

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fifth Week of Lent 2019



Sunday, April 7: *"Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Moses commanded us to stone such women."... "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."* (Jn 8:1-11)

The last chapter of lawyer Bryan Stevenson's powerful and provocative book, *Just Mercy*, is entitled "The Stonecatcher's Song of Sorrow." It addresses the privilege and the risks involved with being a person who stands between those accused and those all too willing to cast stones. An older woman Stevenson encounters at a courthouse explains that after her own grandson was murdered, she found her calling "to be here to catch some of the stones people cast at each other." It didn't matter to her whether the people grieving were with the victims or perpetrators. Her role was to provide compassion and support to whoever needed it.

I'm impressed by those who minister in prisons and their willingness to do the Lord's work among those whom society has judged as wrong or sinful. I hear from them about the deep spiritual blessings that come from their work. Not all of us are called to work with prisoners, but what about with those whose daily lives are prisons due to immigration issues, bullying, the impacts of bad past decisions, mental illness? What about hourly-wage workers we see treated with contempt and disrespect? What about those who treat them that way? It takes a lot of courage to stand up for those being mistreated or condemned and to those who mistreat them.

Today's Provision: Pray for the Courage to be a Stonecatcher. I believe most people who are ready to cast stones are wounded as well, so our willingness to stand in between—to be a stonecatcher—can change their hearts too. Take some time today to think about situations you've encountered where you've been able to diffuse anger, violence, or judgment, and about times when you've walked away, not wanting to get involved. Can you think of any situation that might benefit from your compassionate, non-anxious presence today? Pray for the courage and patience you need.

Monday, April 8: *God stirred up the holy spirit of a young boy named Daniel, and he cried aloud: "I will have no part in the death of this woman."* (Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62)

This riveting, rather lurid story of the false accusation of Susanna is not found in the Hebrew Masoretic text; it is listed as an appendix in some Christian Bibles. To use current vernacular, it is like 'click bait'—a tabloid-worthy account in which one can see clear parallels to the current #MeToo movement. But as Scripture, it is the story of God stirring up in a mere youth the willingness to take a stand against hypocrisy. That too is topical and relevant. Young people all over the world are rising up, unafraid to point out the blatant and egregious pretense they see in churches and governments, whether it is marching to call attention to climate change, raising their voices in youth religious movements and social justice networks, or using their vote to elect what many of their elders dismiss as radical voices. It is all too easy for those of us with what we might call the wisdom of age to just go with the status quo. This story reminds us that God very often uses the audacity of youth to shake us up, to wake us up to the duplicity occurring right under our noses.

Today's Provision: Fast from Accepting the Status Quo. If you are among 'the elders' who tend towards skepticism and the status quo, open your hearts and minds to listen, to think differently. If you are a youth fed up and disgusted by the hypocrisy you see, don't just criticize and dismiss your elders (which is, BTW, also a form of accepting the status quo!) Build bridges. Open up to learn the lessons age has imparted to those older than you. Remember that many of us fought for change years ago as well, and some of the freedoms you take for granted are borne of battles we waged. And don't give up. *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* (Margaret Mead)

Tuesday, April 9: *But with their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses... "We are disgusted with this wretched food!"* (Nm 21:4-9)

Isn't it interesting how quickly the manna moves from being a blessed miracle to something taken for granted to something disdained? Think how fast the latest phone becomes an outdated embarrassment for our kids, or the newest style becomes passé?

Today's Provision: Give Thanks for the Everyday Gifts. The pace of life can move yesterday's luxury to today's necessity to tomorrow's burden. Let's make a point to start each day giving thanks to God for everything—the sunrise, the smell of coffee, our very lives. And let's also remember that often, the things we tend to gripe about—the line at the grocery store or bank, the traffic jam, the wait at the doctor's office, the cost of the plane ticket—are actually due to our blessings. Instead of complaining, see if you can give thanks for the everyday gifts God has bestowed on you. Because truly, all is gift.

