

Provisions for the Journey to Bethlehem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings,
preparing us to meet the Christ Child.
The Octave of Christmas and The New Year



Sunday, December 28: *The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt" (Mt 2:13-15, 19-23).*

I wish I could find the right words to get some people in my country to read this story with open eyes. I wish they could see in this passage the story of so many undocumented immigrants as they flee their homelands to save their families from forces looking to destroy them. I could provide links to all kinds of data sources, even ICE itself, that show a majority of those arrested in ICE raids have never committed a crime, much less a violent one. It doesn't seem to matter. The answer is usually, "Well, being undocumented is a crime." Really? "Being undocumented" seems, to some, to mean, "You're illegal. You don't matter. We don't care."

Provision: *"Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:12-17).* "Blessed St. Joseph, you heeded the angel's warning and fled in the night to protect your precious wife and child. We implore your care and protection for all who flee from persecution. Give them courage to stand up for their dignity and strengthen those who stand beside them as allies. Open the eyes and soften the hardened hearts of those who fail to see the Holy Family in these men, women, and children. We ask this, we do this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen."

Monday, December 29: *There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. ...It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ. ..."Lord, now let your servant go in peace: my own eyes have seen the salvation which you prepared in the sight of every people" (Lk 2:22-35).*

Simeon is content now and ready to die. He has seen the Christ. But he doesn't get to experience the promised salvation during his lifetime. He just gets the satisfaction of knowing that sometime, somewhere in the future, all will be at peace, all will be saved. As Paul tells us in Hebrews 11, our ancestors in faith, *"though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised."* As we look around us, peace seems out of reach. And yet, like Simeon, we have seen the Christ. We too are patient, we too live in hope, trusting in God's promise.

Provision: Rely on faith. I imagine most of us say we have faith, but does that faith run deep enough so that we could say to God, *"Let your servant go in peace?"* That's a tough one, particularly when it comes to imagining the whole world at peace. We'd be happy just to see our families and communities getting along! What can you do to foster peace? Like Simeon, rely on faith and be open to the Spirit as she calls you to witness to the promise.

Tuesday, December 30: *"Do not love the world or the things of the world... the world and its enticement are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever" (1 Jn 2:12-17).*

Let's not misinterpret this passage. There is no more moving a prayer than to behold the majesty of God's world, to be "enticed" by the beauty of creation, and then to be moved to protect God's earth. It is God's will that we love the earth and care for the gifts God has given us. When John refers to "the things of the world," he means the enticements of our human condition that can overtake and replace the primacy of God in our lives. *"Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity"* (from *The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson).

Jesus tells us, *"Where your treasure is, there your heart is also."* The Sufi mystic, Rumi, says, *"You are what you seek."* Treasure the earth and seek God's will and your heart will remain with God forever.

Provision: Treasure Mother Earth. Unfortunately, a lot of laws that protect Mother Earth and her creatures are being rescinded, at least in the US, in favor of corporate profits and the economy. This is *exactly* what John is talking about today—how can you read it any other way? It's important to remember this is God's world. We must stop behaving like it is ours to do with it what we want. Do what you can to take care of Mother Earth, and advocate for laws to protect her.

Wednesday, December 31: *"He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him"* (Jn 1:1-18).

Several of my friends are retiring soon (I'm fortunate to know people who can retire!), and one of the activities they are excited to undertake is looking into their genealogy. (We remember listening to Jesus' genealogy recently!) From our little ones asking, "where did I come from?" to those wanting to get a sense of belonging and their place in history, it's interesting to find out about our roots. (There's a popular PBS show about this very thing.)

We hear today that the world (the "cosmos" meaning the planet and all its inhabitants) came to be through Christ—The Christ is our root—but that the world (meaning humanity) **did** not know him; I'm not so sure we know him now either.

Provision: Commit to get to know Jesus in the New Year! You may say, "Oh, I know Jesus," but really, are you more like Job: *"My ears had heard of you"* (42:5). Have your eyes, mind, and heart really seen him? Is Jesus an intimate friend? How does one get to know Jesus better? If you are a regular pray-er, you might consider the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in everyday life (<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/>; I suggest you pray these with a director to help guide you.) Or just start reading the stories in the New Testament with an eye for what Jesus says, and what he means, imagining you are there listening to him. Picture the setting, the other people around you, and even what Jesus may be thinking and feeling. Get to know Jesus better in this new year.

Thursday, January 1 *"May God grant us grace and bless us, may he shine his face upon us. To know on earth your way, among all the nations your rescue"* (Ps 67, Hebrew translation).

By the time you read this, I worry the news may be filled with new atrocities as bad as what we've seen worldwide over the past few weeks, not to mention the "everyday" terror that occurs within families and in cities and countries all over the world. I don't know if you are a New Year's resolution person, but perhaps amid the personal commitments to lose weight, exercise more, spend less money, etc., etc., we all make a commitment to pray for peace.

Provision: Counter every piece of bad news with a prayer for peace. Each time you hear or read about some sadness, evil, or suffering, respond in quiet prayer, "Lord God, bring us peace." There are those who dismiss prayer as a means for change, but the more we pray together for peace, the more peace will be ours to take out into the world. *May God's face shine upon you this coming year. Have a blessed and healthy New Year!*

Friday, January 2: *"Sing to the Lord a new song"* (Ps 98).

How are you doing on our New Year's resolution from yesterday? (I hope none of us have had any need to use it yet!)

"A new song, eh?" First, we have to know the song we've been singing. Has it been a song of praise, of lament, of desire, of intention, of despair, of gratitude? Mine tend to be all of these mixed together, but usually a little light on the praise and gratitude front: praising God's wondrous deeds, thanking God for God's kindness and faithfulness.

Provision: Write some lyrics for your new song. The psalms are amazing. They run the gamut from praise and thanksgiving to sorrow and the wish for vengeance—often within the same psalm! It's an interesting prayer exercise to write your own psalm, so give it a try (although leave out the vengeance part—that's not what Jesus would want). Don't be shy or think it needs to be melodious and in meter or poetic in any way. Make it real. God loves real! Then sing it aloud, in the shower if you must. Use it for prayer until it's time for another new song.

Saturday, January 3: *"Anyone who abides in him does not sin; anyone who sins has not seen him, nor has known him"* (1 Jn 2:29-3:6, literal Greek translation).

John tends to be very either/or. He likes to make declarative statements like the one here without any caveats or wiggle room. I think he can be harsh, and yet I understand the point he is trying to make.

The fact is that we all sin. Most of the time it's the run-of-the-mill stuff, one-offs, nothing too dramatic or damaging. We lose focus and slip up, but we remain with Jesus. What I hear John talking about today is awareness. If we are aware and in the present moment, if we take the time to respond rather than react, we allow our hearts to abide in Jesus, and the Spirit will always lead us in the right direction. Awareness is the key.

Provision: Remember, Jesus abides in us. I don't want to ignore or discount the many people who fall into the trap of serious sin due to all types of toxic habits, influences, or mental illness, some of which are outside their control. In fact, it can often be the sins of others that have brought them to sin. And unfortunately, we tend to scorn and punish these people rather than offering them help and love. We may be tempted to judge, but even though it doesn't look like they are abiding in Jesus, Jesus abides in them in the most compassionate and loving of ways. *"Go and do likewise."*