

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

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



This Advent, we look for the intersection of simplicity and incarnational mysticism.

Sunday, December 7: *"There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD"* (Is 11:1-10).

What do you read in this verse? For me, it says when people know the Lord, they are not violent or evil. So, logic says, if individuals and nations still commit atrocities and violent acts, they do not know the Lord...even as they claim to be God's "warriors!" *"The way of the Lord, the way of peace they do not know and there is no justice where they go"* (Is 59:8).

Provision: Get to know God. Well, this is quite an assignment to start the week! In this same passage from Isaiah, militaristic language is used: he will strike and slay the ruthless and wicked. He will be armed for battle with band and belt. Yet look at the "weapons" this shoot from Jesse will use: words of peace, justice, faithfulness. *"Those who err in spirit shall acquire understanding and those who find fault shall receive instruction"* (Is 29: 24)—doesn't sound too warlike to me! Today, consider your image of God. Jesus Christ came to live among us to show us the true face of God. How real is that face for you?

Monday, December 8: *The LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid, because I was naked, so I hid myself"* (Gen 3:9-15, 20).

"I was afraid. I was naked. You know, the way you made me. Simple, unashamed, unencumbered, not needing to hide from you. You clothed my bones with flesh, beautiful naked flesh that allowed me to smell and taste and see and touch all the wonders of your creation. You breathed your Spirit into me...talk about an incarnational mystery! Why did you do that? You knew I'd mess up. You knew I'd make things so much more complex by striking out on my own. I'd like to somehow get back to that simple existence where I walk with you, free as the breeze that moves in the trees of your garden. Is there some way we can work together on this? Some way another incarnational mystery can come about?"

Provision: Let the incarnational mystery come about in you. We don't need to be perfect, pure, without sin. We just need to be willing to allow the mystery to come alive within us. Pray today for the grace to accept God's gift.

Tuesday, December 9: *"Comfort, give comfort to my people," says your God... "All flesh is grass, and all their glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower wilts when the breath of the LORD blows upon it. So then, the people is the grass. Though the grass withers and the flower wilts, the word of our God stands forever"* (Is 40:1-11).

"Ah, excuse me, Mr. or Ms. Second Isaiah: This is how you *comfort* us?! Reminding us we wither and wilt like the grass?! Here today and gone tomorrow?!"

As I prayed with this reading today, it came clear to me: this is what the term "incarnational mysticism" is really all about! We read tomorrow, *"Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the eternal God!"* We need not fear our transient nature. The God within, the Spirit that animates our earthly bodies is eternal. As Christians, this is the why and wherefore of the Incarnation. This is the reason "knowledge of the Lord" we spoke of on Sunday will lead us away from fear of death, and the violence that can bring, into the great comforting strength of the Word of God that stands forever.

Provision: Take comfort. Give comfort. The holidays can be warm and nourishing for some, but bleak for others: people living in fear of deportation, the unemployed, those grieving lost loved ones, depressed, or addicted. If you are blessed to be warm—literally and figuratively—be a source of comfort to others less fortunate. Go beyond material donations if you can, and serve at a soup kitchen or visit a nursing home. These days, even a kind word or a smile can brighten someone's day. If you are lonely or depressed, pray God will give you the comfort—the strength and courage—to reach out to a church or community support group. Seek help and allow others to care for and comfort you.

Wednesday, December 10: *"He gives strength to the fainting; for the weak he makes vigor abound. Though young men grow weary, and youths stagger and fall, they that hope in the LORD will renew their strength"* (Is 40:25-31). *"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest"* (Mt 11:28-30).

SIGH! If there is one thing we could all use right now, it is rest. When I reread things I've written in the past. I seem to have thought things could not get any more complex or difficult than they were at the time...but I am always proven

wrong. The challenge I face is finding time to rest while not getting tired; reflecting, but not running away from the problems of the world. Is this a challenge for you, too?

