

# Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,  
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.  
For the week of the Epiphany, 2021.



**Sunday, January 3:** *"Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples... Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance. Raise your eyes and look about..."* (Is 60:1-6)

I am writing this on Christmas...very quiet around my house today. Our adult children are safely ensconced in their own apartments hundreds of miles away. We will ZOOM later this evening. No celebrations with our extended families or friends either. It would be easy to get caught up in the thick clouds that have darkened the world for millions of people this year. My heart aches as I try to comprehend the loss. And yet, as a Christian, I raise my eyes and look about to see the Light has come; it has, in fact, been here all along. I remember I am called to light the way for others, to be a bearer of the Light that shines upon me.

**Today's Provision—Be a bearer of the Light:** Being a bearer of the Light doesn't mean we are "tone deaf," proclaiming the good news to people in the throes of grief, or saying things like, "There but for the grace of God, go I" (which begs the question, "Where is the God's grace for the other?"). We remember Jesus' heart, moved with compassion for the masses of despairing poor and infirm; for the widow who had lost her only son. He cried with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb. The best way to be a source of hope and light is to be present to the other, to listen more than we talk, and be with them in their sorrow. And if appropriate, to ask as the Lord so often does, "What would you have me do for you?"

**Monday, January 4:** *"Jesus began to preach: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mt 4:12-17, 23-25)*

Each new year, I like to think about a theme or two for my writing to take us through Easter. Of course, the image of light speaks to us these days, but the one the Spirit has been leading me to over the past several weeks is "metanoia." Modern translations typically use the word "repent" to represent this concept, but as is the case in many translations, the nuance can be lost. The word repent has a transactional bent: I commit sin and then I repent my sin. Metanoia — a change of heart — indicates something much deeper. It is not about what we do or do not do, i.e., sins of commission or omission. It is about who we are, what motivates us, what is in our hearts. It speaks of transformation from fear to love, from prejudice to hospitality, from indifference to compassion.

**Today's Provision—Look at your heart:** I'm not a big proponent of New Year's resolutions. Most are destined to fail and only serve to discourage us. Each morning is a better time to consider a small, attainable resolution for the day that leads us in the right direction. When it comes to changing our hearts, we have to start by taking a hard look at what needs changing. You might say, "Nothing needs changing. I am fine with my heart just as it is!" Oh really? That answer in itself suggests you take another look! What or who do you fear? What biases or prejudices do you hold—we all have them. What have you given up caring about? Where are you apathetic? This often becomes a problem when things around us are overwhelming -- like now! Moving towards compassion is as simple as saying a heart-felt prayer or speaking to God, visualizing the thing or person you fear, or for which you have developed prejudice or indifference. Each morning during some usual routine, say, while the coffee or tea is brewing, take a deep breath and ask God to shine a light on your heart. Ask: "Lord, what needs attention in my heart today? Give me the awareness and courage to make a change today!"

**Tuesday, January 5:** *"Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. ...In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us..."* (1 Jn 4:7-10)

God's love comes first. Not as a result of our love for God or each other. Not as a reward for anything we have done or not done. Not as a means to keep us in line. Not because God *has* to love us. God is love and therefore cannot do anything but love. Do you really believe this? Do I? If I'm not careful and aware, images of the punishing, score-keeping God of my childhood will sneak in the backdoor of my soul -- usually a warning sign my prayer life is lacking.

Anything that is not love is not God, so anger, bigotry, fear (as we will hear from John tomorrow) — any of these things we found when we looked in our hearts yesterday — these are not God. And striving to make God's heart our own is the highest and holiest aspiration of anyone's life. No, we will never reach that goal, but it is in the striving that God fills us with divine love to continue the quest.

**Today's Provision—Get to know God as Love:** Let's remember: Love is not always butterflies, hearts, and flowers. Love can be difficult. Love can challenge us. Real love involves letting go which is precisely why God lets us be who we are to make the mistakes we make. But God's love frees us to be the best we can be. If God is not love for you, look into books on God's love by William Barry, SJ (who died December 18, 2020. Rest in peace).

