

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

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



Sunday, December 16: *"Brothers and sisters: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* (Phil 4:4-7)

There's not much I can add to Paul's joyous, encouraging, and poetic words. Today is Gaudete Sunday, a day to rejoice in the knowledge of the coming of our Savior. Joy is different than happiness. Happiness is fleeting, but in the emotional bank account of our lives, instances of joy have no principal risk. In today's psalm, the author says, *"God is indeed my savior. I am confident and unafraid."* Time does not diminish joy, and we can go back to our experiences of joy again and again confident and unafraid that they cannot be taken from us. Such should be our joy at the gift of the Incarnation, that peace God has given us that surpasses all understanding and fulfills our greatest desires!

Today's Provision—"Be Joyfully Confident in Holiness:" Now, that's a mouthful! What do I mean by that? By now, I hope you understand that holiness is not some pious, unattainable state, but an attitude, a way of being in the real world, modeling ourselves after Jesus as he was in the world, even when things get a little messy. Let us be assured of God's saving grace! Let us go forward unafraid, confident in our own holy intentions, even when our actions fall short. Let the joy of this holy season guard your hearts and minds in Jesus!

Monday, December 17: *The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.....* (Mt 1:1-17)

If you ever need a reason to lie down with a cold compress on your head, spend some time tracking the first half of this genealogy through the Old Testament. The spelling of names varies from book to book, and the stories don't sync chronologically. Thankfully, there are websites that explain this. Did you know that, contrary to Matthew's genealogy, Jesus' actual bloodline from David is from his mother? On Joseph's side, his claim to kingship is a title inheritance only.

But what's really interesting is reading all the stories of the crimes and misdeeds of many of Jesus' early ancestors. Jacob was a liar and a thief (abetted by his mother); Tamar posed as a prostitute to trick Judah, her father-in-law, into impregnating her; David was an adulterer and murderer; Solomon succumbed to seduction and idol worship; Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed their sons. There were clearly more kings that "did evil in the sight of the Lord" than "pleased the Lord." It just goes to show that no family is without some skeletons in the closet!

Amusing yes, but it's important we not miss the most important point. Soon we will celebrate the Incarnation: God becoming one of us, taking on our human condition, facing the struggles we face in life. Jesus knew illness, arguments, death, and sorrow. He is *"our high priest, able to sympathize with our weaknesses..."* (Heb 4:15).

Today's Provision—Holiness in Real Life: No one's life is perfect. We all have our stories, some more painful than others, but most of us carry at least some baggage. If we try to ignore it, it will just get heavier over time. If there are burdens you carry, talk to Jesus about them. Ask him to help you accept what is and lighten your load. *"...he came to share your plight, your fight, your night, and point you toward tomorrow."* (Michael Moynahan, S.J.)

Tuesday, December 18: *"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home... When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.* (Mt 1:18-25)

Have you ever had a powerful dream, one through which you believe you received a message or guidance? I have, and it can be a very disconcerting experience. I remember having to spend time discerning what I was supposed to do with the message I had received. Joseph has had a powerful dream experience. So powerful in fact that he seemingly needed no time to discern. He wakes up and takes Mary right into his home, no questions asked. Scripture says "he did as the angel commanded," but what it really should say is that Joseph awoke and chose to listen to his heart, to put aside his fears and doubts and humbly trust in God's will.

Today's Provision—Humble Holiness: True humility is one of the hallmarks of holiness. Humbleness is not about lowering oneself; it is about raising up the other. There is a difference. C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, *"True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."* Both Mary and Joseph were willing to put aside all they thought they knew about the world and how things work. And they were willing to listen. See today if you can hear God's voice by listening closely and putting aside your own assumptions and expectations. Say a special prayer to St. Joseph for the holiness and humility to do great things for God!

Wednesday, December 19: "...this boy is to be consecrated to God from the womb. It is he who will begin the deliverance of Israel from the power of the Philistines." (Jgs 13:2-7, 24-25a)

This is the story of Samson's conception and birth. Note that the angel says he will *begin* the deliverance of Israel. No word that he will be the one to finish the job--we know that person comes onto the scene about a thousand years later! God does that a lot—gets the ball rolling—even with his own Incarnation. Yes, Jesus is the one to "save his people from their sins," and yet he relies on future generations to keep his message alive and fresh and new to address the needs of the world as it evolves. Each one of us is consecrated and has a role to play in the saving work of God!

Today's provision—Holy Labor in the Kingdom. *"It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. ...We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."* (from *The Prayer of St. Oscar Romero*, written by Bishop Ken Untener)

Thursday, December 20: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." (Lk 1:26-38)

The term "imposter syndrome" has been in the news recently. Former US First Lady Michelle Obama says she suffers from doubt about her accomplishments and that she will slip up and be exposed as a fraud. I've had that sort of feeling too, especially when I was first starting out as a writer and spiritual director: "Who am I to guide people in spiritual growth?" I wonder if Mary had those kind of doubts too—"Why me? I am no princess or queen to give birth to the Messiah. I'm nothing special." Of course, we know Mary was something very special, but she also had the faith God would use her giftedness for the good of the world; hence her words, "Do unto me." God has given each of us gifts too, but we might dismiss ourselves: "Who am I to spread the word of God, to tend to needy when I am so needy myself?" We pray for Mary's depth of faith that God knows our gifts even better than we do and, if we allow him, he will use them for the good of the world. Don't be afraid. You have found favor with God.

Today's Provision—Accepting Grace in Holiness (Round 4): When you think about it, dismissing ourselves and our gifts is really denying God the wonderful work he has done in each of us. Accepting the grace of our giftedness in the true humility is really a song of praise and thanksgiving to God as the source of all our gifts and virtues. Let's model ourselves after Mary and not refuse the great work God has planned to accomplish through us.

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

And blessed are *you* when you believe that what the Lord has promised will be fulfilled. Blessed are you when you can look beyond the difficulties you face and the violence and anger that surrounds us and find joy and hope and peace in God's word. Blessed are you when you take that joy and hope and peace and share it with everyone you encounter. Blessed are you, holy are you.

Today's Provision—Sharing the Holy: Mary was willing to share the Holy with the world by bearing Christ. We are also called to bear Christ. Look for opportunities today to share the Holy within you with others.

Saturday, 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." (Hannah) left Samuel there. (Sm 1:24-28)

It's difficult to imagine what Hannah does here, but the lesson of this reading is the lesson of our lives—letting go and giving back to the Lord what the Lord has given. Letting go...of our children, our need for control, past hurts and sinfulness, and in the end, our very lives...letting go is hard. In Ignatian Spirituality, this letting go is called "holy indifference." It isn't about not caring or the attitude of "whatever." On the contrary, it's a freedom we grant ourselves and those we love. By growing in indifference and letting go, we can love more honestly, care without being needy, give without the expectation of receiving. It's the recognition all we have and all we are are gifts from God, and the only thing that really matters is God's love and grace—these alone are enough.

Today's Provision—Holy Indifference: *"The very essence of motherly love is to care for the child's growth...Here lies the basic difference to erotic love. In erotic love, two people who were separate become one. In motherly love, two people who were one become separate...It is at this stage that motherly love becomes a difficult task, that it requires unselfishness, the ability to give everything and to want nothing but the happiness of her child."* (Erich Fromm) Joy and peace can elude us precisely because of our inability to let go. Start small and release yourself (and the other if it involves another) from that irksome little slight or mistake that keeps popping up. Ask God to accept it, knowing it's going to take some time to let go completely. Each time it comes to mind, say "This belongs to you, God." The more you do this, the easier it becomes.