

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, 2024—"Embracing Starlight."



Sunday, December 22: "He shall be peace" (Mi 5:1-4).

To which I respond: "How long, LORD? ...How long will you hide your face? How long must I carry sorrow in my soul, grief in my heart day after day? ...Look upon me, answer me, LORD, my God! Give light to my eyes...Lest my enemy say, I have prevailed.'...I trust in your mercy. Grant my heart joy in your salvation" (Ps 13). How long until his peace appears?

As I am writing, this thought jumps out at me: Who is this enemy I'm so worried about? Who or what is it that might prevail over me? I imagine some of us can put together a short list of people we'd like God to deal with, but here's a more practical way: Don't have any enemies. If I dehumanize or worse, demonize others, events, or issues, I am, in effect, creating enemies for myself. Of course, we all want peace, for ourselves, families, nations, and the world. But "He shall be peace" only when each of us commits to being peace in our own lives.

Provision: Be peace. This reminds me of a few words from my father's favorite Native American prayer: "I seek strength, not to be superior to my brother, but to fight my greatest enemy - myself" (https://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/oh_great_spirit_whose_voice.html). How often I find this to be true! My ego or my need to be right makes me then look at others as being wrong; sometimes, so wrong that I make them enemies. This doesn't mean we ignore immoral or unmerciful actions or policies. We work to right wrongs, but if we start with an "us/them" mentality, we will get no closer to peace than when we started and likely make things worse. Try this week to give a gift to the Prince of Peace: Be peace.

Monday, December 23: "And suddenly there will come to the temple, the LORD whom you seek... But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? (Mal 3:1-4, 23-24). When they came to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah..., but his mother said, "No. He will be called John" (Lk 1:57-66).

These passages address one of my favorite subjects: expectations. "Who can stand when he appears?" Who is willing to stand at the entrance of a smelly stable in the middle of a cold winter night? Who the heck thinks "the Lord we seek" will be a vulnerable baby born outside Jerusalem? Oh, and I just love the relatives and neighbors who are ready to give Elizabeth's baby a name *they* think is appropriate! "Sorry, say she and Zachariah, "We and the Lord have other plans."

Provision: What were you...what are you expecting? A good follow-up to yesterday's reflection. It can be our expectations that cause us disappointment. We expect others...and God...to work according to OUR plans. In Buddhism, this is one aspect of "beginner's mind:" Don't assume to know the answers. Be present to the Lord in your midst.

Tuesday, December 24: When King David settled in his palace, and the LORD had given him rest from his enemies he said, "Here I am living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God dwells in a tent!" (2 Sm 7:1-5; 8-12, 14, 16).

David feels ashamed that he is living in a great palace, while God is out back in a tent! (Although read Exodus:25-27 to see how elaborate that tent is!) David talks to Nathan about building God a permanent residence, but Nathan relates God's words, "I have been with you wherever you went." Over the centuries, elaborate temples were built to honor God, only to be plundered and destroyed. Tonight, we celebrate God coming to be with us where *we* are. And where does God arrive? In a dirty stable, amid the animals, in a manger, a feeding trough ... food for the world who came to live among us in the realities of human existence, a living temple that cannot be destroyed.

Provision: Look for God where you will find God. "Leave this chanting and singing... Whom do you worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple? ... God is where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathbreaker is breaking stones. God is with them in sun and in shower, and God's garment is covered with dust. Put off your holy mantle, and like God, come down on the dusty soil! Deliverance! Where is this deliverance to be found? Our Master has taken upon him the bonds of creation, bound with us all forever. Come out of your meditations and leave aside your flowers and incense! What harm is there if your clothes become tattered and stained? Meet and stand by God in toil and in the sweat of your brow." ("You are There," by Rabindranath Tagore, adapted from *The Heart of God*, p. 26-27). (Note: In sharing this poem, I, by no means, dismiss the essential need for times of quiet prayer and devotion. To do our work in the world, we need intimacy with God, just as Jesus had when he sought time alone in the mountains to be with God. But Jesus *lived*, and *lives still* "on the dusty soil" we trod. **This** is Incarnation.)

Wednesday, December 25: *"A light will shine on us this day: the Lord is born for us"*(Ps 97).

