

# Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,  
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.  
For the Second Week of Advent 2018. "Everyday Holiness"



**Sunday, December 9:** *"Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever..."* (Bar 5:1-9);

The focus for the second week of Advent is preparation. We hear John the Baptist quote Isaiah in Luke's Gospel: *"Prepare the way of the Lord!"* Many of the readings this week are vivid in their imagery of dry, barren places springing to life, streams bursting forth in the desert, all the world being refreshed and renewed by the healing waters of the Spirit. But we all know it can be hard to prepare for joy when our hearts and minds are dry or when we are clothed in sadness. It often seems easier to hide behind our robe of mourning, or to allow what's left in us to wither and blow away. Preparation takes work and when we are weary, we might find trying to keep up appearances during the holidays particularly draining.

**Today's Provision—"Blessed and Holy are They who Mourn:** They will be comforted." If you are mourning the loss of a loved one or are struggling to keep your chin up, try this little prayer exercise: Imagine yourself physically taking off the sadness that envelopes you. Just put it aside for a while. Then imagine being welcomed into the warm embrace of whatever image of God brings you the most peace. Perhaps you rest your head on God's chest; or maybe Jesus hugs you as a dear friend would; or you allow the Spirit to wrap you in her wings and float away. Maybe you find God in visions of nature or in beautiful, soothing music. Stay with those consoling images for a while. I can't say your robe of mourning and misery will be gone when you return from prayer but it will surely be made lighter by the comfort of Divine love. Use this prayer exercise any time sorrow threatens your peace of mind and heart.

**Monday, December 10:** *"I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home." He stood up immediately before them, picked up what he had been lying on, and went home, glorifying God.* (Lk 5:17-26)

I wonder if the paralytic in this story knows in advance that his buddies are going to take him to Jesus. Does he ask to be taken, or do they just whisk him away and up and through the roof without his consent? Can you imagine what is going through his mind? Here he is in the middle of everything, with Jesus, the elders, and all the people around him. As an invalid, being the focus of attention is likely not something he has experienced. And what about when Jesus says to him, "Your sins are forgiven, rise, and go home." What if the man had said, "No, I can't. My sins are too grave;" or, "No, I am not able to walk;" or, "No, I would rather remain paralyzed—I don't want to learn to walk again." It might not seem obvious, but heeding Jesus' instruction to get up and walk takes great courage and faith.

**Today's Provision—Accepting Grace in Holiness:** How often have I had my sins forgiven, only to say, "No, I am not worthy of such forgiveness." "No, I can't get better, I am unable to take steps towards change." "No, I'd rather just stay stuck where I am." Abundant graces—of forgiveness, of courage, of faith, of healing—are always available to us. We need only to accept them with humility in order to rise up. If you are struggling to accept grace, pray for your heart to be opened to Jesus' touch and words of redemption. *"A highway will be there, called the holy way...It is for those with a journey to make, and on it the redeemed will walk."* (Is 35:8-9)

**Tuesday, December 11:** *"Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God." (Is 40:1-11) "It is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost."* (Mt 18:12-14)

Jesus' words in Matthew today are very consoling, words of hope that salvation is there for all of us. Jesus tells us it is not God's will that any one of his children be lost. Think about that. Not one. And, I am confident that God's will WILL be done. We may not see it now, but remember that nothing will be impossible for God. God will bring home on his shoulders each and every one of us that goes astray. Wow!

Jesus asks, "What is your opinion?" Do you believe 'God's will' will indeed be done? Do you believe in God's unending, unfailing mercy, seeking us out any time we leave the fold? Do you trust God with your life?

**Today's Provision— Accepting Grace in Holiness (Round 2):** How does this reflection make you feel? A God of complete and total mercy can be a bit unnerving. While we may not realize it, we sort of like to feel that we have some level of control in all this, a say in the matter. (And we do have a role, just not the way we might think!) If I want to be a lost sheep and stay lost, God allows for that—it's called my freewill. God's will for me is an invitation, not a fiat. But all too often, our getting lost is not what we intend, but we are too proud, too independent to accept the grace of forgiveness and hospitality that God offers us over and over. God sees into our hearts and knows our true desires better than we can ever know them. So surrendering to God's will is more about recognizing and trusting in God's vision for us, rather than keeping on the straight and narrow path all the time. Offer prayers of gratitude and praise today for "such and so great a Redeemer" we have in Christ. Accept the grace of being found yet again.

