

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 2017.



This Advent we are on the lookout for hope, both in Scripture and in our daily lives. Consider keeping a "Journal of Hope" to jot down readings, events, and people that are a source of hope for you.

Sunday, December 3: *"Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, with the mountains quaking before you, while you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for."* (Is 63:16-19, 64: 2-7)

"Come on, God, let's see some awesome deeds, deeds that we couldn't begin to hope for, deeds that even our ancestors did not witness! Shake us up! Shock us! Open up the gates of heaven and come on down!"

"Okay," says God, "I'll do it. Get ready..."

"Umm... uh... where are the quaking mountains, the thunder and lightning—you know, all that stuff that's supposed to scare us and the rest of the world into being good. All I see is this poor, bedraggled mother and father with a newborn infant in a ragged hut. This is your idea of an awesome deed!?"

"Silence in the presence of the Lord! for he stirs forth from this, his holy dwelling." (Zec 2:17)

Today's Provision—Find Hope in The Incarnation. It's an oh-so human tendency to want to witness God in the big, dramatic things, but anyone who has experienced the birth of a child can attest to the wonder and awe of new life. According to UNICEF, it is an event that happens an estimated 353,000 times a day across the world. *"Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man."* (Rabindranath Tagore). God came to earth as a human child, not because of discouragement, but as a testament to the depth and breadth of God's love for us. This Advent, keep a watch for the incarnational hope that arises in the everyday blessings and sorrows of life, from our shared humanity with the Christ Child.

Monday, December 4: *"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)

It's our greatest hope: Peace. No more fighting and violence. Turning the weapons of war into things that can benefit all humankind. It seems we need the faith of Abraham who, as Paul tells us, "was hoping against hope" for God's promises to be fulfilled. (Rom 4:18) Indeed, at times, it may seem even that is not enough. Very few of us are in a position to make a tangible difference in bringing about global peace (although our prayers, united throughout the world, are essential), but we can make a difference in our own lives and those around us by providing sustainable hope for the hopeless and surrendering our own swords by offering forgiveness and love.

Today's Provision—Surrender Your Sword: What is your sword? You know, that thing you hold so dear and reach for any time you are feeling vulnerable or threatened? Perhaps it's your intellect...or your isolation...or your prejudices and judgments...fill in the blank. We all have them and some have more than one, and a few impenetrable shields as well. What keeps you from opening up to forgive those who've wronged you? What defenses have you erected to shield yourself from the blight of hopelessness in your town, in your household, or even in your own heart? Sometimes, surrendering your sword means asking for help, and often, that's the sword we clutch most tightly. Spend time with this image and see if you can name those things that keep you from reaching out to and for help.

Tuesday, December 5: *Jesus rejoiced and said, "I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike."* (Lk 10:21-24)

Another expression for what Jesus is talking about here: "Theology of the People." You might hear this phrase used about Pope Francis' view of theology and his papacy. And it's upsetting some people. There are those who want to be told what to do by the learned, rather than acknowledging and learning from God's presence in the everyday messiness of their own lives. *"Francis preaches mercy, compassion, and forgiveness rather than stern admonishments and condemnations."* (from *Go Into the Streets*, Rausch and Gaillardetz) If memory serves me, Jesus' sternest words were always for those who put laws before love, boundaries before brokenness. Something to consider, don't you think?

Today's Provision—Be Childlike: Note, Jesus doesn't say "childish." It's childish to rely on someone else to tell us what to do, to have someone else to blame: "They told me to do this." When Jesus uses the word childlike in this passage, he is referring to those who are not book-smart, who don't have high opinions of themselves or preconceived notions; those not afraid to listen and learn. What new things can you learn about your faith today?

Wednesday, December 6: *"Jesus said, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," and a few fish." He took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves... They all ate and were satisfied. (Mt 15:29-37)*

Jesus has just finished curing the sick, giving sight to the blind, making the deformed whole. You'd think, when he asks about feeding the crowds, the disciples just might consider, "Well, you know, he can probably do that, too." I reflect on everything Jesus has done for me. All the blessings and miracles I have witnessed. Then he asks me, "How many loaves do you have? What can you give of yourself to feed others?" I scoff, "Oh, not much. What difference can I make?" I fail to recognize it is not me but Christ who takes my meager offering and turns it into food for others.