Given our theme of "Embracing Starlight," I'd like to share an excerpt of my Christmas reflection from 2010:

Provision: "There is one provision that led us here we might have taken for granted, something we didn't need to work for or even pray about. An "undeserved light" available to each of us every day...the guiding light of the Christmas Star.

So, eat, drink, and be merry. But when all the carols have been sung and the decorations are being put away, keep one little star ornament out this year. Hang it where it can be noticed. Let it be a reminder that our Advent journey is indeed our life's journey, so we need to stay awake and aware. But if the road gets rough and our provisions dwindle, remember—the Star is always there to light your way and guide you home. Christmas blessings to you all!"

Thursday, December 26: *They cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. They threw him out of the city and began to stone him* (Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-59).

Forgive my irreverence, but the following came to mind: I imagine I am back in Catholic grade school, taking our bows after the Nativity Pageant, when Sister "whisper-yells" to us, "All of you—Mary, Joseph, angels, sheep—exit the stage! We've got to set up for Stephen's stoning!" (Sorry, but God must have a sense of humor—how else can we explain God's patience with us!) I thought maybe there was something more pleasant to use from the Common Lectionary, but alas, we all get to experience "the day after!" But if we truly believe the Incarnation is not a season, but a lived reality, we also believe God's presence on earth is not all stars and carols but is deep in the messiness and darkness of life.

Provision: "Finding God in all things." This is a basic tenet of Ignatian Spirituality. The late Jesuit, David Fleming describes it this way: *"Most people say, 'I'll believe it when I see it.' Ignatius says, 'When I believe it, I will see it.'"*

This is very hard at times. How do we look at the evils in Syria, the Israeli/Arab conflict, the sick, the poor, the dying all over the world, the scapegoating of immigrants and still see God? Perhaps, we see God in how we and others are moved to make a difference. Remember, the Incarnation is now. What will you do to bring the light of God into the darkness?

Friday, December 27: *"They have taken the Lord from the tomb"*(Jn 20:1-8).

Who are the "they" Mary of Magdala is referring to? The Romans? Jewish elders? Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea? Tomb robbers? The gardener? If we go back to our reflection on Sunday, we remember the "we/they," "us/them" is a recipe for conflict. I'm not questioning Mary's panicked concerns and assumptions. "They" had to be somebody! The idea that "they" could be divine Love, a Love that defeats death never crossed her mind.

Provision: In the realm of divine Love, there is no "us and them." It is hard to put away our tribal instincts. Those instincts are part of our animal nature and the need to defend ourselves. And yet, we know we are also divine in our nature, and our task on this earth is to have our "God-spark" overcome the need for self-preservation, to allow Love to defeat fear and death. Reflect today on who or what you consider "them." Really give it some thought and be honest. We all do this, so don't beat yourself up. See if you can make a conscious effort to continue to be aware, so the next time you encounter one of "them," you'll be ready with a smile and a kind word!

Saturday, December 28: *"A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more"*(Jer 31:15, as cited in Mt 2:13-18).

"Al-Ram identified with Ramah in Benjamin, a town mentioned multiple times in the Bible. Al-Ram (Arabic: الرّام) ...is a Palestinian town which lies northeast of Jerusalem, just outside the city's municipal border"(Wikipedia and validated sources). This took my breath away. While we can't know for sure the actual location of Ramah, it is close to the very place where Jewish and Palestinian mothers weep today, unconsolable for their children who are no more.

(Quoting from my reflection from December 28, 2023): Today is the Feast of the Holy Innocents. It's a despicable story and we may be tempted to ignore it. Just like the stories in the news now: hundreds of thousands of children dying of starvation; tens of thousands of poor children sold as prostitutes and slaves; the 2,500 children killed (in 2021) by gun violence in the US. ...Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, *"The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children."* Conversely then, the indictment of society is found in what it does to its children.

Provision: Save the children. Herod's slaughter continues. Research local programs [to aid families caught in the web of violence]. Contribute to charities that show a strong commitment to child health and welfare. Don't be afraid to speak out against violence and guns. ...And pray, pray, pray, not just for the unborn, but for children living every day under the specter of death. Let's start focusing on our collective future instead of on just our own.