

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 2017.



The Third Week of Advent, we focus on joy: Joy that is only found in the hope we have in Christ. Things are sure to be busy this week. See if you can be a source of joy and hope to all you meet!

(A personal note: I write today with a heavy heart—heavy, but uplifted nonetheless—at the passing of Fr. Jim McGovern, a most pastoral shepherd who welcomed me back to church and encouraged my writing ministry. Rest in peace, Fr. Jim. I am so grateful for your presence in my life and for your gentle Spirit that blesses me still.

Sunday, December 17: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...* (Lk 1:46-54)

This of course is the first line from Mary's Canticle, the "Magnificat." While this translation is more in line with the meaning of the word "magnify" (Latin "magnificare"—to esteem greatly), I always liked one I learned as a child. I assumed that magnify meant exactly what I thought—that Mary's soul made God bigger! From a theological standpoint, this is impossible, but think about it poetically instead. Think instead about the idea that we, through our souls, minds, and bodies, can make bigger and more evident the presence of God in our world. Mary is the model for us: humble in surrender, but bold and outspoken in proclaiming—in enlarging—the awareness of God!

Today's Provision—Be a "Magnifying Mirror" for God: It's true: we can't make God any bigger. But we can reflect to others the love of God we have within, or even better, reflect back to them the love of God *they* have within. See if you can make the joy of God's presence evident to everyone you meet today.

Monday, December 18: *"The days will come when they shall no longer say, "As the LORD lives, who brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt"; but rather, "As the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of the house of Israel from all the lands to which I banished them; they shall again live on their own land."* (Jer 23:5-8)

These last verses of this passage (the promise of a new King, "a righteous shoot to David") were likely added during Israel's exile in Babylon. It was to provide hope to the people that they would no longer have to reach all the way back to their exodus from Egypt to see God's salvation; that one day, they would look back upon their return from this exile as well to recognize God's saving hand once again. It was to remind them that God was still with them, still active, still making things new, a good message for us as well as Christmas seasons come and go. This is not about commemorating an event some 2,000 years ago. We joyfully celebrate God's presence alive and active with us every single day.

Today's Provision—Celebrate the Incarnation Every Day! This is not to say that holding onto and cherishing the memory of God's saving grace is a bad thing. It is particularly important during difficult times to remember the ways God has supported us in the past. But if we are always looking back, it can keep us from seeing the grace right under our noses, especially if that grace is wrapped tightly in a package that is difficult to open! As you go about your day today, look for the signs of the Incarnation present in the people and things you experience. Celebrate!

Tuesday, December 19: *"I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place... After this time his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she went into seclusion for five months."* (Lk 1:5-25)

Can you imagine how quiet it must have been around Zechariah and Elizabeth's house? Oh, how I wish! We know Mary comes to visit Elizabeth and tend to her needs before John's birth. Given the jubilation of their initial encounter, I wonder how Zechariah dealt with the exuberance of two pregnant women in his house! (The reading tells us he was mute, not deaf. 😊) And yet, I think of his silence as a time to behold the joy emanating from these two blessed women, a time for him to reflect upon the role he is to play in raising this child whose own voice will cry out loudly in the wilderness. Perhaps he is speechless, not so much as a punishment, but in awe of God's wondrous power and majesty.

Today's Provision—Be Quiet: When my kids were young, we would occasionally play the "No Talking Game." Whoever spoke first lost the game. It worked for a few weeks. 😊

We may choose to quiet our tongues at times, but it is so very rare these days to be in silence. And while being in silence really helps, you can, with practice, learn to quiet yourself even in the midst of noise and activity. Be like Zechariah. Instead of being distracted by all the noise, reflect instead on the voice of God echoing in the voices of others. Listen for joy and be quiet as he stirs from his holy dwelling: this wild and wacky, wonderful world!

