

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Preparing for Lent, 2019



During Lent, we are called to pray, to fast, and to give.

These three offerings will be the starting point for the daily provisions we request for our Lenten journey.

Sunday, March 3: *"Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own? ... You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye."* (Lk 6:39-45)

Funny thing about that wooden beam: once I removed it from my eye, the splinter I saw in my brother's eye seemed to disappear as well! This reading is appropriate for what is happening in politics today, at least in the US. One side calls out the other side for their transgressions, but so often fail to recognize they are doing the exact same thing.

It is said the things that bother us the most about others are often the very same traits with which we struggle. Let's see if we can make a commitment today to refrain from judging and instead, take an honest look at ourselves.

Today's Provision: Fast From Judging Others. Try to be aware today of how you judge others. It can be subtle, so much so that we tend not to notice it. What feelings arise within you when you are critical of others or their opinions? See if you can quell the tendency to react and instead open your heart and mind to respond compassionately.

Monday, March 4: *"To the penitent, God provides a way back, he encourages those who are losing hope... Return to him and give up sin, pray to the LORD... Turn again to the Most High and away from your sin..."* (Sir 17:20-24)

Back in the early 1960s, there was a theory of moral theology called "The Fundamental Option." The authors based the premise on the idea that *"To have some ... fundamental orientation of life is not the exception but rather the rule; most people have a more or less definite orientation ... which constitutes a form of life for them. It provides an organizing norm to which their particular activities are related."* At its simplest, it's not much different from St. Augustine's idea that there are two types of people: those who reside in the "City of God" and those who reside in the "City of Man." There's a lot of debate about some aspects of this theory, but Ben Sira's words today remind me about the importance of keeping our focus centered on God. Of course, we all sin, and yes, at times, turn our backs on God through grave sin. But God always provides a way for us to turn around and return to him.

Today's Provision: Pray For the Grace to Keep our Eyes and Heart Focused on God. I imagine the fundamental option as being a kind of continuum on which I move back and forth. My focus is on God, but through everyday sins and everyday good works, I move farther away from or closer to God; but my orientation remains towards God. Conversely, I might be appear close to God, pious and holy, and yet my motivation is pride or self-interest. (Those who have abused children or put their own reputations before the safety of children come to mind here.) Each night, it's a good idea to see where you are on the continuum, but it's also important to ask yourself: Is my life oriented toward or away from God?

Tuesday, March 5: *"In works of charity one offers fine flour, and when he gives alms he presents his sacrifice of praise... to avoid injustice is an atonement... Appear not before the LORD empty-handed..."* (Sir 35:1-12)

In a reading from Isaiah later this week, God admonishes the Jews for their fasts and tells them what sacrifices he really wants. In today's passage from Sirach, we are told that those who give alms are in fact offering sacrifices of praise. Charitable works are equal to the offering of fine flour on the altar. This theme is repeated throughout the Old Testament: Hosea 6:6-- *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice;"* Proverbs 21:3-- *"To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice;"* Amos 5:21-24-- *"Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.. But let justice roll like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."* God makes it crystal clear through the words of the prophets and by the Word Made Flesh: our sacrifices and fasts and offerings of praise and atonement are empty rituals if we neglect the needy and oppressed in our midst. What are you bringing to God today?

Today's Provision: Give To Those in Need and that Suffer Injustice. Giving involves the three Ts: time, talent, and treasure. For many, time is their most valuable commodity; it is easier to open their wallets than their calendars. Consider doing something different this Lent. If you've been generous with your treasure, what talent could you share for the good of others? Can you spare some time each week to work directly with those in need?

Wednesday, March 6: *"When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet as the hypocrites do to win the praise of others. ...When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who stand and pray so that others may see them. When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites so that they may appear to others to be fasting."* (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18)

Jesus is calling out his favorite target again—the hypocrites who make great displays of piety and sacrifice, all for the attention it brings them. This does not mean anyone who announces their intention to be generous or give something up is a hypocrite; in fact, some influential people like Bill Gates come to mind. Their actions are not for show, but can serve as a model for others to do likewise. I imagine we can all think of people whose only motivation is for attention and show! Providing others with a humble model to follow is not wrong, and can inspire others to great things as well. Let's just make sure when people look at us, they see authentic witness, not a self-serving charade.

