

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fourth Week of Lent 2019



Sunday, March 31: *The Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable... (Lk 1:1-3, 11-32)*

Actually, Jesus addresses three parables to the elders (and to the assembled crowd): The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. While there are different secondary messages in all three--the importance in God's eyes of what many might see as insignificant (the one lost sheep or coin); the importance of repentance (the lost son) and the need to abandon hard hearts and bitterness (the older son); the great love and mercy of God (the father)—the common theme in all three is rejoicing, celebration at the return of what was lost. It's easy for us too to get lost in the carelessness of the wayward sheep, the panic of the woman who has misplaced a small coin, the sinfulness of the ungrateful sons. And we know Jesus is teaching the elders the lesson behind his welcoming approach to sinners. But he takes this lesson of God's mercy and goes a big step further. 'Rejoice! Don't dwell on what was lost; delight in what has been found!'

Today's Provision: Give Thanks for Heaven's Joy. My prayer of thanksgiving for God's mercy is often tainted with wanting to hang on to the guilt for past sins. Instead, when I reconcile with God, God calls me to celebration: 'Let what is past be past, and let us rejoice together at your return!' See if you can rejoice today in being found yet again!

Monday, April 1: *Jesus said, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." The royal official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." Jesus said, "You may go; your son will live." The man believed what Jesus said to him and left. (Jn 4:4-54)*

I find the royal official's response to Jesus' comment so endearing, so real. Jesus is expressing his frustration. He is continually being asked for signs, miracles, for "what have you done for me lately." The Roman official, who has made the 17-mile trek from Capernaum to Cana, just wants his son to be saved. Perhaps he knows nothing of the controversy swirling around the Jewish community because of this man; perhaps he does. It doesn't matter. What really matters is that he trusts in Jesus' word. He doesn't require Jesus to come to his son's bedside. He doesn't make a fuss about a sign. He just believes. Do I 'just believe' what Jesus says to me? Or do I too seek signs as a prerequisite for belief?

Today's Provision: Fast from Needing Signs. We like signs. They give us a sense of control, a way to lessen our anxiety or risk, or to prove something. Some see signs as omens or punishments for past sins; again, a way of exerting control. And we really like signs that are immediate and crystal-clear. God knows I am dense, so blessed me with several such signs early in my faith journey. But now I find I must be more patient, more aware, more accepting that I may not receive any sign at all. I just have to trust Jesus' words. If you've been praying for a concrete sign from God, let your expectations go. See if you can find a place of peace and say, "I do believe. Help my unbelief." (Mk 9:24)

Tuesday, April 2: *A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there...he said, "Do you want to be well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." (Jn 5:1-16)*

This is a fascinating interaction between Jesus and the man. First of all, we hear the man is ill, that he has had some sort of ailment for a very long time. We assume given the details that he is physically crippled, although we don't know that for sure. Jesus asks him what seems to be a strange question: "Do you want to be well?" The man doesn't answer Jesus directly. He talks instead about his inability to move forward and his vain attempts to heal on his own. Jesus hears in his answer that yes, the man does want to be healed. But he also wants Jesus to know he has the will to be healed as well.

Today's Provision: Pray for the Will to be Healed. While we may think wanting to be healed is a slam dunk, I challenge us to look at the pain or woundedness in our own lives that we tend to hold on to: bitterness over past hurts; lack of forgiveness of both others and ourselves; childhood images of a vengeful God; dependence on money, material goods, or substances that make us feel better, at least for the short-term. I still can carry my sins and fearful God images like some war wound of battles fought with myself, too proud in my shame, too determined that I will control my own healing. Jesus does not assume we want to be healed. For some, remaining in woundedness—out of habit or the need for control or the fear of responsibility—becomes a way of life too comfortable to give up. The prospect of what healing entails is too much to face. Our wounds can become tied up in our identity, a source of perverse enjoyment. Perhaps you have been praying for some healing in your life and don't see any progress. Take some time to consider if there are things standing in the way of your will to be healed. What might you have to give up in order for Jesus to heal you? Pray for the grace of surrender that can finally bring to you Jesus' healing touch.