Provision: Rest...and encourage others to rest. Saturday's reflection has to do with our children and our future. There are a lot of studies in the news these days about our young people, many who are weary; some staggering, some falling. As their elders, one small way we can turn our hearts back to our children is by modeling simple things that bring us rest. Not vacations that stress us out or over-the-top holiday preparations (I feel my adult children's skeptical gaze right now!) Things like prayer, meditation, "unplugging," agreeing to simplify or eliminate some time-worn (not time-honored) traditions. Be intentional today. Think about the coming weeks and how you can bring rest into your life and the lives of others.

Thursday, December 11: *"Since John the Baptist came, up to this present time, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and the violent are taking it by storm"* (Mt 11:11-15, Jerusalem Bible translation).

There is little consensus among Biblical scholars as to what Jesus is talking about when he says the kingdom has been subjected to violence by the violent. Some translations indicate it means the kingdom of heaven is forcing its way into humanity, but most I reference say the kingdom of heaven is under attack, assailed by violent powers trying to overtake it. A bit too close for comfort considering what is happening with nationalist Christian movements.

Provision: Get to know Jesus (2). We go back to our reflection on Sunday. Violence and hatred are human flaws. They are never of God. Ethically, there is the theory and doctrine of "just war." Those in roles of defending the innocent against those doing harm are absolved of guilt; Jesus even tells us there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for another (although who is "innocent" and who is "doing harm" seem to be a matter of opinion these days, rather than a matter of ethics, morality, and truth). If you are interested in learning more about Jesus and nonviolence, books and essays by Fr. John Dear or theologian Walter Wink can be very enlightening.

Friday, December 12: *"Silence, all mankind, in the presence of the LORD! For he stirs forth from his holy dwelling"* (Zec 2:14-17).

"There is nothing in the world that resembles God as much as silence" (Meister Eckhart). In essence, Eckhart is saying this: Silence is a privileged entry into the realm of God and into eternal life...there is a huge silence inside each of us that beckons us into itself, and the recovery of our own silence can begin to teach us the language of heaven....Silence is a language that is infinitely deeper, more far-reaching, more understanding, more compassionate, and more eternal than any other language. ...It's the language of heaven and it's already deep inside of us, beckoning us, inviting us to deeper intimacy with everything" (Ron Rolheiser, OMI, 2001, <https://ronrolheiser.com/in-praise-of-silence/>).

Provision: Find time today to be silent. I mean really silent. I mean turning off the TV, phone, computer, ticking clocks, and anything else that beckons you with beeps and dings and other little noises. This means the kids, spouses, parents, whoever else beckons you with not-so-subtle noises! Put on headphones with no sound. See if you can work it for a whole half-hour. Gee! A whole half an hour to be silent, just breathing. We are mid-way through Advent. Give yourself an early Christmas gift of seeing and hearing and growing in intimacy with God in silence.

Saturday, December 13: *"You were destined, it is written, in time to come to put an end to wrath before the day of the LORD, to turn back the hearts of fathers toward their sons"* (Sir 48:1-4, 9-11).

This last phrase—turning the hearts of elders back toward their children—always gives me pause. With a few exceptions, I don't see much that looks like our hearts are turning towards our children's futures: cuts in education, food assistance, and medical research; discouraging preventative means of warding off childhood diseases, a job market that is becoming increasingly difficult, the lack of affordable housing, the dismantling of efforts to offset climate change, while at the same time, giving tax breaks to the rich. I don't know. Maybe I am missing something. But I pray we come to realize that without turning our hearts back toward our children, we have no future.

Provision: "Don't look back. You're not going that way." Or, *"Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God"* (Lk 9:62). Or, *"See, I am making all things new!"* (Rev 21:5). Or, *"Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,"* (Phil 3:13-14). Or, *Let your eyes look directly forward, and your gaze be straight before you"* (Prv 4:25). Or, *"Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Is 43:18).

"I see him, though not now; I observe him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a scepter shall rise from Israel" (Nm 24:17).