

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, 2018. "Everyday Holiness"



Sunday, December 23: *"When Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me...As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.' By this 'will' we have been made holy through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."* (Heb 10:5-10)

In Jesus' time, animal sacrifices were still expected of the Jewish people. We know Mary and Joseph offer two young birds when Jesus is presented at the temple after his birth. The first seven chapters in Leviticus describe (in great detail, mind you) the reasons and types of cereal and animal sacrifices God expects. But here, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says Jesus, by the surrender of his will and his body, puts an end to the need for such sacrifices—sacrifices that in themselves can never take away sin. By Jesus' will to offer his body and spirit as the ultimate sacrifice, we are made holy. And while most of us are not called to surrender our mortal bodies, we are called by Christ to sacrifice our will for God's will and the greater plans he has for us.

Today's Provision—Holy Surrender: We've talked before about the paradox of surrender: surrender is a willed act, so can we ever truly surrender? How do we really make God's will our own? We pray for the grace Jesus asks for at Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done." Holy surrender is not a one-and-done thing; it is a moment-by-moment way of being present to God's desires. See if today you can be aware of times God is calling you to surrender to his will.

Monday, December 24: *"You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins."* (Lk 1:67-79)

"Prepare his way." Ready or not, Christmas is upon us. We spend so much time getting ready: preparing for guests, preparing food, decorating, baking, wrapping gifts. Most of my preparation for Christmas adds to my to-do list and to the clutter around the house. And yet the preparation John is called to—and we are called to as well—is to clear a path, eliminate the extra baggage, to make straight the way of the Lord.

Today's Provision—Holy "Soul-keeping": Look around right now and decide on one housekeeping thing on your to-do list that is not essential. If you're anything like me, there are probably several! Make a conscious decision to put that aside and use the time instead to sit in silence. Bring to mind your favorite image of the Nativity and try to keep focused on that for a few minutes. If it is easier, grab a religious Christmas card, look at a crèche, even find a beautiful image on the computer. Look at the whole image and then allow your mind and heart to wander, taking in the details, the expressions on the faces, little aspects of the setting, etc. Let your gaze settle in on one thing and then sit quietly and listen. Allow the Spirit to lead you. (This is the practice of *Visio Divina*--'divine seeing'--one of my favorite ways to pray!) See if you can take a bit of time each day for "soul-keeping" over the remainder of the Christmas season.

Tuesday, December 25: *See, the LORD proclaims to the ends of the earth: say to daughter Zion, "Your savior comes! Here is his reward with him, his recompense before him." They shall be called the holy people, the redeemed of the LORD, and you shall be called "Frequented," a city that is not forsaken.* (Is 62:11-12)

The brief chapter 62 in the Book of Isaiah is well worth the read in the quiet of this Christmas morning. It is a testament to the excitement and joy God hopes for all of us—his holy people—on this remarkable day. I was curious about the word "frequented" in this passage. The Hebrew translation source I reference uses the term "sought out" which reminds me of the famous poem by Francis Thompson, *The Hound of Heaven*, described here by J.R.R. Tolkien: *"As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. And though in sin or in human love, away from God it seeks to hide itself, Divine grace follows after, unwearingly follows ever after..."* In the supreme act of seeking us, God chooses to become one of us, one with us, to live with us and to know our trials. So amid the hustle and bustle of day, set aside some time to reflect on the true meaning of this, the Incarnation, that we are not lost, not forsaken, but a people made holy by God's living, breathing presence among us. Alleluia! Amen!

Today's Provision— Being Holy People: *"I have the immense joy of being human, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate."* (Thomas Merton) The Christmas message of joy and hope is one that is so needed these days. It is easy to get sucked down into the continual barrage of bad news and by the deterioration of trust in our most cherished institutions. Christians are called even more so today to be the voice of truth, a beacon of compassion that Christ is to the world. Let us be joyful and proud to be one with the *"Father of all mercies who put himself at our mercy."* (Frederick Buechner) Let us be a holy people and a shining example of hope amid the darkness. A Blessed and Merry Christmas to you all. Thank you for allowing me to journey to Bethlehem with you again (or for the first time) this year. (Come and See resumes next week.)

Wednesday, December 26: *But he, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven... (Acts 6:8-10; 7:54-59) "...do not worry about what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say."* (Mt 10:17-22)

"How is this possible? How can I not worry ahead of time about what I am supposed to say or do? How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?" We talked earlier this week how being prepared often means stocking up on stuff, making extra food, having extra gifts, "just in case!" Hospitality is a wonderful virtue and there's nothing wrong with wanting to be prepared. Think of Abraham and the three visitors who show up out of nowhere; his sole focus is that he and Sarah move quickly to offer them hospitality! But what we are talking about today is a different kind of readiness, a clearing out, a preparing of empty space so the Spirit can enter.

