

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Preparing for Lent, 2018



Sunday, February 11: *"Blessed is he whose fault is taken away, whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, my guilt I covered not. I said, 'I confess my faults to the LORD,' and you took away the guilt of my sin. Be glad in the LORD and rejoice...!"* (Ps 32)

I have the incredible privilege, as a retreat leader and spiritual director, to accompany people on their spiritual journeys. It's a humbling experience. Some of the interactions occur over long periods of time; others can be just a one-time, brief listening session. But there's a common thread that weaves itself throughout the lives of many people I companion: the difficulty in accepting God's forgiveness and forgiving themselves. I struggled with that myself, so I know the pain it causes. The key is to accept the radical nature of God's unconditional love and mercy, undeserved, given freely to all who acknowledge their sins and, though they sin again, are willing to come back to God's embrace. Be glad. In fact, don't just be glad, rejoice! *'O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer.'* (Sts. Ambrose, Augustine, and Aquinas)

Today's Provision—Rejoice in Forgiveness: I remember reading somewhere that when I can't accept God's forgiveness, I discount Christ's sacrifice, and that when I can't forgive myself, I put myself higher than God. You can only imagine the level of guilt I then felt over those two transgressions! Through the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, my image of God and my relationship with Jesus were healed such that I was willing and finally able *"to approach the throne of grace confidently, so that I could receive mercy and the help I needed."* (Heb 4:16) If accepting forgiveness is a problem for you, pray for the grace of acceptance. Allow God to love you as you are.

Monday, February 12: *"Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I hold to your promise. You are good and bountiful... It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn your statutes."* (Ps 119)

A good follow-up to yesterday's reflection. It's a curious thing that it is most often through the pain and suffering of sin that we really get to know God as God wants to be known. Sometimes, it takes us going astray to finally realize the way back to peace is to allow God to take us by the hand and lead us back to him. Or perhaps we or someone we love is afflicted with a physical ailment. We pray fervently for God to cure them of their illness, when in fact, we find the healing of our spirits to be the greatest gift of all. What is your affliction? Are you willing to place it on the throne of grace to receive the mercy and help you need?

Today's Provision—Know—Really Know--God as Good and Bountiful: I am surely not going to approach any throne when my image of the one sitting there causes me unholy fear. What do I mean by "unholy" fear? It's not biblical fear, the awe and wonder in which we behold our God. It's the kind of primal fear that keeps us turned away from God or afraid to lift our heads. If the God you know in your heart isn't a loving God, bountiful in mercy, this step has to come first. Turn around. *"Look at God looking at you with love and smiling."* (Anthony DeMello, SJ)

Tuesday, February 13: *"Blessed the man whom you instruct, O LORD, whom by your law you teach, giving him rest from evil days."* (Ps 94)

Oh boy, we could all use a rest from "evil" days...or at least from the evening news!

The advice here is sound: if you want to keep yourself above the fray, looking forward in hope and confidence, make sure you are spending enough time with Scripture and prayer. I mentioned recently the words of the theologian Karl Barth that we should read the news with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. I hear of so many people whose current outlook on the world is negative, even hateful. More troubling, I also see those who pick and choose what they want to take from their particular faith practice's sacred writing or Scripture to justify violence or prejudice, even murder. If we call ourselves Christians, there is one law Jesus gives us: Love God-- in the fullness and immense depth and breadth of what God is; and love each other--not just those related to us, not just those who look or pray or think like us. We are to love. Period.

Today's Provision—Rest from "Evil:" Evil is such a strong word. We think about dramatic acts of hatred and malice. But evil is also insidious. It can sneak up on us when we least expect it and slowly begin to take over our thoughts and hearts. While we may never commit really evil acts or think really evil thoughts, our hearts can become hardened. And a hard heart is not open to love. How can you rest from evil today? Listen to the words you speak. Are they kind and positive? Is there too much negative news on the radio? Turn it off. Spend time today looking for what is good.