Today's Provision: Give, Pray, Fast. Sounds like a good title for a book. ☺ Or it could be the subtitle for the Bible, I guess! Think about completing the following sentence: This Lent I will: give to _____; pray for _____; fast from _____. This doesn't have to be a big production but articulate a plan. If it helps, share it with a group of friends committed to doing this same exercise. Gather each week for coffee and share how your efforts are going.

Thursday, March 7: *"Choose life."* (Dt 30: 15-20) *"Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."* (Lk 9:22-25)

How do we choose life? Jesus tells us: we choose life by losing it. It's not a surprise this concept is hard to grasp. We choose life by giving our life away—to the Lord and to others. This does not mean we surrender our free will. What it says is that each moment, each decision we face, we take time to ask ourselves, "Which choice leads to life?" Sometimes, we follow that path to life and sometimes we don't. We are human. We make mistakes. We allow ourselves to be led astray. We choose to follow other gods like what is most profitable or comfortable or popular. What would it mean for you to choose life this Lent?

Today's Provision: Give to the Lord Your Life. I sometimes wonder about those who mock religions by saying we are all just puppets with God pulling the strings; or why at times I resist "giving up control" to follow God's will. My freewill is always available to me. The advice Moses and Jesus gives us today is borne of wisdom, and those of us who have lived awhile can attest. Choosing life by following the way of the Lord will always lead to peace. Maybe not comfort, maybe not happiness in the conventional sense, but always to peace. How will you choose peace today?

Friday, March 8 *"Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? This, rather, is the fasting I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, setting free the oppressed; ...sheltering the homeless; clothing the naked..."* (Is 58:1-9)

Let's consider what God is saying: A real fast—the kind God wants-- is not ashes and sackcloth, elaborate penances, or depriving ourselves of food. A true fast is setting aside self-importance, prejudice, judgment, ignorance, and lack of awareness. It is moving beyond our blindness to see the need in our midst. None of us is so sheltered that we cannot look and see people who are oppressed in body or in spirit. How do God's words change the way you look at fasting?

Today's Provision: Fast from Self-Serving Fasts. 'But it's so much easier to give up chocolate or wine or cheeseburgers!' 'Oh, but I always use the Lenten fast to get ready for bathing suit season!' There are two reasons why we fast: the first is to make ourselves aware of sacrifice, to pay more attention to things we take for granted and to those who are not so blessed. We sometimes say it is to remind us of Jesus' sacrifice, but somehow, my giving up gossiping or judging for a few weeks doesn't quite seem match up to death of a cross. The second reason--especially if we are not spending the \$5 each day for the latte, or gaining several hours a week by fasting from video games—is to consider how we can use the money or time we save to give to someone in need. Go back to that exercise we did on Ash Wednesday. Is the thing from which we are fasting self-serving or other-serving?

Saturday, March 9: *The Pharisees and their scribes complained to his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"* (Lk 5:27-32)

Jesus hangs out with a shady crowd. That's what the elders think. I wonder what his early followers think. Peter's a small businessman. He has to pay taxes like everyone else. He's probably not too fond of the likes of Levi, the tax collector, either. Much of what Jesus teaches is upside down from what the disciples have been taught all their lives. Some are alienating parents and families for keeping company with such questionable characters. Of course, Jesus is the great physician whose very presence is healing for those in darkness. We are weak, so it's wise for us to consider the company we keep lest we fall into sin. But what about those whose "shadiness" has nothing to do with sin?

Today's Provision: Pray for and Give to Those Judged by Society as Unworthy. Who are the tax collectors and sinners in your world? The people who make you cross to the other side of the street when you see them coming? The people you wouldn't be caught dead with because they are not popular or they have a disability or whatever makes them less likely to be accepted by the crowd? Remember, in our society, being unworthy may have nothing to do with sinfulness; in fact, these days it appears sinfulness is in vogue! Make a point of praying for the person you see is struggling. Give them a smile, a place to sit, a helping hand if they need one. In the Old Testament reading today, Isaiah calls for the Jews to be "repairers of the breach." What are the breaches in your family, community, church, world? What can you do to restore dignity to those society has left behind?