

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, 2025.



I mentioned last week our theme for Advent is to look for the intersection of simplicity and incarnational mysticism. That's exactly what this season is about: the complete, confounding mystery of the Almighty choosing to become a wee babe born into simple circumstances; or, as Frederick Buechner writes, *"the Father of all mercies putting himself at our mercy."* As the Spirit guides, I will point out things in Scripture that reflect this intersection, but I'm also challenging myself to be more aware of events and people that bring simple, incarnational mystery to life; as St. Ignatius suggests, to *"find God in all things."* Perhaps you will give this a try too! Have a simply blessed, alive-in-the-mystery season of Advent!

Sunday, November 30: *"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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!"* (Is 2:1-5).

I don't watch much TV. Now that baseball season is over, the set stands idle for a good part of the week. But last Sunday, I watched some pro football. Aside from cringing every time someone took a hit, I was taken aback by the advertising. In the hour or so I watched the game, at least three-quarters of the ads were about some horribly violent movie or TV series. Lots of shooting and things blowing up and bloodied, mangled bodies. (And we wonder why there is so much violence in our world!) I also watched a public television series this week on the American Revolution, a documentary by Ken Burns. It is quite well done and nowhere near as graphic as those ads, but the images of war still caused me such heartache. What we see as entertaining...what we do to each other in the name of power...this is a mystery I don't think I will ever figure out. I pray that my incarnate body will never be put to the test.

Provision: "Walk in the light of the Lord!" In Isaiah today, we hear people shall beat weapons of war into tools that foster nourishment and growth. Such an effort will take a lot of hard work and courage. It takes work, strength, and courage for each of us to stand up against violence and evil, to walk in the light of a Lord who became incarnate to teach us peace, the way of God's Kingdom. What will you do today to simply radiate the light of peace in the face of darkness?

Monday, December 1: *For over all, the LORD's glory will be shelter and protection* (Is 4:2-6).

Several readings this week have to do with the universality of God's mercy and love. God's shelter and protection will be *"over all."* In today's gospel, people will come *"from the east and the west."* As our world continues to shrink, we are circling the wagons, breaking up into even more insulated tribes; not just nations or regions or religions or ethnicities, but within congregations, communities, families. Such fragmentation can easily lead to the violence we spoke of yesterday. The most-oft used phrase in scripture is *"Do not be afraid!"* We claim to believe in God. What are we so afraid of?

Provision: Imagine the fullness of God, a shelter for all. In response to a question about how he defined himself, the Dalai Lama answered: *"I am one of the 7 billion human beings alive today. We each have a responsibility to think about humanity and the good of the world because it affects our own future. We weren't born on this planet at this time to create problems but to bring about some benefit."* Imagine if we could all have such a simple view of ourselves, and a global, God's-eye view of humanity! Consider how you define yourself. With what "tribe" do you align? Does your tribe exclude others who look or think or pray in a different way? Does it foment fear? Then consider how God defines you and how God defines that person you look at with disdain. Pray that *"you may have strength to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth ...so you may be filled with all the fullness of God"* (Eph 3:18).

Tuesday, December 2: *"The Spirit of the LORD rests upon him: of wisdom and understanding, counsel and strength, knowledge and fear of the LORD...Not by appearance shall he judge, nor by hearsay shall he decide"* (Is:11:1-10).

We live in a world where we can't trust our eyes or ears. "Deep fakes" and AI-generated photos and words infect everything. It's scary. We should never judge on appearances or hearsay anyway, but this advice is even more critical now. It takes wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and good counsel to avoid being swept away by falsehood. Relying on and delighting in God as our source of what is good and true can help us navigate these dangerous waters.

Provision: Be patient. Don't make rash judgments. Part of being wise and strong is being patient, waiting for the truth to emerge. *"By their fruits you will know them."* Good fruit takes time to grow. We would all do well to slow down, to seek knowledge without judgment before we act or take a stand. Remember, the gifts *"the shoot from Jesse's stump"* receives have nothing to do with power or riches. Pray today for wise and patient discerning eyes, ears, and hearts.

Wednesday, December 3: *"You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes"*(Ps 23).

