

# Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fourth Week of Lent 2018



**Sunday, March 11:** *"Until the land has retrieved its lost Sabbaths, it shall have rest while seventy years are fulfilled."* (2 Chr 36:21)

This verse refers to the law in Leviticus 25 that states the land be allowed a sabbatical year. Just as the people are given rest on the seventh day, God's earth is to be rested every seven years--no seed sown, no harvest reaped. God's earth deserves its Sabbath as well! For many years prior to the Babylonian invasion, God's people had been lax in following his commands, ignoring God's messengers and warnings. I can hear them saying, "Yes, yes, we will get back to all those laws soon. We are just too busy with life right now." So they are "given" seventy years in exile, time to recognize, reflect on, and repent their sinful behavior. Seventy years is an awfully long time to spend reflecting, a long time for the Promised Land to lay dormant. It makes me think... "How often do I put off repenting because I am too busy with life?" "What fields that should be producing good fruit I have let fall dormant?"

**Today's Provision—Reclaim your Sabbaths:** First, let's recall what Jesus tells us: "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mk 2:27) How do you use your Sabbaths? The intention is of course to have a day set aside to reflect on our relationship with God--to be grateful for all the gifts we've received, to praise God, to repent for things we have done wrong or not done at all, to look forward in hope. Unfortunately, far too many of us have Sabbaths that don't look much different from the other six days, running here and there, perhaps squeezing church in if we can. How many of us schedule Sabbath moments during our every days? Reclaim the great gift of rest God has given us. Perhaps spend a few moments looking at the nature around you and praise God for the earth. All is sacred ground.

**Monday, March 12:** *"I extol you, O LORD, for you drew me clear and did not let my enemies rejoice over me."* (Ps 30)

Bad things come to mind when I think about enemies rejoicing over the vanquished. Unfortunately, we have seen far too many images that portray celebrations over the burned-out remains of villages, of innocents losing limbs and lives due to religious wars and nation-building. I can't think of any time in history or place on earth that does not carry the stain of a victor's revelry. So yes, we can think about this verse that way and how sad it is. But what about when that person at work or school really messes up—you know, that person who gets under your skin? We likely keep a straight face, and all the while we are dancing inside! Or maybe we've been the one who has been "defeated." Hatred can well up inside the most stable of persons when we know someone is deriving joy from our misfortune. Perhaps we enjoy seeing the political opposition with egg on their faces (in the US, this seems to be the party excuse for the day!) Or maybe we are lucky and have no enemies other than ourselves and those little bad habits that enjoy tripping us up.

**Today's Provision—Compassion:** We live in such a competitive, dualist win/lose world. There is so much division that finding workable compromises or win/win solutions doesn't even enter the conversation anymore. Let us pray: "O, Lord, draw us clear of all this anger. Lift us above the pettiness and partisanship that drives division, hatred, and a desire for revenge. Grant us the grace to be compassionate, to look beyond winners and losers, to a world that strives for equality and justice for all." Look at your life today. Are there individuals or groups of people that you find hard to treat with compassion? See if you can look beyond your opinions and biases to show them love. And remember to show compassion for yourself as well.

**Tuesday, March 13:** *There lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. One man was there for thirty-eight years... Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time... Now that day was a Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat."* (Jn 5:1-16)

Notice how Jesus relates to the man contrasted with how the others in this story relate to him. Jesus knows him. He knows the man's face and the severity and duration of his condition. The elders most likely know him too. The Sheep's Gate is close to the temple, so they have seen him hanging around over the many years. But to them, he is faceless and nameless. There is no amazement, much less joy, at his cure. Instead, they are only concerned with him breaking the rules. Just like with Jesus: "Curing the sick on the Sabbath—the nerve of that man!"

**Today's Provision—Have "the Nerve:"** We don't like to rock the boat. We follow rules, even ones that don't make much sense, because we don't have the energy or will to deal with the fallout. Even if we choose to bend or break rules we see as unjust, we do so privately, and at times this is prudent. But if we are unwilling to speak out against injustice or the unintended consequences of poorly conceived laws, things will never change. Reflect on this: are there rules or practices you follow out of habit? If so, really consider what's behind them. Deepen your commitment to the ones that are sound or promote justice. Question the ones that might not be true to the Spirit. Speak out. Be a healing presence.

