Will I put aside my own anxiety to help others escape the web?

**Provision: Look for the light through the veil.** This image has relevance in our current situation. Whether we are disturbed due to political or world events, beginning to contemplate our own mortality, or worried about the future, it can feel like we are trapped and not in control. For me, the key is to recognize the light does indeed exist beyond that veil but is within our reach. If we allow God to free us, we can live in that light right now, here in the land of the living. We just need to stop railing against reality. One good way is to turn to others in their struggles. Help them to surrender to the knowledge that God's got this.

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**Thursday, December 5:** *"It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes"* (Ps 118).

Oh, those princes of the world with their glittering gold and neon lights! Their Baroque castles and cathedrals! Their huge mansions and bank accounts! It is easy for us to be blinded by the lights of the world, and unfortunately, that is just what "the princes and princesses" want to happen. It gives them control over us. I would debate the psalmist today: it is not just *better* to take refuge in the Lord—it is *essential!*

**Provision: Take refuge in the true Light.** Maybe you plan to take the kids or grandkids out to see the lights in the neighborhood. I loved doing that when my kids were young, to see the twinkling lights reflected in their wide eyes. After that excursion, see if you can visit a local church that has a simple outdoor crèche display. If the kids are old enough, talk to them to see what they were able to see beyond the bright, flashing lights on the houses and trees, and what they see now in the dimly lit stable. Remind them that the lights of Christmas will be taken down and put away soon, but the true Light of Christmas will remain forever. Encourage them (and yourself) to take refuge in this Light.

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**Friday, December 6:** *"Out of gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see"* (Is 29:17-24). *The blind men approached, and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they said to him. He touched their eyes and said, "Let it be done for you according to your faith." And their eyes were opened* (Mt 9:27-31).

Faith opened the eyes of the blind men. They emerged out of the gloom and darkness. If we limit our interpretation of these stories to being only the actual curing of the physical malady of blindness, we miss the deeper meaning. We fail to recognize the spiritual healing that occurs when Jesus touches us.

**Provision: Let faith open your eyes.** We are all blind in some way. When I am immersed in the gloom, I tend to make snap judgements. I get cynical. I fail to look closely at the stories behind the stories. I get so wrapped up in my own world, I can be blind to the needs of those around me. These are all sure signs that I need to go to Jesus, tell him I believe he can heal me, and allow him to touch me. In what ways are you blind? Ask Jesus to heal you.

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**Saturday, December 7:** *"God tells the number of the stars and calls each by name"* (Ps 147).

Do you remember the TV ads several years ago for the International Star Registry? It's a business that enables you to purchase, for \$33, the right to name a specific star in honor of someone. I guess they don't realize God named them all eons ago!

I live on the East Coast of the US, and you'd be hard pressed to find any stretch along the I-95 corridor that allows for good star gazing. But I've visited places far enough away from city lights, and I can only imagine the awesome majesty of the night skies in the ancient world. For us in the modern world, we need to be reminded the stars are there, even when we can't see them.

**Today's Provision: Trust the light is there.** A few weeks ago, I shared the Native American saying about those who have gone before us: *"Perhaps they are not stars in the sky, but rather openings where our loved ones shine down to let us know they are happy."* These pinpoints of light, be they stars or holy souls, are with us always, guiding our way, even though it is dark. Trust the light is there.