

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 2018.



This Advent, let's be on the lookout for examples of (and opportunities for) "Everyday Holiness."

Sunday, December 2: *"May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father..."* (1 Thes 3:12-4:2)

The Pope's recent exhortation, *Gaudete Et Exsultate*, is a call to everyday holiness. Francis calls this holiness, *"the most attractive face of the Church."* He emphasizes that holiness is not a set of credentials or boxes to check, but rather, *"each believer discern(ing) his or her own path that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts."* In the words of the Quaker author Richard Foster, *"Holiness gives us our truest, fullest humanity. In holiness, we become the persons we were created to be."* If our desire is to increase and abound in love, holiness is the only true path.

Today's Provision—Be Blameless in Holiness: (Sigh). "Ok," you say, "I'm beginning to understand that holiness is more attainable than I first thought. But blameless?" Holiness is not perfection. Perfection is the Lord's alone. Holiness is found in a striving towards perfection, and the resilience to get up and try again each time we fall. As Foster also writes in his delightful book, *Streams of Living Water*, *"God meets us at the point of our effort."* Make a point today to keep trying. Notice when you succeed at being your best self and give thanks. Be aware of those times when you are not being true to the person God created you to be, and ask for forgiveness and help to move forward. (If you haven't read the Pope's Exhortation, it is brief, to-the-point, and full of hope. It is available online at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.html)

Monday, December 3: *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! ...I will say, 'Peace be within you!' Because of the house of the LORD, our God, I will pray for your good."* (Ps 122)

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus, as he comes upon the city for the final time, he weeps and cries out, *"Oh Jerusalem, if this day, you only knew what makes for peace."* (19:42) He weeps still, and while I have not yet been brought to tears, I lament about the world, my country, and my church. We humans really have a hard time knowing what makes for peace. Oh, we think we know! We know what's right and wrong, and 'I am right and you are wrong.' There's a little hint in this psalm that might help if we struggle to find peace in our personal relationships: *"I will pray for your good. I will say, 'Peace be within you.'"* 'I recognize your path to find the very best in yourself is not the same as my path. I accept that your holiness may appear different from my holiness, and yet, if we are people of goodwill, praying for the others' good, then perhaps we can start along this path of peace together.'

Today's Provision—Be Peaceful in Holiness: This is one of the many reasons I know I have a long, long way to go on this path towards holiness: I am not peaceful. I get riled up easily and have little patience with people who I think "don't get it." Being a source of peace doesn't mean being a doormat—being a pacifist doesn't mean passivity—but it does mean we take time to listen and we try, as Jesus did, to diffuse situations escalating into heated debate or violence. Look around your life today. Make a commitment to be a calming, non-confrontational voice. Be aware of opportunities to be holy by sowing peace.

Tuesday, December 4: *"No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him."* (Lk 10:21-24)

"No one knows who the Son is except the Father?" At first, I was put off by this phrase. All this time, I have been claiming to 'know' Jesus and who his is, but here he says, 'Sorry, it's only my Father who knows who I really am.' As I reflected on this in prayer (what one should always do when Scripture is confusing or off-putting), the Spirit led me to see that what Jesus says about his relationship with God is true for each of us. I like to think I am an "open-book," and yet, I know in my heart that my heart is only truly known by God. God sees things in me I don't see--how else do I explain being given so many second, third, and fourth chances! Jesus' words were probably accurate at the time—the disciples seemed incapable of really knowing him. And they are probably true today as well. Many know of Jesus. But do we really know him?

Today's Provision—Be Relational in Holiness: We might fall into the trap of thinking that to be holy, we need to stand apart and worship God from afar. To worship something or someone from afar without really knowing them can easily fall into blind idolatry. God wants us to be moved to holiness and to worship him because of his great love for us, not because we are supposed to. Spend some time today getting to know God by getting to know Jesus.

