

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, 2025



Sunday, December 21: *Isaiah said, "Listen, pray, O House of David! Is it not enough for you to weary men that you should weary my God as well?"* (Is 7:10-14, Hebrew translation, Robert Alter).

"To weary: The Hebrew verb sometimes means this, though it also means 'to incapacitate' which is not appropriate in this context" (Alter, Hebrew Bible, Vol. 2, p. 645). I find this translation and explanation provocative. Let's get one thing straight up front: no one, no thing can "incapacitate" God (although we can surely get in the way of God's messengers!) But it got me thinking...God's way is to work through humanity, and most of the time, flawed humanity: Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, Mary, Joseph, the disciples...and us. And while God's will WILL be done, with or without us, I think about times I have gotten in the way, maybe even hindered God's will by not paying attention. *"And who was I to hinder the work of God"* (Acts 11:17, Peter's words about the Gentiles receiving the Spirit.)

Isaiah is weary, tired of trying to get across to the various Israelite princes and kings they need to trust in God. They are more concerned with maintaining their power, and in the case of Ahaz today, not being killed by the approaching enemy! It is hard for most of us to look beyond ourselves with patience and trust in God's plan.

Provision: Don't be weary...or wearying! I'm weary of bad news and want to hide. Or I whine about things without doing anything, wearying others and my God! Sound familiar? Spend time in prayer with your journal. Write down things that weary you. Present them to God. Ask God to help you find positive and productive ways to address them. Pay attention and trust in God's plan.

Monday, December 22: *"My spirit rejoices in God my savior, because he looked upon the low estate of his slave. ...his mercy is for generations to those who fear him. He has scattered those who are arrogant in the thoughts of their hearts; He has pulled dynasts down from thrones and exalted the humble"* (Lk 1:46-56, literal translation, David B. Hart).

A good follow-up to yesterday's reflection. *"God has looked upon my low estate"* just as God looked upon the seeming unworthiness of many of his leaders and disciples. Just as God looks upon you and me in our "low estates." I hear from people who feel impotent, unable to do anything about the immoral, unjust, and evil things being done in the name of faith and patriotism by arrogant dynasts. Don't doubt God is asking you to bear Jesus into this darkened world!

Provision: Say yes. Incarnational mysticism is not something that happened 2,000-plus years ago. It happens each time anyone says yes to birthing Christ. What moves your soul to compassionate action: the plight of immigrants, poverty, unjust imprisonment, illiteracy, climate injustice? Don't think you are unworthy. Say yes to God's call.

Tuesday, December 23: *"I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the LORD comes, the great and terrible day, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers"* (Mal 3:1-4; 23-24).

These are the final words in the last prophetic book in the Masoretic text. Christians believe this verse refers to John the Baptist (*"But I tell you, Elijah has already come,"* Mt 17:12); indeed, both Elijah and John the Baptist called for repentance before the day of the Lord. I read in these words the need for elders to look forward to the future, making decisions for the good of their children, and for children to respect and honor their elders. *"Everyone disciplined to the kingdom of heaven is like an elder who brings out of his treasure things new and old"* (Mt 13:52).

Provision: Be open to both new and old. As our children move out into the world, life changes. It can be hard for elders to accept that things are not as they used to be. Conversely, if we are a young person, we might be eager to leave behind things our parents hold onto. Things can be tense in families around the holidays, but perhaps an open conversation addressing the tension head-on could help. Agree upfront on topics that are off-limits or agree to disagree. Show respect for each person and their rights. Keep an open mind and heart, filled with love.

Wednesday, December 24: *"And now you, little child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you go forth before the presence of the Lord to prepare his ways, To give to his people a knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of their sins, Through our God's inmost mercy, whereby a dawning from on high will visit us, to shine upon those sitting in darkness and death's shadow, so to guide our feet into the path of peace"* (Lk 1:67-79, literal translation).

