

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
For the Third Week of Advent, 2025.



Where have you encountered a simple, incarnational mystery this Advent?

Sunday, December 14: *"Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: 'Be strong, fear not! Here is your God'"* (Is 35:1-6, 10). *"The LORD sets captives free.... the LORD raises up those who were bowed down...the LORD protects strangers, but the way of the wicked he thwarts"* (Ps 146). *"Be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord"* (Jas 5:7-10). *When John the Baptist heard of the works of Christ, he sent his disciples to Jesus... "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"* (Mt 11:2-11).

I couldn't decide which reading to reflect on, so I will try to pick up a thread that weaves these four together. Isaiah encourages those with weak knees and fearful hearts to be strong, to rely on the Lord. There are many people today who are frightened, scared to even go out of their houses to work or school each day. Good people. Moral people. People who want to believe the Lord sets captives free and protects strangers; they want to be patient, but right now, there is doubt, even for those like me who face no risks. We ask, *"Are you the one who is to come?"* "And if so, can your Spirit come upon us soon to free those who live in fear, to open the eyes of the blind, and to thwart the way of the wicked?"

Provision: Don't be blind! If you are unaware of the terror your neighbors and fellow citizens are facing right now, you need to pay closer attention. I have friends, American citizens born of American citizens of foreign descent who will not speak to cousins and friends in public in their shared language for fear some masked enforcers will swoop in and round them up. It is unspeakable that this is happening in the so-called "land of the free." Many who access the website for these reflections are Roman Catholics, and the bishops are finally doing something. Go to this website sponsored by the USCCB: <https://justiceformigrants.org/you-are-not-alone/> to see what your community or parish can do. It's for anyone with a conscience, and I pray will speak to those Christians who choose to continue to be blind.

Monday, December 15: *Jesus said, "Where was John's baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?" [The chief priests and elders] discussed this among themselves: "We do not know"* (Mt 21:23-27).

I wonder where the discussion would have gone if the chief priests and elders had answered with the truth: "He is a prophet, so it was both: human and heavenly!" How would Jesus respond? (I think Jesus would have been impressed! It's an interesting and often enlightening prayer exercise to imagine how scripture stories might have played out.)

Provision: Be a prophet. Prophets were and are flesh and blood humans inspired by the Spirit to speak out against sin and injustice. It is a call all Christians receive at baptism and affirmed in the rite of Confirmation. Too many of us are afraid to use our voices to call out the evil we see. We don't want to be "trolled" or "doxxed" or worse. We don't think it is our business. *"Did you fail in a day of adversity, did your strength fall short? Did you fail to rescue those who were being dragged off... those tottering because you said, 'We didn't know about it?' Surely, the Searcher of hearts knows and will repay all according to their deeds"* (Prv 24:10-12). Pray today for the courage to be a prophet. Then, be one!

Tuesday, December 16: *Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders ... "When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him"* (Mt 21:28-32).

In the musical *Les Misérables*, the main story line is the tension between the protagonist, Jean Valjean and Inspector Javert. Javert is obsessed with bringing Valjean to justice for violating parole for the crime of stealing bread to feed his nephew. Javert's rigid worldview is that those who have broken the law cannot change, even though at one point, Valjean spares him his life. Javert eventually takes his own life rather than change his view about redemption.

Could this be the way the chief priests and elders looked at things? Though they could quote Isaiah's prophecies of redemption, they were not convinced when they saw sinners who had been baptized by John. Sinners were sinners, doomed to that fate by the actions of their ancestors or their own weakness. And it didn't appear that these sinners' lives had changed; they were still poor, after all. The elders were stuck in their rigid worldview. How about us? Do we believe redemption is possible? For others? For ourselves?

Provision: Have faith in redemption: We can quote sayings about God's mercy, but do we believe them? Do we think it is there for everyone? Criminals who find the light in prison? The drug addict who winds up back on the streets? Ourselves, when we make the same mistake over and over? Pray to believe in the words you preach as true.

Wednesday, December 17: *"May his name be forever. As long as the sun may his name bear seed. And may all nations be blessed through him, call him happy"*(Ps 72, Hebrew Translation, Robert Alter).