Wednesday, December 5: *"...On this mountain he will destroy the veil that veils all peoples, the web that is woven over all nations..." (Is 25:6-7)*

Visualize a group of individuals trying to break free from something that keeps them bound. It's an uncomfortable image: each one struggling to free themselves and by doing so, ensnaring everyone all the more. It's reminiscent of suspense movies when it's not until those entrapped band together that they're able to escape their predicament. Isaiah reminds us we need God's grace to free ourselves. As individuals or as nations, we cannot break free of the web that prevents us from living in peace. Struggling on our own won't work; we will quickly become overwhelmed. It's through praying for grace and peace, and working together that we begin to see the light more clearly. God will bless our efforts, giving us the strength and courage to continue until the day when *"the Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces,"* and we will see ourselves and others as we are—beloved children of God.

Today's Provision—Persevere in Holiness: If you are burned out from bad news or social justice work that doesn't seem to scratch the surface, remember this passage. It's through perseverance, patience, and teamwork that we keep on keeping on, but it is grace that ultimately bears the fruit. Allow God to be God and don't carry the burden alone.

Thursday, December 6: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom of heaven...Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. (Mt 7:21-24-27)*

Jesus tells us there are two steps: 1) Listen to my words; 2) Act on my words. We can have a big theological debate as to whether one of these steps are more important than the other, but truly both are essential. There are lots of people who listen and proclaim "Lord, Lord," but do not act as Christ in the world. Likewise, there are lots of people out there "doing good" when what they are really doing is imposing their own standards of what is "good" on others, without having Jesus' words and God's grace as their foundation.

Today's Provision—Listen AND Act in Holiness: There's an approach to theological reflection called the Pastoral Circle that can help you evaluate and process your work and life in the Kingdom. It's always a good idea to do this sort of reflection, especially for people involved in ministry--and I am not just talking about working with the poor--teachers, coaches, parents and grandparents, etc., can also benefit from this approach. The Pastoral Circle goes something like this: the person considers (or persons share) an experience that has challenged or enlightened them. It might not be the experience itself, but the person's reaction to the experience that needs to be processed. The individual or group spends some time in 'social analysis,' thinking about and discussing, in a nonjudgmental way, why this certain thing or response has happened. Next comes the important time for theological reflection--still using our heads: how would Jesus respond or lead us?--followed by empowering prayer and the discerned course of action. And then the circle begins again. On a personal level, this is similar to the nightly examen, with the added step—how would Jesus respond? See if you can identify a situation that might benefit from this approach to help you (and others) listen and act on Jesus' words.

Friday, December 7: *Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they said to him. Then he touched their eyes and said, "Let it be done for you according to your faith." (Mt 9:27-31)*

I love the way Jesus asks the blind men in this story about their belief. There's something so personal and intimate about the exchange. We see evidence throughout the gospels of the importance Jesus places on faith in order to be healed, but so many of the stories are about the crowds pressing in on him and the many being healed. With a few notable exceptions, Jesus is not always given the opportunity to listen to the voice and look into the eyes of those he heals. When you pray to Jesus, imagine him looking into your eyes and asking, *"Do you believe I can do this for you?"*

Today's provision—Holy Intimacy: Intimacy can be hard. You have to allow yourself to be vulnerable, and yet isn't that exactly what Jesus does by and throughout his entire life? If we are striving for holiness, then we also have to strive to be intimate with Jesus and with others as well. Think today about what stands in the way of intimacy in your relationship with Jesus. Start there. Once you've achieved closeness with Christ, doing so with others is easy!

Saturday, December 8: *"Behold, you will conceive and bear a son... he will be great and called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David...and of his Kingdom there will be no end." (Mt 9:35-10:1, 5-8)*

I am privileged to accompany people in contemplative prayer. I notice a common tendency among "new" pray-ers to question whether they are doing it "right." I wonder if Mary ever worried about "getting it right." She knew the prophecies about the Messiah; she hears as Gabriel describes her role. As she journeys with Jesus from his simple birth through his ministry and death on the cross, I wonder: did she ever think she had failed? Did self-doubt ever creep into her heart? We've discussed before about how Mary's "Yes!" is a life-long answer. I believe that any time she began to have second thoughts, she voiced her 'yes' over and over to God, and God brought her peace of mind and heart that is the model of holiness that all of us should follow!

Today's Provision—Saying "Yes!" to Holiness: I describe Mary as being "expectant without expectations;" having faith and hope in God's promise regardless of the apparent outcome. Think about something in your life that hasn't quite lived up to your expectations. Say 'yes' to God and have faith God will lead you through it to holiness.