

# 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 2022.



Each Advent, I pick a theme that speaks to something happening in our world, something moving within me. This year, we focus on a topic we touched on last week: the universality of the Christ.

**Sunday, November 27:** *"All nations shall stream toward it; many peoples shall come and say: 'Come, let us climb the LORD's mountain...that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths.' For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.... 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). "Because of the house of the LORD, I will pray for your good"(Ps 122).*

What does it mean to be "chosen?" Did God choose Abraham and his descendants because they were the tallest or the best looking or the most sophisticated and intelligent? (See Tuesday's gospel!) The most docile or sheep-like? Being chosen is usually an honor, but it is also a responsibility; and to be called God's chosen is a big responsibility at that! We hear today that *"from Zion (i.e., the chosen people) shall go forth instruction."* What is the instruction for all the nations, what is the lesson to be taught? Isaiah tells us clearly: the message is peace and justice.

**Today's Provision—Pray for the good of all. Pray for peace:** Do you see yourself as being chosen as a child of God? I'm not using that word in a strict biblical sense, as in the Jews being God's chosen people, nor am I appropriating or diluting the Old Testament biblical meaning. What does it mean to you to be chosen by God? Is it just a privilege, or is it a responsibility to teach, by your actions, the way to peace? What "swords" and "spears" are you carrying around that contradict the peace you desire? Do you pray for the good of others or do you pray they will "be good" in the way you define it? Because we belong to the house of the Lord, we pray for the good of all—ALL—even our enemies or those who worship differently—that all will see themselves as children of the universal God of Love.

**Monday, November 28:** *"I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the Kingdom of heaven"(Mt 8:5-11).*

The whole situation unfolding with the Roman centurion is shocking to the assembled crowd. "WHAT? He's going to enter the house of Gentile, a Roman soldier! The occupier? The enemy?" I wonder too what the crowd thinks of Jesus' words that people from the east and west will join the patriarchs at table. "Oh, he means east Jerusalem and west Jerusalem, or maybe some of those other towns in Israel like Bethlehem and Nazareth. He can't mean those infidels in Rome and Asia Minor!"

**Today's Provision—Who's at your table?** I don't mean who is sitting at the kitchen table right now or during the holidays, although that might have some relevance as well. I mean who is welcome into your sphere, be it your home, church congregation, or local community? I'm not talking just about the poor or homeless refugee or the lonely neighbor. What about that relative with whom you are estranged due to political arguments or family issues? The LGBTQ+ child of the family next door? I ask myself, "Would Jesus welcome this person to table?" If so, and I claim to be his follower, then I am to welcome them too.

**Tuesday, November 29:** *"May his name be blessed forever; as long as the sun his name shall remain. In him shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed; all the nations shall proclaim his happiness."(Ps 71)*

What do you think makes God happy? I think the word "ALL" is key to God's happiness. God desires for *"all the tribes of the earth"* to be blessed. When the nations come together, when nations stop training for war, God will be happy. It's simple, right? But oh-so hard to accomplish!

**Today's Provision—Make God happy today!** Not by following rules and giving alms or even praying (although I would never suggest that you stop doing any of those things!) Make God happy by widening your circle, by being more accepting of differences, even—no, especially—with those who call God by a different name. Think that might be tough for you? Read 1 Jn 4:16: *"God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."* No caveats here, no "seals of approval" or particular belief system necessary. Whoever abides in love abides in God and is blessed. And that makes God very happy and will make us happy too!

**Wednesday, November 30:** *"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him (Mt 4:18-22).*

There's a cartoon circling around that depicts Jesus in a modern setting, sitting on a park bench with a young man. The caption reads, *"No, I am not talking about Twitter. I literally want you to follow me."* These days, this concept of following is more like observing, or worse, voyeurism. When Jesus called the first disciples, he was not asking them to follow him because of some ego trip or just to have them observe. He was literally asking them to give up their way of life to learn from him, to be like him, wherever that might lead. For some, this meant following him in death. While it's unlikely we'll be asked to sacrifice our mortal bodies, Jesus does ask us to sacrifice our own will to follow him. Do you have the courage?