Wednesday, April 3: *"The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works." (Ps 145) "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." (Jn 5:17-30)*

God is compassionate toward all his works. God is still at work nurturing all he has created. So too should we be at work, caring for creation. I imagine most of us understand what it means to treat other people with compassion. But how about compassionate care of the earth? Perhaps we think of tending to animals or limiting pollution, but did you know in the US alone, we waste close to 40% of all edible food at an estimated cost of \$165 billion? (Data from Harvard Law School's Food Law and Policy Clinic and the Natural Resources Defense Council). In addition, some 160 billion pounds of discarded food clogs up landfills. Several years ago on World Environment Day, Pope Francis called upon the world to address the problem of waste: *"We should all remember that throwing food away is like stealing from the tables of the poor, the hungry! I encourage everyone to reflect on the problem of wasted food to identify ways and means that are a vehicle of solidarity and sharing with the needy."*

Today's Provision—Fast from Waste: How's your Lenten fast going? If you've never settled in on one or the one you planned is going so well, consider trying to be conscious of and curbing your wastefulness. Go to <https://justresponse.faith/lent-2019> to get started with prayer and a realistic view of your role as a consumer.

Thursday, April 4: *Moses implored the LORD, his God, saying, "Why, O LORD, should your wrath blaze up against your own people..." So the LORD relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people. (Ex 32:7-14)*

So this is Moses, the same guy we read about last week hiding his face from God and giving all sorts of excuses as to why he shouldn't be the one to bring God's people out of slavery. Yes, he has experienced being a channel for God's awesome power before the Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Israelites, but I would think that would make me tremble all the more. Instead, Moses shows brazen confidence in his relationship with God. He talks God down from blazing anger and his desire for punishment. Wow! What happened? How did he go from a stuttering, timid, unwilling messenger to someone willing to challenge the Almighty?

Today's Provision: Pray for an Honest Relationship with God. The Jewish scholar Robert Alter suggests two interpretations of this passage: either God is truly fed up and wants to destroy the people or he is testing Moses, tempting him with prospect of a new nation born of his seed. Moses will have none of it. His ego is not part of this equation. Moses trusts God implicitly. He knows God as well as God can be known because he has been an honest servant since his first day on the job. God wants us to know him—we talked about that last week as well—and wants us to come to him unafraid, but also without our own ego needs and expectations. Pray for the grace to be like Moses and to work towards an honest, trusted friendship with God.

Friday, April 5: *"The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." (Ps 34)*

"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted." We've heard that line a lot, even prayed it perhaps, but how real is it in your life? Is it just a nice platitude or have you really allowed God to come close when your heart has been broken? Have you ever been able to feel God's nearness through the presence of another? Have you ever been God's compassionate eyes, ears, and hands for someone crushed in spirit?

Today's Provision: Give Love, Be Close to the Brokenhearted. First question to ask myself: Am I paying attention to the need for compassion right in front of me? Am I aware of those in my own circle of friends or community whose spirits may be crushed? Often, our Lenten giving can be at arm's length—donating to charitable causes, handing a plate of food over the cafeteria line. These are wonderful things and can move us to compassion, but might not require much closeness on our part. It's interesting: I often say I want to be closer to God. That means I should go to where God is most often found—close to the brokenhearted.

Saturday, April 6: *"Nicodemus ... who had come to him earlier, said to them, "Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" (Jn 7: 40-53)*

Jesus has 'spoken' to Nicodemus. Earlier, we know he takes a first step coming to Jesus in the darkness, fearful but wanting to learn more. Here we see him taking a bolder step suggesting the chief priests at least listen to what Jesus has to say. The last time we hear of him is when he and Joseph of Arimathea care for Jesus' body after the crucifixion. We might be tempted to look at Nicodemus as a coward, not willing to stand up for what he knows in his heart. But by coming forward to bury Jesus, he risks losing his stature, being banned from the Jewish community, or worse. He takes an even greater risk than Jesus' closest friends who have run away.

Today's provision: Pray for Courage: Sometimes, like Nicodemus, you might come to Jesus under a cloak of darkness, either by your unwillingness to publicly live your faith or within your own anguish of doubt. At other times, like the disciples, you might betray Jesus when the going gets rough or something else becomes more attractive. Jesus sees your willingness and your fears, your declarations of faith and your betrayals, and accepts them both. Pray that he will continue to speak to you, giving you courage to take that next step to acknowledge him in the light.

(Note: This month marks the 10th anniversary of "Come and See" and "Provisions for the Journey." I am grateful to so many people for their support and encouragement over the years. But most of all, I am grateful to the Spirit from whom all my thoughts and reflections come. Please pray that she will continue to guide me. Thank you.)