How many times have we heard or read this psalm? Most of us can recite it verbatim. And yet today, as I read these words, the Spirit poked me: "And what, Elaine, would Jesus have you do after he has honored you by spreading a table before you in the sight of your foes? Would he want you to gloat, to look upon these foes with satisfaction and disdain? No. Of course not. Jesus would have you invite them to sit at your table and partake of the feast!"

Provision: Practice hospitality. We talked on Monday about how divided our world has become. We read yesterday from Isaiah *"the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb."* I don't know about you, but I surely cannot claim to be the lamb in this scenario, and I imagine that is true for all but the holiest among us. Find an opportunity to invite someone whose views are different than yours to coffee or lunch, not to debate or argue but to enjoy time together. Food is always a good mediator! (Watch this TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_lesser_take_the_other_to_lunch).

Thursday, December 4: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*(Mt 7:21, 24-27).

How many times have you, have I, lamented, "Oh, if I only knew God's will for me!" You want simple? Here's simple, expressed at one of the most dramatic examples of incarnational mysticism there is: the Transfiguration. *"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" "LISTEN TO HIM!!!"* (I sometimes imagine God finishes by whispering, "you meatheads!")

Provision: Listen to Jesus' words. Act on them. No one had a microphone under Jesus' nose to record him (so no one can do a "deepfake" either!) Our Christian faith tells us the evangelists were inspired by the Holy Spirit and referenced the Hebrew scriptures to express Jesus' message. But one thing we notice about Jesus' words: there's not much in the way of dogma or doctrine. In fact, much of his message is expressed in deeds, not words: feeding, healing, consoling, enjoying hospitality, surrounding himself, not with the bigwigs and lawyers, but with the poor and marginalized. Loving enemies, praying to God in secret, showing mercy. No reason to make this complex. Doing God's will is listening to Jesus' words and rising each day to put those words into action. Pretty simple, I'd say!

Friday, December 5: *"On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book"*(Is 29:17-24).

Have you ever seen videos of toddlers who have been deaf since birth or adults who have lost their hearing, receiving cochlear implants? The babies hear their parents' voices for the first time; the adults hear music again. The overwhelming delight and emotion are so moving to watch. Those blessed with five physical senses take so much for granted. Those of us blessed with plenty often don't take the time, like the poor, to *"rejoice in the Holy One of Israel."*

Many years ago, at Christmas time, I was helping to serve dinner for the poor in my city. As people were leaving, we gave each some toiletries that might last them a few days. One man smiled and said exuberantly to me, "Oh, I was praying for this! It is a miracle!" A small bag of toiletries! He looked around for a moment and said, "It is all a miracle." Tears come to my eyes any time I recall this story. It humbles me and calls me to look around and see.

Provision: Tap into your sense of wonder! Simple, incarnational miracles are everywhere if we but look! As you go about today, tap into wonder. Dispel any deafness, blindness, or numbness you feel. *"For Christ plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his to the Father through the features of men's faces"*(Gerard M. Hopkins).

Saturday, December 6: *"At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd...." Ask the master to send out laborers for the harvest"*(Mt 9:35-10:8).

God looks out upon the Israelites enslaved by tyrants, hearing their cries. Jesus, in the gospel scene, looks out over the poor and marginalized, the lost. I see Jesus looking out today, hearing the cries of those interned in squalid camps in my own country, many whose only "crime" is having darker skin than mine or coming from countries labeled as unacceptable—I will not quote the adjective used by our leadership—imprisoned by tyrants posing as government leaders and agents. Is your heart, like Jesus', moved with pity? If not, perhaps it is time to pray that God will replace your heart of stone with one of flesh (Ez 36:26).

Provision: "The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few." I don't do enough to address the fear and horror playing out across my country. I have not taken a risk other than to pray and to write words like these, which some consider unpatriotic. Jesus is calling us as laborers to do something real. It is not enough to say or write words, or to issue "special messages" condemning what is happening to our sisters and brothers at the hands of our leadership. Amid this busy season that celebrates a babe born into poverty and forced to flee as a refugee into the very country that so long ago enslaved his ancestors, let us gather our courage to labor in God's fields that cry out for freedom and mercy.