**Today's Provision—Courage to Follow:** Following Jesus can't be done from a distance. We can't rely on the occasional "tweets" from the pulpit, thinking that is enough. The immediacy with which the first disciples chose to follow was preceded by stirrings of the Spirit in their hearts, through the prophecies of John the Baptist and the general unrest of the Jewish people at that time. It is often unrest that will stir our hearts as well. If there is turmoil in your life or in your soul, pray for openness to hear a call and the courage to follow.

**Thursday, December 1:** *"Open up the gates to let in a nation that is just, one that keeps faith. A nation of firm purpose you keep in peace; in peace, for its trust in you" (Is 26:1-6).*

A thought came to me as I was reading this: Why not, "Open up the gates to let OUT a nation that is just," one that spreads peace. What if instead of building walls to keep others out, we open up the gates and venture into the world to bring peace? *"For from Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."*

**Today's Provision—Be a peace bearer:** There are millions of people who serve in various agencies and NGOs, both secular and religious, who do just that: they go out into the world, often into the poorest, most desolate areas of the globe to bear peace and healing; not necessarily in the name of a particular country or denomination, but in the name of love. I am privileged to call some of them friends. Not all of us are called to the four corners of the earth. We are called right where we are. Today, as you venture OUT into your little corner of the world, open the gates of your heart as well. Spread peace through kind words and a smile. Be patient with others. Lend a helping hand where you can.

**Friday, December 2:** *"One thing I ask of the LORD: To dwell in his house all the days of my life... I believe I will see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps 27).*

"ONE thing I ask of the Lord? Well, maybe one thing today or one thing this hour or this minute!" The psalmist has it right. If we ask to dwell in the Lord's house every day, the little (and not so little) things we ask become subsumed under the roof of God's will. But dwelling in God's house is not about waiting until after our death or joining a monastery. God dwells today in the land of the living: in our homes, communities, and workplaces; in our schools and sports fields; in hospitals, prisons, and war zones—everywhere. God is not so much a noun, but a verb—active, doing, living, healing, saving. God's bounty is everywhere and if we dwell in the house of God's will, that bounty will be ours.

**Today's Provision—Ask for the One Thing:** When I find it hard to pray, I try to remember to say, "thy will be done," several times throughout the day, particularly when I am faced with difficulty. But the important thing is to say these words from your heart, not your head. Only then can acceptance be realized. Ask God today for the grace to dwell in his living house and to trust in his will.

**Saturday, December 3:** *"The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few" (Mt 9:35-10:8).*

I don't know how things are in other countries, but in the US, there is a shortage of workers post-COVID, particularly in the service industries, healthcare, and education. Small businesses like restaurants have either closed or have had to cut way back on the number of people they can serve. Many school districts must rely on substitute teachers or increasing class sizes. Doctors' appointments are pushed further and further out. A lot of reasons have been floated for this, including low wages and rude treatment from employers, customers, patients, and parents. (BTW, Jesus' words from this reading, *"Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give"* do NOT apply in these cases 😞.) I pray that we are coming to understand how we have underpaid and undervalued many essential roles and will work to rectify this disparity going forward.

**Today's Provision—Be a bearer of the Good News:** Of course, we know Jesus is referring to the Kingdom of God and there are millions of people in need of hope, waiting to hear the good news. The harvest is indeed abundant, and many are dying on the vine. And yes, in this case, the good tidings we have received are to be shared far and wide without cost. (I can name some preachers and televangelists who have conveniently forgotten about this verse!) Start every day in praise and gratitude. Ask Jesus to commission you to go forth into the world that day, not with rose-colored glasses, but with his open eyes to see the needs of those around you. Be the bearer of the Good News, not by your words, not by proselytizing, but by your compassion, understanding, acceptance, and love.