**Wednesday, December 12:** *"Silence, all mankind, in the presence of the LORD!" (Zec 2: 14-17)*

When was the last time you were in complete silence? I think we might need to redefine silence in this age of text messages, social media, and 24/7 'news.' It's fine to be quiet, with the radio and TV turned off and the kids out playing or in school, but do we also allow ourselves a break from the constant bombardment of information that occurs as we use technology? The silence the prophet Zechariah is referring to is an all-encompassing silence, awe in the overwhelming presence of God. When was the last time you were rendered speechless and truly silent in the face of God's majesty?

**Today's provision—Holy Silence:** True, holy silence can occur in our souls regardless of the noise taking place all around us. That is precisely the goal of the spiritual life: to be a calm, non-anxious person of faith and hope amid the chaos. This is very hard to achieve though, so we need to be intentional about silence. We have to demand it for ourselves by turning off the phone and computer, the TV, and finding a place to be alone to stand in the light of the glory of God. We are at the halfway point of the Advent season. See if in these remaining 12 days you can find time to be silent each day and marvel in Emmanuel—God with us.

**Thursday, December 13:** *I am the LORD, your God, who grasps your right hand... "Fear not, O worm Jacob, O maggot Israel, I will help you, says the LORD; your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. (Is 41:13-20)*

Okay, try not to get too caught up in the worm and maggot references! Not very pleasant to think about, and I will venture a guess that if one were to practice Lectio Divina with this passage, they might get stuck on those vile images. I include them for a reason though. God, the Lord, your redeemer, the Holy One of Israel is always available to lead us, to help us even when we are in the depths of sin or sorrow. This message is so important. God is not just there for us when we are cruising along, keeping his statutes, and being true to our worship. God is by our side when we are at our lowest point, surrounded by the muck and mire of life.

**Today's Provision—Accepting Grace in Holiness (Round 3):** (I don't know, but this provision might be popping up a lot these next two weeks!) There's a second message in this passage as well: God is there to help us, to grasp us by the hand and lead us to solid ground. No, God won't do it for us. Why? It's that freewill thing again, and it's the gift God has given us so that our dependence on him can be based, not on slavery but on mutual love. We need to be ready and willing to accept the help God offers. Accepting help should never be looked at as a sign of weakness, but as our true humility, unafraid and maybe even unashamed of our tendency to fall into worm and maggot territory every once in a while! (Oh, and don't forget...it is often in the muck and mire that the greatest growth occurs.☺)

**Friday, December 14:** *"Blessed the one who delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on his law day and night. He is like a tree planted near running water that yields its fruit in due season." (Ps 1)*

Well, I sure have not been practicing what I preach! I am too busy with the many tasks of the season. While I am still bearing some fruit, I've allowed the water feeding my roots to grow stagnant. My spiritual reading and reflection has been more about seeing what I could get out of the message, rather than what the message could get out of me. I know I'm not alone. It happens to all of us, hearing the same stories and Scripture readings year after year. The image of running water is an important one. We need to be open to freshness: new ideas, new concepts, new ways of looking at old stories and beliefs. Allow the living waters to refresh and revitalize your faith and practice in light of today's world and its needs.

**Today's provision—Growing in Holiness:** Is your faith stagnant? Most of us don't like change. We would rather stick with the same old thing we know instead of embracing change and its potential for growth. I encourage you to use this season, not to just reminisce about Christmas' past, but to look forward in hope. Allow the holy waters that feed your roots to be renewed and refreshed.

**Saturday, December 15:** *"Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved." (Ps 80)*

*"But my face you cannot see for no man sees me and still lives." (Ex 33:20)* God calls Moses "his intimate friend," but when Moses pleads to see God's face, God tells Moses that he can see only God's back (a metaphorical reference to seeing God in creation). In today's psalm, Israel begs for that same gift: *"Let us see your face,"*—'once we see you, we won't withdraw from you anymore. We promise.' So God eventually relents, sees our bid, and raises the stakes: *"Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison? Amen, I say to you whatever you did for the least brothers of mine, you did for me." (Mt 25:38-40)*

**Today's Provision—Seeing the Holy in Everyone and Everything.** Do you desire to see God? Some people might balk at this phrase since seeing God is still a metaphor for dying. So even though it's a nice platitude, we really don't mean it. Because if we did, we would understand that we see God's image in the face of everyone and everything we encounter in creation. The Lord does not need to make us turn to him; his face is everywhere we turn. If we are to save our lives, we must lose them by risking to meet the eyes of others--friend and stranger alike--with love and compassion in our own. Look around as you go about your day today. Challenge yourself to see how many times you can be aware of God in the people you meet and the places you go.