

# Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,  
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.  
For the Octave of Christmas 2020, 2021.



**Sunday, December 27:** *"Let the peace of Christ control your hearts...Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..."*  
(Col 3: 12-21)

Psychologists say one of the more difficult things for us during this time of pandemic is facing the lack of control we actually have over our lives. Many suffer under the delusion that we control our destinies, so the idea that a little microbe can bring the world to its knees is hard for some to accept. But this time gives us a good opportunity to learn a valuable lesson: Peace that the world gives is short-lived and fragile. It may be an illusion of peace, but it is never the real thing. Only faith can do that.

**Today's Provision—Seek the Peace of Christ:** What does it mean to seek the peace of Christ? What do you imagine that would look like in your life? I think of the story of Jesus asleep amid the violent storm, when the disciples are fearing for their lives, and I compare that to the happiness I feel when I actually get a full night's sleep — I know I am not alone in that regard! Oh, to be that serene and calm!

Paul makes several sound suggestions as to how we can seek Christ's peace: be compassionate, kind, patient, and loving. Forgive. Be grateful. We give these virtues lip service, but in reality, how many of us are aware enough to live them every day? To obtain the peace we seek, we must first seek Christ in our everyday lives. And one way to do that is to put aside the newsfeed and pick up the gospels. Start with Matthew and go through the four gospels reading just Jesus' words -- in many Bibles they are highlighted in red. Savor them. Let them sink into your being and allow them to dwell in you richly. Let them be the building blocks for a foundation of true peace in your life.

**Monday, December 28:** *"If we say, 'We have not sinned,' we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin."* (1 Jn 1:5--2:2)

Is John contradicting himself here? He is writing to us so we do not commit sin, and yet, we can't say "we have not sinned." The distinction here is the difference between humanity's sinful nature and our acting upon that nature by committing sins. But human beings are made, *"a little less than the angels"*-- we also carry the spark of the divine within, and through Christ, forgiveness of sins, *"not for our sins only but for those of the whole world."* Our nature is not just sinful. We are also blessed and graced.

**Today's Provision—Celebrate the Spark of the Divine Within You:** Teilhard de Chardin said it this way: *"We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience."* A quote often attributed to C.S. Lewis (but actually said by the Scottish preacher, George Macdonald, whom Lewis revered): *"Never tell children, 'you have a soul. Teach them, 'you are a soul; you have a body.'"* The truth is we are sons and daughters of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus, bodies AND souls; human beings with weaknesses and frailties, AND with amazing gifts and strengths, capable of great love and mercy. If you tend to be hard on yourself, stop. Sure, we are to acknowledge our sins and ask for forgiveness and the grace to do better, but denying our divinely-given gifts is a refusal to accept God's love and generosity. God loves you as you are. Learn to love yourself.

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

In Greek, the word for walk translates to tread, meaning "to walk in a specified way." I imagine Jesus walked in a specific way. Yes, he was a man on a mission, but my guess is that he took his time. He didn't hurry. If he had rushed everywhere, he might not have heard the cries of Bartimaeus amid the crowd. He might have missed the touch of the hemorrhaging woman. He could have walked right past Zacchaeus hiding in a tree.

**Today's Provision—Pace yourself:** This may seem odd to say in the midst of a simpler, slower Christmas season. I'm talking not just about the physical pace we keep — which might indeed be slower — but about our spiritual and emotional pace as well. Anxiety and isolation can complicate the way we live: we might experience a frenetic feeling, anxious to get all the "C priority" projects finally done (guilty as charged!); conversely, we might find a dulling of our psychic energy, so much so that we don't seem to be able to move at all (a lack of daily structure can add to this). Jesus walked at a slow pace but with a sense of purpose. And he always made sure he set aside time alone with God. Think of Jesus as your personal trainer as you go into this new year. Ask him to set the pace for your life.