Wednesday, February 14: *"Even now," says the LORD, "return to me with your whole heart...Rend your hearts, not your garments."* (Jl 2:12-18) *"A clean heart create for me, O God, a steadfast spirit renew within me."* (Ps 51)

Today is Ash Wednesday, a day we begin our Lenten fast. It also happens to be Valentine's Day, a day to celebrate love. I guess the chocolates will have to wait until tomorrow.☺ But these two days have something in common—they both focus on our hearts. Sometimes, our hearts can get crowded, messy. Or we build walls around our hearts, protecting them from hurt. The dust builds up, making it hard for us or anyone else to live there. Or maybe we choose to withhold parts instead of giving our whole hearts. God invites you today to come to him with your whole heart. Rend it, open it up and let God help you clean it thoroughly, sweeping away the vestiges of sin and hurt. Clear out the clutter that keeps your heart from being a cozy, restful place for you to reside with God.

Today's Provision—Air out Your Heart: It's still a little early for spring cleaning, but hey, we might as well get a head start. I like the image of "airing out your heart." Let it breathe in the freshness of God's Spirit. Shake it free from whatever weighs it down or causes it to be dull, lifeless, faded. Air any grievances, sorrow, sinfulness, or confusion honestly to God and let God enlighten and renew your heart. Make it a Lenten practice to do this every night, thanking God for the gift of each day and the sweetness of his mercy and love!

Thursday, February 15: *"Choose life."* (Dt 30: 15-20)

What would it mean for you to choose life this Lent? Taking time for prayer or meditation each day? Giving up a bad habit, a sinful practice, or something that drains life from you? Putting aside your fears and busyness to reach out to others or to forgive? What gets in the way of Jesus' wish that you have life and have it abundantly?

Today's Provision—Choose: I remember talking to my kids about this when they were young, and of course they both decided to give up homework since it drained life from them! Sorry, it doesn't work that way, but it does bring up an interesting consideration. We can't always change our life circumstances, but we can choose our attitude toward it. "That person at work just drains me." Can we instead try to look at them with lovingkindness, even though at first, it may be through clenched teeth? "I just don't have time for prayer." Can we turn off the TV or car radio, log out of Facebook or CNN, and engage for a few brief moments several times a day to check in with God? "I'm just not comfortable reaching out to people I don't know." These days, a simple greeting or a sincere smile to someone from a different culture may be just the reassurance they need. Spend time thinking about this and then take a few minutes to bring it to your heart in prayer. Ask God to give you the grace each day to choose life.

Friday, February 16 *"This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly...Setting free the oppressed...Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own."* (Is 58:1-9)

Or to put it another way: "Fast from the prejudice and bias that causes you to judge individuals or groups of people unfairly...Fast from the fear that keeps you from offering a path to freedom to those oppressed or afraid...Fast from selfishness that makes you hoard your time, talent, and treasure.... Fast from self-righteousness that makes you turn away from those on whose faces you can see the nakedness of their sin and suffering. What will you fast from today?

Today's Provision—Ask God What Fast He Wishes from You: "Well, that's ok. I won't trouble God about that. I will go ahead and pick my own fast for today." Oh, that is so much easier, isn't it? How about if we start the day with a simple request: "God, make me aware today. Grant me the grace to see what fast you wish from me today and give me the courage to carry it out." If you can, jot it down in a little notebook each day. See if a pattern is developing. It will help you recognize God's call for you.

Saturday, February 17: *"If you remove from your midst oppression...Then the LORD will guide you always... 'Repairer of the breach,' they shall call you, 'Restorer of ruined homesteads.'"* (Is 58: 9b-14)

Is there a breach in your life? A long-standing family rift or a falling out with a good friend? How does oppression play into that breach? We might be tempted to use dualistic thinking and look at one side as the oppressor and the other as the oppressed—and sometimes this is the case—but oppression is just as likely an internal weight based on our own insecurities and fear that plays out in our relationships. To repair the breach, to restore the ruins, we turn to God to guide us past the hurt in our hearts so we can be open to healing.

Today's Provision—Being a Restorer: Working to repair a rift or a hurt does not mean being a doormat. Healthy relationships call for mutual respect and sacrifice, not that one party always gives in and winds up being beaten down. Sometimes, being a restorer means restoring ourselves, mending a breach we have allowed to happen not with others, but within our own hearts and with God. Restoration takes work, time, and reflection and prayer. Don't go it alone. Seek help and encouragement from loved ones and counselors. Pray for strength.