Today's Provision—Offer What You Have: It took me awhile to understand that by discounting the gifts God has given me, I was in fact, failing to acknowledge God's ability to turn my imperfect offerings into something much greater. Maybe you still struggle with this, and like Jeremiah, find excuses to ignore God's call: "I am too young...too old...too uneducated...too frightened...too busy." Pray today to listen for God's call and ask God to multiply your gifts.

Thursday, December 7: *"Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came...But it did not collapse. (Mt 7:21-24-27)*

This image is jarring in light of the devastation we have seen all over the world due to rains, floods, fires, earthquakes etc. Homes built on solid ground destroyed, the huts of the poor gone in an instant. Of course, Jesus is using this as a metaphor for all the trials we face as human beings: acts of nature, disease, addiction, abuse, loss. For us to weather the storms of life, we need faith, and that faith takes work on our part, just like building a house on rock takes more work than building one on sand. But say you've put off laying a strong foundation. Or maybe you have no foundation at all. This doesn't mean all is lost. Turn to Jesus and ask for help to lay the first stone. Turn to him and say, "Son of David, have mercy on me." (Mk 10:47)

Today's Provision—Start Building Right Where You Are: A vacant, overgrown lot with no shelter at all? Some cracks in a weakening foundation? A strong building that could use a little updating or maintenance? No problem. God, the master builder, comes to us where we are, but we have to be open to invite him in despite the disarray, dust, and dirt. If the project seems too intimidating, enlist the help of a minister or spiritual director to help draw up some plans. *"It is morning. Afternoon. Evening. Begin."* (Thomas Merton)

Friday, December 8: *But (Mary) was greatly troubled at what was said (by the angel) and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. (Lk 1:26-38)*

We hear the Annunciation story at least six times during the course of any given lectionary year. Some of you could probably recite it verbatim. The risk of such repetition is that, if we are not careful, we can lose the real drama and impact of the message. When we hear Mary "pondered," we might imagine her, index finger tapping her lips, thinking carefully, weighing the options. The Greek meaning of the word is thorough and utter confusion. The Greek for "greatly troubled" implies a physically anxious response. We may want to chalk up Mary's willingness to answer God's call to her gift of grace or her young age, but if we do, we discount the faith and courage it took for her to say yes. She is the epitome of that "childlike" acceptance we mentioned earlier this week—"I don't know, I don't understand, I'm scared. But I am willing to trust and have hope in the will and the word of God."

Today's Provision—Have Faith and Hope: Let us not overlook the fact that Mary expresses doubts. She does indeed ponder this invitation in the true Greek sense of the word: "This makes no sense. I am totally confused." Perhaps you're hearing God's voice beckoning you to do something outside your comfort zone. You can ignore it, I guess. Mary could have rolled over and gone back to sleep. But she opened herself up in faith and hope. See if you can do the same. Be willing to dialogue with God. Express your doubts. And then listen, "for nothing will be impossible for God."

Saturday, December 9: *"Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." (Mt 9:35-10:1, 5-8)*

Grab a pen and paper and write down all the things you have received as gift in your life this year. And don't just list the obvious blessings, like your body, your breath, your brain, your faith, and all the things those gifts have brought you. List also the trials that have provided great lessons and growth. This is not to discount the hard work you've done to bring your gifts to fruition; it's a prayer exercise that I hope can open your eyes to see God at work in you, and that, in reality, all is gift. Now, flip the page over and list the gifts you've given others without cost. I'm not talking here about the charitable deductions you take on your taxes. When have you given of your time, of your true self, without any expectation of return? Do you see that these too are gifts?

Today's Provision—Thank God!! This is a form of the Examen, a great prayer to incorporate into your life. If you can do it each evening, imagine how you will grow in gratefulness and joy, for remember: *"The root of joy is gratefulness... We hold the key to lasting happiness in our own hands. For it is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful."* (Br. David Steindl-Rast from *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*)