

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the Fourth Week of Advent and Christmas Day, 2021: JOY



Sunday, December 19: *...he shall be peace.* (Mi 5:4)

Twenty-seven hundred years have passed since Micah said these words. The "he" of course is the long-awaited Messiah. Israel has been on a roller coaster ride since David's reign in 1,000 B.C. with brief periods of calm interspersed with defeats, exiles, and wicked leaders. I guess we can say the last 2,000 years have been no different for humanity. Peace still seems to elude us.

But perhaps, like the ancient Kingdom of Israel, we don't understand what this peace really means. We look for God to flip a switch so the other person might see the light. We look for peace to be imposed from the outside, when peace can never be achieved that way. In the words of Buddhist monk and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, *"To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women."*

The only way Jesus can truly be our own Prince of Peace is if we allow him to change our hearts, to root out hatred and prejudice so we can be beacons of peace, a source of joy for others.

Today's Provision—Cultivate peace and joy within: Micah, like all the prophets, writes of the Messiah in future tense. But as Christians, we believe the Messiah lives in our midst. It's not some future peace we await. Jesus IS peace. Here. Right now. So how do we cultivate this peace? It takes mindfulness and continual tending in prayer. It means that when provoked, the switch we flip is not one of retaliation or frustration, but of compassion. We look to respond rather than react. It is surely not easy.

If this approach is new for you, like all new habits, it takes time and work. One way is to look closely at people or situations that foster peace and joy in you and those that disrupt your peace. Consider both nonjudgmentally to see if you can uncover any patterns: "Why does this person lead me to peace? Why do these kinds of situations make me uneasy?" Be alert to times when your sense of interior peace is moved either way. There's a lot we can learn from this about ourselves and God's call to us. (And yes, this is a part of that pesky nightly Examen I talk about all the time! 😊)

Monday, December 20: *"Let the Lord enter."* (Ps 24)

The instruction is clear: The Lord is ready and waiting. Maybe he's making his presence obvious, knocking at the door or *"gazing through the window, peering through the lattices,"* like the lover from tomorrow's Song of Songs reading! More than likely though, God is speaking in whispers or through the presence of another. God "appears" to us by catching our eye or through "God-cumstances" or "Spirit-dipity." The question: Will you let God enter?

Today's Provision—Finding joy in God's presence: "This is a strange provision. Of course, we find joy in God's presence!" Oh really? I guess that means you are joyful all the time! There are those among us who seem to radiate joy, aware of God's abiding presence. But for most of us, it takes effort and a special kind of awareness to allow God to enter our every days. See if today you can be aware of God. Then, take the next step: Invite God in.

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

"The Lord's counsel will stand forever, his heart's devisings for all generations." (Hebrew translation). God's wisdom does not change. God's desire for all people in every generation is the same: peace, joy, mercy, love. But every generation has its unique challenges (although many, at their root, are the same). So we come to God with new songs: songs of thanksgiving, songs of repentance, songs of petition and for mercy. We can always use the songs of old and prayers of our traditions -- sometimes, they are the most consoling and the easiest to pray. But they can also become hollow, void of the fire God desires in our hearts. In his book, *Let Us Dream*, Pope Francis quotes Gustav Mahler that *"tradition is not the repository of ashes but the preservation of fire."*

"See, I am making all things new!" In this season of the new-born babe, let us turn to God with new songs, new prayers that speak directly to the challenges and desires we hold in our hearts.

Today's Provision—Sing a new song to God: Our theme this week is joy, and for many, I pray, there will be the joy of reuniting with loved ones. We can sing songs of thanksgiving. But for others -- I am thinking and praying right now for those in US suffering such loss due to the recent outbreaks of violent weather — songs of joy and thanksgiving will be hard to come by. That's ok. Just make it real. Pray to God in whatever words console you. Sing to God with whatever fire is burning in you right now. Try to find the strength to trust that God's plan for peace stands forever.

Wednesday, December 22: *"He raises the needy from the dust; from the dung heap he lifts up the poor, to seat them with nobles and make a glorious throne their heritage."* (1 Sm 1:24-28)

In ancient societies, and to a real extent, implicit in modern culture, people were born into a specific caste or societal level. If you were born into nobility, you, your children, and your children's children would reap the benefits. Those of a poor or despised heritage had little chance of breaking free from that burden. We see this play out around the world today. I think of what Nathanael says in John 1:46 about Jesus' origins: *"Can anything good come from Nazareth?"* So too, we often judge people, before we've even met them, by their appearance, economic status, religion, or birthplace. But we hear in Hannah's Canticle that God will take the poor and oppressed and change their lot. And this season, we celebrate him doing just that: beginning his life on earth in poverty and simplicity, in humble circumstances.