I love Zacharias' canticle. It's my favorite prayer for this time of year. Let's make it our own. We hear Jesus saying to us:

"And now, my sisters and brothers, children of my Father, I call you as prophets to prepare my way as you go about your daily lives. By your actions and your love, let those you meet know that the salvation of happiness and peace comes through mercy and forgiveness, of themselves and of others. Mercy and love are God's inmost being. You, my followers, can be like the dawn, shining upon those who live in darkness and death's shadow. Rise from where you sit to guide others in the path of peace."

Provision: Let's get on our feet! *"There is no path to peace. Peace is the path"* (Gandhi; Rev. A.J. Muste, adapted). We might think we cannot lead others to peace when we ourselves are not at peace. There is some truth to this: *'You cannot give what you do not have'* (Carroll Wise). But it is also true that when we journey together, sharing our doubts and foibles, coming to a place of peace can be easier for all. Don't be afraid to join other light-bearers committed to peace as the path. Together, you can be like the dawn, shining upon those in darkness.

Thursday, December 25: *The shepherds said, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place." They went and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child... The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God* (Lk 2:15-20).

Provision: So...what happens next? Imagine you are one of the shepherds. You return to your flock praising God, singing at the top of your lungs. You are amazed and incredulous: "Why would God announce this to lowly folks like us?!" A few of your fellow shepherds stayed behind to mind the sheep. You sit down on the cold ground, take a deep breath, and try to process the events of this night. The ones who stayed behind stare at you: "What the heck happened?" "Did you find this baby who is supposed to be our Messiah?" *(We ask ourselves, "What the heck just happened? What are we celebrating and commemorating? Did the real thing get lost in all the hoopla of presents and eating and drinking and singing Christmas carols off-key at the top of our lungs!? Are we incredulous or doubtful? Did we—do we—see what was promised? [Don't be hard on yourself. It's a crazy time.]*)

You settle down a bit more. Your body is telling you to rest, but your mind is going a mile a minute, your heart is still beating fast. Everything is quiet except for the bleating of the sheep. You are lost in your thoughts, and know that in a few days, you will return home to your family. You think, "What am I going to tell them? Will they think I am nuts? Did they too, see and hear the angels? What am I to do now?" *(Perhaps things have quieted down in your house, except for the beeping of new electronics. You reflect and ask this same question: "What am I to do now?"*)

"When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock...The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among brothers, To make music in the heart" Howard Thurman (Have a merry and blessed Christmas!)

Friday, December 26: *Stephen, brimming with God's grace and energy, was doing wonderful things among the people, unmistakable signs that God was among them* (Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59, from *The Message*, Eugene Peterson).

I assume from this passage that Stephen has been working miracles, *"great wonders and signs among the people."* It doesn't say that, though. We hear earlier in Acts of Peter curing the crippled beggar and the sick in Jerusalem (3:6-8; 5:15-16), and maybe Luke just didn't take the time to document every miracle that happened. I don't want to take anything away from Stephen, but what if the "great wonder" is that he was willing to show up despite the risks.

Provision: Show up. I've mentioned many times that I serve as a spiritual guide for members of the Ignatian Volunteer Corps in Baltimore, MD, USA. These fine folks, most in their 70s and 80s, show up at least eight hours a week to serve those less fortunate in our area. They companion, they teach, they read, they write letters, they comfort the elderly and dying, they do administrative work for our non-profit partners. They work "great wonders," and sometimes, a miracle of healing in the lives of individuals and communities. They show up. You can too.

Saturday, December 27: *"What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and the Son. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete"* (1 Jn 1:1-4).

We've heard this line before, about joy being complete. Jesus says it: *"I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete"* (Jn 15:11), "this" being remaining in his love and loving others as he has loved them. I like the idea that as followers of Christ, an important part of our ministry is to continually grow the community of joy. Jesus was joyful and wanted his closest friends to share in that joy. They, in turn, shared the joy with the new Christian communities, and as these disciples went out into the world, they too were to bring the good news and the joy. Growing a community of fellowship and joy that welcomes all and excludes no one: that is our call as Christians.

Provision: Spread joy! We can't be "Polly-annas," ignoring the great suffering and injustice we witness in the world. Our willingness to show up, despite the risks and challenges, with mercy, compassion, and kindness, is a good way to spread joy, even if it's just for a little while. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, do it with joy and love!

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