**Wednesday, January 6:** *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love."* (1 Jn 4:11-18)

In biblical Hebrew, there are two words used for fear: "pachad" is projected or imagined fear; and "norah" (or "yirah") is described as *"the fear that overcomes us when we suddenly find ourselves in possession of considerably more energy than we are used to, inhabiting a larger space than we are used to inhabiting."* (Rabbi Alan Lew, from *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life.*) Think of Moses at the burning bush, Mary at the Annunciation, and Joseph in his dream (but not Zachariah in the temple which might help to explain that story)! In today's reading, John is referring to the first type of fear ("phobos" in Greek). We expend a great deal of effort on this first kind – particularly these days -- and likely not enough on the second. Put very simply, our acceptance and joy of "norah" in our lives can help us overcome "pachad." *"The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD"* (Prov 9:10); *"fear of the LORD lengthens one's days"* (Prov 10:27).

**Today's Provision—Let love drive out fear to change your heart:** All these things fit together so nicely, don't they? Oh, if only I could get out of God's way and allow the change in my heart to take hold! First, we pray to accept God's unconditional love that drives out the real or imagined threats to our mortal existence. This is not to say fear of illness or violence aren't real or are somehow sinful. Many fears are natural given our humanity and can serve to protect us and those we love (e.g., face masks and social distancing). But let's look to rid our hearts of those fears that keep us from living free, full, and energized lives, to inhabit that ever-enlarging space that is the love of God.

**Thursday, January 7:** *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen...Whoever loves God must also love his brother."* (1 Jn 4:19-5:4)

I guess John has never heard the expression, "familiarity breeds contempt!" Some people may say, "Oh, I can love God. It's just other humans I can't abide" -- especially true these days when we are spending so much "quality time" together! Humorous yes, but an important truism: We cannot love God without loving each other and we can't really love anything we are afraid of. It is no wonder the most oft-used directive used in Scripture is "don't be afraid."

**Today's Provision— "Whoever abides in Love, abides in God:"** I know parents who lament that their adult children have moved away from organized religion. It is pretty common and with the problems rampant in many religious institutions over the past decades, not surprising either. Are your children loving? Do they care for others? Are they committed to justice and do they live in a way that supports that commitment? Do they abide in love? Then they abide in God, the God who says to us, "do not be afraid." Love them, pray for them, and trust in God's unconditional love.

**Friday, January 8:** *"Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean."* (Lk 5:12-16)

When I read this story, I think about Mark's version of the healing of the boy with a demon, and the father's words to Jesus: *"if you can do anything to help us, please have compassion."* (Mk 19:22) The leper in Luke declares both his faith in Jesus' power and in God's will. I imagine this leper would have accepted God's will no matter the result (although I am sure he would be greatly saddened if he was not healed). I more often sound like the boy's father from Mark, always having to declare, *"I do believe! Help my unbelief!"* I sympathize with this father. In his desperation to help his son, he doesn't want to come across as imposing on Jesus. Perhaps he is a little frightened as well (there's that theme again). But the leper is not afraid to approach Jesus directly. And Jesus does not hesitate to touch him, an untouchable. Fear doesn't even enter the equation.

**Today's Provision—Trust in God's will:** An easy thing to say, but oh, so hard to live. It takes a real experience of metanoia to put aside my own will for the will of God, which I cannot begin to know or understand. As Job says, *"I put my hand over my mouth."* (40:4) (Hey, come to think of it, that's not a bad suggestion to keep in mind whenever we pray!) We cannot will ourselves to accept God's will. Surrender is a grace. Pray for that grace today.

**Saturday, January 9:** *"Beloved: We have this confidence in him that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us."* (1 Jn 5:14-21)

*"If we ask anything according to his will..." "If you wish, you can make me clean." "Abba, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will, what you will."* (Mk 14:36) The leper in yesterday's story has confidence in God's power to do anything, the same confidence Jesus expresses in the garden at Gethsemane. But they also bow to and accept God's will even if they don't understand.

**Today's Provision— "If you had the choice, which would you choose: the granting of your petition or the grace to be peaceful whether it is granted or not?"** (Anthony de Mello, SJ) I use this quote a lot because it captures in such simple language the challenge we face when we pray for intentions. The next time you pray the Our Father, consider what you really mean by these simple words: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

(NOTE: we begin ordinary time and *Come and See* this coming week.)