Wednesday, December 20: *"Listen, O house of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men, must you also weary my God? (Is 7:10-14)*

I picture Isaiah in this passage, trying to reason with King Ahaz, and smacking himself on the forehead, saying, "If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times, DO NOT FEAR. JUST TRUST IN THE LORD." This passage reminds me of instances when Jesus' frustration with the disciples is evident (e.g., Lk 9:41). For the prophets and for Jesus, God's presence is a constant. God is the source of their being, and like a parent who wants the best for their children, they can lose patience with others who don't have this same understanding, particularly those who have been blessed to hear God's words and guidance.

Today's Provision—Pray for Patience: When we talk about patience, it's not just about having patience with others or with ourselves. We also need, as Teilhard de Chardin reminds us, to "trust in the slow work of God." We cannot know God's plan for us, much less God's plans for others, but the key that unlocks a treasure chest of patience is trust in God and our acceptance of what is. Being patient becomes second nature when we give up unrealistic expectations and wishes about how others should think and act, and when we open our hearts to God's will. Pray today that God grants you true patience, rooted in trust and acceptance.

Thursday, December 21: *"Exult in the Lord! Sing to him a new song. ... The plan of the LORD stands forever; the design of his heart, through all generations." (Ps 33)*

I love the message of these verses. God's plan is forever, unchanging through all generations, a solid foundation on which we can always rely. And yet, as the generations pass, God looks to us to sing new songs, to find new ways of expressing his covenant, not just using the songs of the past, but finding ever new, ever fresh ways to show that God is alive, incarnated in our world.

Today's provision—"Sing a New Song unto the Lord:" As we get older, we can fall into the trap of looking back on how things "used to be." As we discussed on Monday, we allow our memories to get in the way of finding new things, new ways to experience God and have others experience God through us. Think about shaking things up a bit today. See if you can write some new lyrics. Look for the design of God's heart where you least expect to find it!

Friday, December 22: *"The bows of the mighty are broken...the well-fed hire themselves out for bread." (1 Sam 2: 4-5). "He has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud...He has cast down the mighty from their thrones.... He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." (Lk 1:51-53)*

Here I sit in my warm, comfortable home decorated for Christmas. I am clean, well fed, well-clothed. I have no needs. I like to think of myself as a good person. But when I read passages like Hannah's Song or Mary's Magnificat, I have to wonder, "Am I among the mighty, the proud, and the rich doomed to be broken and scattered? Does my privileged lot today preclude me on the day of salvation? And what of my country and Church— both rich and powerful. Will they survive the strength of God's arm?"

Today's Provision—Have Faith: I don't know answers to these sorts of essential questions. None of us do. And wanting to know is what got us in trouble in the first place. Hannah and Mary didn't know either. What they had, and what we have, is the gift of faith, trust in a God that looks at our flawed humanity with love and forgiveness. Faith is the joy of knowing intimately what cannot be known. Let's just do our best in God's name and rejoice in our faith.

Saturday, December 23: *"Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me..." (Mal 3:1-4, 23-24)*

I am keenly aware these days that I am not as aware as I should be! Sounds contradictory, but I am allowing busyness to take over. I am so harried by doing that I rarely take time to just be, and that means I am very likely to miss the messengers the Lord sends to help me. And I'm really good at putting the messengers I do notice on hold, keeping them at bay, often because their arrival interrupts my very important agenda and means I have to change something...or a lot of things; I have to approach things differently, to give up old, bad habits, to move from the illusion that I am in control to the realization that my life is controlling me. What messengers are you missing or ignoring in these busy days before Christmas?

Today's Provision—"Invitation," by Mary Oliver: *"Oh do you have time to linger for just a little while out of your busy and very important day for the goldfinches that have gathered in a field of thistles for a musical battle, to see who can sing the highest note, or the lowest, or the most expressive of mirth, or the most tender? Their strong, blunt beaks drink the air as they strive melodiously not for your sake and not for mine and not for the sake of winning but for sheer delight and gratitude – believe us, they say, it is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning in the broken world. I beg of you, do not walk by without pausing to attend to this rather ridiculous performance. It could mean something. It could mean everything. It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote: 'You must change your life.'"* (From *A Thousand Mornings*, New York: Penguin Books, 2013).