Today's Provision—Finding joy in humility: We live in a culture that does not value humility. Maybe we don't even know how to demonstrate humility. So it's good to remember the great quote from C.S. Lewis: *"Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."* Be aware today. See if you can change your focus from what you can get out of an encounter to what you can give. You'll be amazed at the real joy you can feel!

Thursday, December 23: *"And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek...But who will endure the day of his coming? ... For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye."* (Mal 3:1-4, 23-24)

"Oh, yes, I seek the Lord! But what's this about 'the refiner's fire' and 'the fuller's lye?' That isn't on the job description I submitted! That's not the kind of Lord I am seeking!" There are times I would be quite happy just to keep with the image of Christ as the new born babe, a warm and fuzzy God; not a God that challenges me or burns me with remorse, with righteous outrage, with a longing for resolutions and answers. But that's what the Incarnation is really about. If we seek the Lord, we have to accept all that comes with it. We can't claim true faith in Christ unless we make our mantra, our way of life his instruction: "Love one another."

Today's Provision—Finding joy of God's promise in real life: And real life is real messy. We can get burned loving others. We can be taken advantage of when we choose humility. Reflect today on a time you were burned. Do you hold a grudge? If so, try to forgive from your heart. Again, you'll be surprised by the joy forgiveness can bring!

Friday, December 24: *"In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."* (Lk 1:78-79)

One of most beautiful verses in all of Scripture! I imagine an artist's depiction of the deep and comforting emotions of these words: tender compassion, a guiding light shining on those in darkness, our very feet being led on the way of peace. It's a lovely verse for us to pray, this year in particular. Maybe we don't feel joy in the more exuberant use of the word, but instead, a deep, abiding, warm joy whose embers keep aflame the love of God in our hearts. Hold onto the feelings these words inspire in you and try to keep the simple, warm joy of Christmas alive every day.

Today's Provision—What does joy look like to you? Maybe you are an artist. Or maybe not. It doesn't matter. Dust off your imagination and in some creative way, use your prayer time today to depict what these words bring forth in you. How do they make you feel? Use colors, words, musical notes — heck, use playdough if you want! Write a poem or a list of adjectives, call to mind a memory that fills you with joy, a desire that instills joy. Make it real and then give God thanks for the promise that joy is and will indeed be yours!

Saturday, December 25: *"I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me."* (Heb 1:1-6, from 2 Sm 7:14)

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Year of St. Joseph just ended earlier this month. Pope Francis had declared last year dedicated to Joseph to help *"us see more clearly the importance of 'ordinary' people who, though far from the limelight, exercise patience and offer hope every day. In this, they resemble Saint Joseph, 'the man who goes unnoticed, a daily, discreet and hidden presence,' who nonetheless played 'an incomparable role in the history of salvation.'"* (<https://www.vaticannews.va>)

Today, as we celebrate this extraordinary event of God becoming one of us, let us give thanks for all the ordinary people who do extraordinary things every day: those who care for the poor, the stranger, the oppressed; those who care for our health, teach our children, and protect us from harm. We pray St. Joseph will instill in them his quiet peace and joy as they serve Christ in each of the lives they touch. Have a blessed and joy-filled Christmas!

Today's Provision—Joseph's Canticle: 'To Be God's Father Here' by Roy Tolentino and Norman Agatep https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_dGoRMBBVU (performed by Bukas Palad, a Filipino music ministry. Enjoy!!) (REF) *Glory to the Lord! God's name be praised, for You chose to save Your servant's heart from fear. Dream in me, O Lord, grant me the grace to be God's father here. (I) Open my heart, which by Your Spirit stirred receives the Holy Word: the promise my bride has heard. We hope and trust, surrender to Your plan: You've sent the Son of Man. Salvation is at hand! (II) Lend me Your love, to raise Him as my own, provide Him with a home, where justice and peace are known. God from above becomes Emmanuel: Our restlessness dispel! In God, teach us to dwell. Hallelujah! Praise the Son! Hallelujah! Holy One! Hallelujah! Child most dear, I'll be Your father here.*