

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Lent Week Two, 2023



Sunday, March 5: *The LORD said to Abram: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk...to a land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Gn 12:1-4a).*

I wonder if Abram was the first person God went to when God was looking to find a patriarch for his great nation. What if there were several others God spoke with, but they were either too busy to listen or too afraid of what they thought they were hearing? Given the way God chooses ordinary people to do his work, I imagine Abram was just a simple guy—nothing special—who was willing to listen to a voice deep in his heart. A regular person who was not afraid to venture out and take a risk, to find out something new about himself, the world, and this divine presence called God.

Today's Provision: Fast from a hard heart. A reminder that our theme this Lent is fasting, so how does that relate to this story? Does *"If today you hear God's voice, harden not your heart"* ring a bell? (Ps 95) I'd guess most hard hearts are not created by malice, anger, or evil but by distractions, world weariness, or fear. A hard heart has a way of making us deaf to God's invitation to greater things. Let God bless and call you so that you may be a blessing to others.

Monday, March 6: *Jesus said to his disciples: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk 6:36-38).*

*"A mother once approached Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice and justice demanded death. 'But I don't ask for justice,' the mother explained. 'I plead for mercy.' 'But your son does not deserve mercy,' Napoleon replied. 'Sir,' the woman cried, 'it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.' 'Well, then,' the emperor said, 'I will have mercy.' And he spared the woman's son" (Luis Palau, *Experiencing God's Forgiveness*, Multnomah Press, 1984.).*

Today's Provision: Fast from a hard heart, part two: When you hear the words 'forgiveness and mercy'—and we often hear those two words together—do you distinguish between the two? The Greek word for mercy, *oikteírō*, means "to express visceral compassion." In my experience, mercy is much harder than forgiveness. Forgiveness means I make amends with another, aware that I have been forgiven many times over for the sins and mistakes of my life. I let go of ill feelings and resentment. Mercy is an act that offers leniency in the face of justice. We hear of it in the news every so often when a victim's family pleads for mercy for the convicted perpetrator. We will read about a perfect example of mercy in this Saturday's gospel. (Can you guess?) Reflect on times in your past when you've been hurt or have hurt another. Did your heart become hardened? Were you able to forgive or to ask for forgiveness? What about mercy? It means no strings attached. It is what God grants us over and over again. Consider where you might be able to show mercy to someone who has sinned against you.

Tuesday, March 7: *"Come now, let us set things right, says the LORD: Though your sins be like scarlet, they may become white as snow; though they be crimson red, they may become white as wool" (Is 1:10, 16-20).*

So, God invites us back to 'set things right.' The Lord offers us mercy in the face of our crimson red wrongdoings. All is possible with God, so it's no problem for God to make our scarlet sins like white snow or wool. The problem usually comes when we try to forgive ourselves.

Today's Provision: Set things right with yourself. I consider my sins. Some of them are still a lovely shade of pink! I have accepted God's forgiveness. I have accepted God's mercy. But, come on—it's God. God can do that. But I also know that if I can accept God's forgiveness but can't forgive myself, that's classic hubris: I am placing myself above God, and if memory serves me, that too is a sin—a big one! You can't get around it.

How about starting to set things right with God by first giving thanks to God for his mercy and then showing mercy towards yourself? God looks lovingly and mercifully at you, not despite who you are but because of who you are—God's beloved. See yourself through God's eyes for a change. See in yourself what God sees in you.

Wednesday, March 8: *"Into your hands I commend my spirit...In your hands is my destiny"* (Ps 31).

As I was reading these psalm verses, I realized they are both an acknowledgement of God's primacy in our lives—our destiny is surely in God's hands—and also the truth of what we must do to make that acknowledgement real for us. We might be just fine accepting, in theory, that God holds our lives in his hands, but it can be harder to take the next important step of commending our lives to God.

Today's Provision: Turn your life over to God. In the New Testament, we hear the phrase (or a variation), *"I commend my spirit"* twice: once when Jesus is dying on the cross and then, when Stephen is being stoned to death. This might make us hesitant to want to pray with these words! But in reality, to commend in this context means to entrust something to another for care or protection; in this case, it's our lives we entrust to the One who never fails. Sounds like a good idea to me! Imagine the peace you will experience if you consciously and sincerely entrust your spirit each day to God's care! Think about praying this throughout the day. See what difference it makes in your heart.

Thursday, March 9: *"Blessed the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked, nor walks in the way of sinners, nor sits in the company of the insolent, but delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night"* (Ps 1).

"Wait a minute. Walking and talking with sinners, eating with wicked tax collectors? Isn't that exactly what the elders are jumping on Jesus for this week?" Blessed the person, who, by their welcoming and holy presence, by the strength of their faith, can change the hearts and lives of sinners, who, by the way, include you and me!

Today's Provision: Fast from distraction. "Okay," you may say, "I keep my distance from wicked sinners, but how do I meditate on God's law day and night?" Well first, let's do a gut check on verse one. I may not purposely hang around with insolent, nefarious characters, but really, how shielded am I from stories of evil and bad news, and from a culture that normalizes violence, hate, bigotry, and immorality? It's pretty hard to protect ourselves, but one good way is this idea of "meditating" on God's law of love. No, not by sitting quietly in church or in full lotus position doing deep breathing (although I highly recommend both!). It is by allowing ourselves to see with God's eyes in every situation. It is fasting from the distractions that occupy us 24/7. It is praying always by asking ourselves, "What would love have me do here?" I know some incredible people who meditate and act on God's love every minute of every day, precisely in how they walk with "sinners" ...like you and me!

Friday, March 10: *"Therefore, I say to you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit"* (Mt 21:33-43, 45-46).

In Jesus' parable about the vineyard's wicked tenants, they do indeed produce fruit. Sounds like maybe they produced lots of fruit. The trouble is they want to keep it all for themselves. They don't want to share. They want to be the ones who benefit from it without giving the Master his due.

Today's Provision: Do what you do for God's greater glory. There are many ways to consider this parable: one is that we look at the earth as the vineyard. For too long, too many of us have kept the earth's bounty all for ourselves without worrying about those who have less or nothing, or how future generations will survive. Or let's look at our churches: is everyone welcome just as they are? Are all able to share in the fruits? I'm afraid many denominations are elite clubs just for those who belong—"the fruit is only for people in our group!" Another way to think about this is how we approach our charitable and social justice work. Are we doing what we do out of love and for God's greater glory, or...for the accolades or with the idea that we are reserving our place in heaven? Take a look at your work in the vineyard, then take a look at your heart. Are you giving the Master his due?

Saturday, March 11: *"His son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly, bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found'"* (Lk 15:1-3, 11-32).

St Ignatius of Loyola suggests when we pray with Scripture, we put ourselves in the scene. I often take this one step further and ask, "So what happens next?" I rely on the Spirit to help me imagine how things play out. After the feast and celebration in today's reading, how do things go in the household? Does the older brother soften or does his resentment grow? What happens when the father dies? But the thing that struck me as I reflected today, given our discussion this week about mercy: did the younger son ever forgive himself?

Today's Provision: Open the gift of mercy. Use it. God's mercy is a gift, unearned and undeserved. And we accept it, often with overflowing gratitude and humility. Then we put the gift on the shelf and leave it unopened, sealed tight. Maybe we struggle with unworthiness: "I don't deserve this gift." But this is not about you. It is about the generous love of the Giver. I think God is sad when we do not open his gift of mercy and use it to heal ourselves and to share it with others. If you struggle with self-forgiveness, ask the Spirit to help you to open the gift and let the mercy overflow. Let it embrace you in its care and heal you. Then, look around. With whom will you share this marvelous gift?