**Wednesday, December 30:** *"Do not love the world or the things of the world.... For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father."* (1 Jn 2:12-17)

In the New Testament, the word "cosmos" is used in three distinct ways: "It can mean the round planet earth; ...the second usage refers to the inhabitants of this world, and both appear in one verse: *'He was in the world [earth] and the world [earth] was made by Him, and the world [inhabitants of the earth] knew Him not.'* (Jn 1:10) These worlds of mankind are the worlds God loves. The third use refers to the combined activities, affairs, advantages, and accumulated assets of the worldly men on the earth. The Bible calls all these 'the things that are in the world.' (1 John 2:15)" (adapted from Bible.org)

**Today's Provision—Love the Earth as God Loves the Earth:** Consider making a commitment in the new year to care for the cosmos as defined in the first two meanings above. Treat the earth and her inhabitants with gentle care and respect. And note: the more we think of the world in that third way – what's in it for me – the more we risk destroying both the planet and the world of humankind that God loves. The one he sent his Son to redeem.

**Thursday, December 31:** *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."* (Jn 1:1-18)

As we come to the end of this particularly dark year, this seminal message that introduces John's Gospel is even more needed, more meaningful, and more real for me and I hope for all of you too. No darkness can overcome the light that is the Logos of God, the very essence of God's creative and eternal Spirit of Love.

**Today's Provision—Look for the Light:** If you are able, considering doing an examen of the past year. Often, our examens tend to focus on what went wrong or what we did wrong. Instead, look back and give thanks for the times when the Light shone for you amid the darkness. For many, that was our everyday experience so let's not take it for granted. Look more closely and see if you can see where the Light might have been hidden from your view. If all you can see is darkness, pray the Light will come upon you to lead you forward into the New Year. There is still much unknown as we venture into 2021. As always, we pray for just enough light to see us to our next step. Take off any blinders you are wearing and look around. God is true to his Covenant. The Light will be there.

**Friday, January 1, 2021:** *Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.* (Lk 2:16-21)

The shepherds returned, changed forever by the dramatic events they experienced. They went back to their flocks and families, just as we return to our normal lives – whatever that means now -- after the holidays. So we ask ourselves: "Have we allowed the mystery of Christmas to change us?"

**Today's Provision—Take Stock in What is Eternal:** We talked last week about writing down all the things we have learned over the past year and what lessons we want to take forward from these challenging times. What I am suggesting for today is that we allow ourselves to get lost in the mystery and the incredible blessing that is the Incarnation, to let the knowledge that God dwells in a very real way with each of us to sink deeply into our lived experience, especially during the difficult days ahead. It's not about incorporating new lessons into our lives. It is allowing the eternal truth of God's ultimate gift of mercy to strengthen us for whatever lies ahead. *"He came to share your plight, your fight, your night and point you toward tomorrow."* (Michael Moynahan, S.J.)

**Saturday, January 2:** *"As for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, so that you do not need anyone to teach you."* (1 Jn 2:22-28)

Consider this when listening to anyone who purports to preach the word of God—including me! We know that in the early church and throughout the ages up until now, there have been many teachers: some true to what is called the kerygma, or original teachings; some who stay true to the original teachings but express them in light of our current world and its challenges (e.g., Pope Francis); and those who have bent and twisted the teachings to fit their own desires for power or riches. Unfortunately, this latter category exists, not just with hucksters and storefront preachers, but in the highest echelons of organized religion. And depending on when and where you grew up, those who taught you the faith may have not been taught well themselves.

**Today's Provision—Seek to Learn, but Follow Your Conscience:** By virtue of our baptism and anointing we have received the Holy Spirit. To me, that means the ground of my soul has been made fertile to receive, as I grow, all the goodness of God's holy teachings as lived out in the life of Christ Jesus. John is not telling us to eschew learning and growing in faith, but that we test what we hear against our Spirit-inspired conscience. Paul too tells us, *"Test everything you hear. Hold onto what is good."* (1 Th 5:21) Are you hearing words of compassion and nonviolence? Mercy and forgiveness? The unconditional love of our God? Are you hearing about the need for prayer and courage in face of the sinfulness of humanity? Remember, the gospels are meant to challenge us not to make us feel good. True consolation and peace are not found on Easy Street, but in the back alleys and rural roads -- where Christ can be found.