Wednesday, April 10: *"Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you will not serve my god... Be ready to fall down and worship the statue I had made whenever you hear the sound of the trumpet, flute..."* (Dn 3:14-20, 91-95)

Imagine people in Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom going about their daily business and then having to drop everything when some musical instrument randomly starts playing. I guess it's not that different from our Muslim sisters and brothers being called to prayer or the ancient Christian tradition of the Angelus, although those are at set times of day. Shadrach and his compatriots will not bow down to any false god, music or no music. I have to smile when I think about how I react to my phone 'dinging' to tell me I have a message or a new Instagram post (or to do my midday examen!); or when the breaking news story banner runs along the bottom of the TV screen; or whenever I act instinctively, without prayer and patience, to some provocation. Are these provocations "gods?" Not likely, yet they can be big distractions that shift my focus to finding the one, true God in the present moment.

Today's Provision: Fast from Auto-Pilot. This, BTW, is my Lenten fast. I'm doing ok with it, but still at times find myself going from task to task without stopping to give God thanks and praise. Thank goodness God has 'dinged' me a few times to remind me to refocus my attention. Is auto-pilot a problem for you too? Try to commit to taking a few seconds before you move on to the next thing to thank God for being present to you at this very moment.

Thursday, April 11: *Jesus said to the Jews: "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." So the Jews said to him, "Now we are sure that you are possessed."* (Jn 8: 51-59)

Chapter 8 in John's Gospel has several references to judging and judgment, juxtaposing Jesus' way of the looking at things with the way the Jews and the elders look at things. The latter attend to what is visible, literal (e.g., anyone who says a person won't see death is obviously possessed.) Jesus and his Father see and judge, not based on the flesh, but on the heart. They see with eyes that look beneath the surface and behind the actions that may appear on the outside to be sinful or wrong. Think of the number of times Jesus gets in trouble for healing on the Sabbath—an act of a compassionate heart, but a big no-no in the eyes of the Law.

Today's Provision: Pray to See with God's Eyes. It's challenging enough to see God in some people. It is even more difficult, at least for me, to look at others with God's merciful eyes. I can accept that we are all made in God's image and that we are all loved sinners, but it's another thing to look beyond another's surface actions and behavior to see a heart that is hurting and fearful. I believe Jesus, even with his harsh words to the Jewish elders, could see into their hearts and accept that "they know not what they do." Pray today to see with God's eyes.

Friday, April 12: *"I hear the whisperings of many: 'Terror on every side! Denounce! Let us denounce him!' All those who were my friends are on the watch for any misstep of mine. ... O LORD of hosts, you who test the just, let me witness the vengeance you take on them."* (Jer 20:10-13)

The life of a prophet is never easy. Jeremiah's so-called friends have abandoned him and are watching his every move. No one wants to hear bad news or be told that what they are doing is wrong, so his enemies look for a way to trap him. Sounds a lot like Jesus' story...with one big difference: Jeremiah, in his earthly humanity, looks forward to watching God take vengeance on his oppressors. Jesus, in his divine humanity, asks God to forgive them.

Today's Provision: Give Forgiveness. To be able to truly forgive those who oppose or hurt us requires openness, vulnerability, and complete trust in God. It does not mean those who have hurt us are not held accountable for the wrongs they have done. It does mean we take time to listen to their stories, to hear their point of view, and to release them and ourselves from the burden of hatred and anger. Forgiveness is a gift we give not only to the other, but to ourselves as well. Do you carry bitterness over a past hurt? Pray for the strength to forgive from your heart.

Saturday, March 23: *"I will make them one nation upon the land, in the mountains of Israel, and there shall be one prince for them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms...I will make with them a covenant of peace."* (Ez 37:21-28)

The United Kingdom of Israel split into two, Israel and Judah, after the death of King Solomon. One of the main reasons: government taxation. Gee, that has a kind of familiar ring to it, doesn't it? Most countries in the world today have at least two factions battling for control and the issues almost always have to do with money or power. How can we imagine peace between nations when we cannot even debate peacefully and civilly within our own countries?

Today's Provision: Pray for Peace within Nations. Of course, we pray for peace between nations, but given the headlines these days, I'd say it is more urgent that we pray and work for peace where we live. It is very discouraging, day after day, hearing the same old rhetoric and the vitriol that assaults our sensibilities. Instead of demonizing the other side, can we instead pray for those whose opinions differ from ours? Can we pray for ourselves, that we remain open and willing to listen? Pray today, not for others to change their minds, but for all of us to change our hearts and work for compromise and peace.