Jewish scholars see this as a royal psalm rather than a messianic prediction, the last psalm composed by David for his son, Solomon. Earthly king, heavenly king... it really doesn't matter. All the beautiful imagery—mountains bearing peace for all peoples and nations, just treatment for the lowly, flourishing for the just person, abundant nourishment—we pray this to be the beneficence of all servant leaders, human and divine. And we pray that this peaceful, bountiful world is what would make kings and leaders happy, delighted to see those they lead live in harmony.

Provision: What makes Jesus happy? Have you ever read about the Gross National Happiness Index in the country of Bhutan? (<https://bhutanstudies.org.bt/gross-national-happiness/>) It's been a focus of the kings of Bhutan since the 1970's, and became an important measurement tool in 2008. I imagine the pillars of sustainable/equitable socio-economic development; environmental conservation; preservation/promotion of culture; and, good governance would please Jesus to no end. I'm sure he would see these as the will of his father. Would it be that all countries could care about these things for the entirety of their populations! Let's each of us think about how to incorporate these pillars in our daily lives. We might start to make a difference!

Thursday, December 18: *"The days will come when they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives, who brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt'; but rather, 'As the LORD lives, who brought the descendants of the house of Israel from all the lands to which I banished them; they shall again live on their own land'"*(Jer 23:5-8).

The last verses of this passage (the promise of a new King, "a righteous shoot to David") were likely added during Israel's exile in Babylon to provide hope to the people. They would no longer have to reach all the way back to their exodus from Egypt to see God's salvation; that one day, they would look back upon their return from this exile to recognize God's saving hand once again. It was to remind them that God was still with them, still active, still making things new, a good message for us as well as Christmas seasons come and go. This is not about commemorating an event some 2,000 years ago. We joyfully celebrate God's presence alive and active with us every single day.

Provision: Celebrate the Incarnation every day! This is not to say that holding onto and cherishing the memory of God's saving grace is a bad thing. It is particularly important during difficult times to remember the ways God has supported us in the past. But if we are always looking back, it can keep us from seeing the grace right under our noses, especially if that grace is wrapped in a package that is difficult to open. As you go about your day today, look for the signs of the Incarnation present in the people and things you experience. Celebrate!

Friday, December 19: *In the days of Herod, there was a priest named Zechariah; his wife was Elizabeth. Both were righteous in the eyes of God, but they had no child; Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years* (Lk 1:5-25).

Provision: Use your imagination to pray with this story. Put yourself in the Spirit's presence and read the whole passage from Luke. Then: Picture Zechariah, walking slowly on the dirt roads towards Jerusalem from Hebron, a trip of about 20 miles. It is an honor to serve as a priest, but he must leave his wife behind for two weeks. He is old and tired. The world is in disarray and sin abounds in Herod's kingdom; he is discouraged by what he sees happening. Yet, he perseveres and is granted the grace to offer prayers for the people. When Gabriel appears, he is fearful and doubtful. (*Think of times that you have been tired and discouraged by the state of the world around you. Reflect on times you have had doubts and fears about how God is present in the world, or about what God is asking of you.*)

Picture Elizabeth waving goodbye to her husband at the city gate, sending him off with blessings and prayer. She returns to her empty house alone, and as she walks, she is aware of the eyes of others watching her. She delights in the sound of families and children, and yet she is so lonely, deep in her soul. Tears burn in her eyes as she sits quietly to pray. (*Reflect on times when you have felt lonely, unsure of yourself, wondering why God has denied you the gifts you so fervently pray for, the times perhaps when you felt God was unfair, or felt a pang of envy over someone else's gifts.*)

Now picture the two of them, hopeful, joyful but silent, in seclusion, giving themselves time and space to prepare for this wondrous gift God has given them. (*Sit in silence in hope and joy, preparing for the wondrous gift God gives to us!*)

Saturday, December 20: *"Let it be done to me according to your word"*(Lk 1:26-38).

Provision: Pray "Let it be done to me." *"Let the Word that was in the beginning with God become flesh from my flesh. Let the Word, I pray, be to me, not as a word spoken only to pass away, but conceived and clothed in flesh, not in air, that he may remain with us. Let him be, not only to be heard with the ears, but to be seen with the eyes, touched with the hands, and borne on the shoulders. Let the Word be in me, not as a word written and silent, but incarnate and living"*(St. Bernard of Clairvaux, from "In Defense of Humility" from *Watch for the Light*).