Today's provision—Holy Emptiness: There's an endearing tale about St. Francis of Assisi walking with his friend, Brother Leo, who is fretting about the state of his soul and all he has to do to be pure of heart. Francis tells him, *'Holiness is not a personal achievement. It's an emptiness you discover in yourself...it becomes a free space where the Lord can create anew.'* The great mystic, Meister Eckhart wrote, *"God is not found in the soul by adding anything but by a process of subtraction."* Today is a great day to practice emptiness. Put aside the new gadgets and the post-Christmas clean-up. Get the whole family in on it if you can. Sit quietly and picture a horizon or a wide open field. Imagine a gentle warm breeze. Allow the emptiness to permeate your heart. Give the Spirit room to bring you peace.

Thursday, December 27: *Then the other disciple also went in...and he saw and believed. (Jn 20:2-8)*

Today is the feast day of Saint John, the Apostle. I wonder: what is it the "beloved disciple" believes as he enters the empty tomb? St. Augustine suggests he believes Mary of Magdala's story. Other scholars say that since this was the last gospel to be written, the author, possibly a disciple of John, added this (and the term beloved) as a way to honor his mentor. Who knows? And what does it matter? The question that really matters: "What is it that I believe?"

Today's provision—Holy Faith: We've talked in the past about the difference between belief and faith. Belief tends to be more cognitive, statements of fact that we say in the Creed. Faith takes that belief and adds trust. Trust that the one God we proclaim is a loving, merciful God who never abandons us and wants only for our good; trust that this one God chose to come to earth to be one of us, and is with us in Spirit still, guiding and intervening for us. So what's holy faith? Holy faith takes our faith one step further and allows us to say to God, "You can trust me too. Even though I will fail, sin, and make mistakes along the way, I will always return to you with a contrite heart." Holy faith is believing not only in God's fidelity, but in our own as well; that 'God has made us for himself and that our hearts will be restless until they rest in God.' Spend time in prayer today looking at what you believe and faith you have in God and in yourself.

Friday, December 28: *"If we say, 'We are without sin' we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."* (1Jn 1:5-2:2)

I know sin is not the most cheery of topics for the holidays, but the truth is, sin exists, in our world and in ourselves. One thing I notice when serving as a spiritual director is how often people want to enumerate instances of what they consider sin: losing patience with children, gossiping, telling "white" lies, wasting food, etc. I'm not saying some of these are not sins, but if we focus only on the things we do "wrong"—sins of commission—then we often miss the sins of omission—the things we fail to do. We can also forget about the underlying sinfulness which is at the root of so many sinful actions: Is it pride that drives our need for control or that gets in the way of us serving the needy? Is it envy that causes us to gossip? Is it greed that causes us to hoard our belongings? By enumerating sins, we also miss the pervasiveness of societal sin and the roles we unwittingly play in supporting that sinfulness. Becoming more aware of the ways sin impacts our everyday lives is a very important first step to reduce the hold sin has on our lives.

Today's Provision—Holy Awareness: Another aspect of sinfulness is how harsh we are on ourselves. We don't like to admit that, hey, we are human. We make mistakes, we sin all the time. I'm not making light of sin, but I am saying that our tendency to beat ourselves up can lead us to avoid awareness. As John says in his letter, our acknowledgment of sin indicates the presence of the truth within us that will in turn help set us free from sin. Do an examen tonight. Try to avoid being too judgmental, but look closely at your day and see if you can notice, not just sinful actions or thoughts, but the presence of sinfulness. Make amends if you need to and commit to be more aware tomorrow.

Saturday, December 29: *"Whoever claims to abide in (Jesus) ought to walk just as he walked."* (1 Jn 2:3-11)

The Greek word used for walk translates to "tread." The dictionary defines tread as "to walk in a specified way." Jesus did most of his travelling on foot and although he was a man with a mission, he didn't hurry everywhere. Nor did he walk around aimlessly. He was present and aware, able to hear the cries of Bartimaeus, to feel the touch of the hemorrhaging woman, to see Zacchaeus hiding in a tree. To walk as Jesus walked is to be in the here and now, to notice the world and the people around you; to take a break from your very busy day to comfort and empower another. If we claim to know Christ, then we are willing to walk his specified way in the truth and the light.

Today's Provision—Holy Encountering: Challenge yourself to look at everyone you encounter today with reverence. Not just those you know or live with (although that can work wonders, too!) Look at everyone as a bearer of God's image—because they are. Make note of how this approach can change not only the other, but you as well.