**Wednesday, March 14:** *"Say to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves!" (Is 49:8-15)*

When I read this, I can't help but think of those in my country living in fear of deportation. Families torn apart, mothers and fathers separated from each other and their children, people hiding in the shadows, fearful to come into the light. Whatever our political opinions or leanings, I think we can agree that Christ would ask us to be compassionate, to look at the people behind the numbers, to work for equitable and just solutions. I know several people who volunteer aiding immigrants and refugees. One of them purposely volunteered because he found himself growing intolerant. But rather than complain and argue, he set out to learn the other side of the story—or stories, I should say, because that's what he listens to from the people he now serves. While he still has mixed feelings, he doesn't let that stand in the way of reaching out to those who are lost, frightened, and in need.

**Today's Provision—Step Outside your Comfort Zone:** I have such admiration for people who are willing to see things from a different perspective. I am not very good at this. Invariably, what one learns is that there are no right or wrong answers, but smack dab in the middle of an issue are fragile human lives. If you are very biased for or against a particular issue, consider really learning the other side of the story. See what you can do to help in productive ways. You may not change your mind about the issue, but you just may change your heart.

**Thursday, March 15:** *"You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth... He was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light." (Jn 5:31-47)*

"Wait...John the Baptist? 'A shining lamp in whom people rejoiced?' Are we talking about the same guy here?" It had been hundreds of years since a prophet had arisen in Israel, so I guess the appearance of one on the scene was cause for some kind of celebration, especially among the common folk. Even though his message was all gloom and doom, at least having him around meant God hadn't completely abandoned the Jews. But just like in the case of their ancestors and in the generations of their children that followed, the ones in power (the scribes and Pharisees) or the ones who think they knew better (the Essenes and the Zealots) were nervous: "Who is this guy and why is he causing all this ruckus?" Jesus did the same thing. We see those bringing messages of gloom and doom today, causing division and a huge ruckus. What are we to think? How are we to make good judgments about their messages?

**Today's Provision—Know Them by Their Fruits:** Of all the wisdom we have received from Jesus, this quote from Matthew 7 is one of the soundest and most important, regardless of whether we are evaluating the intent of people on the global stage or individuals in our personal lives. Do they preach love or hate? Compassion or prejudice? Do they speak the truth or spread inaccuracies and lies? Do their works stand up to the light of goodness or is there much hidden in the shadows? Yes, John the Baptist and Jesus caused divisions; they paid the ultimate price for that. But they spoke the truth: John, the need for repentance, Jesus, God's salvation and mercy for all. Think about it.

**Friday, March 16:** *Jesus...did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him...his brothers had gone up to the feast, he himself also went up, not openly but as it were in secret. (Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30)*

Have you ever seen the bumper sticker, "My boss is a Jewish carpenter?" It means, of course, that the car's driver takes their marching orders from Jesus, who was in fact a Jewish carpenter. But, as we hear in John's Gospel today, Jesus was also a fugitive from the law. Not sure that bumper sticker would have quite the same impact!

Moses has been featured in many readings this week. He was a fugitive too. God doesn't pick powerful, important, or perfect people to lead. Nor did God choose to live among us as someone special or out of the ordinary...just a regular guy who wound up running from "the law" because he dared to challenge the way in which the law was being lived.

**Today's Provision—Follow Christ:** Earlier this week, we talked about having the nerve to go against the status quo. Christ's message is as countercultural today as it was when he walked the earth. And some who have had the courage to follow have found themselves ridiculed, jailed, oppressed, or even killed. It's not easy to follow Christ. But it is the only way to peace. How are you called to follow?

**Saturday, March 17:** *"Some in the crowd said, 'This is truly the Prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Christ.'...So a division occurred in the crowd because of him...but no one laid hands on him. (Jn 7:40-53)*

John tells us, "a division occurred in the crowd" because of Jesus. It sounds to me like the division is due to the crowd and their various opinions about Jesus. Sound familiar?

**Today's Provision—Be Christ-Centered:** Some in the crowd that day wanted to arrest Jesus, but due to their bickering, Jesus passed through the mob and went on his way. No one was able to lay hands on him. Perhaps it's the same for us, with all our divisions and disagreements about Christ and what he wants. We can't really touch him—in his humanity, in his divinity—due to our own narrow-mindedness or conviction that our religion, our opinion is the only correct one. In his book, *A Conspiracy of Goodness*, Methodist theologian Donald Messer takes a strong stand saying, "Denominationalism is a scandal to the world and a sin before God." (p.23) Pope Francis is calling us to a Christ-centered faith that is found, not in central locations, or large basilicas, or pages of doctrines and rules, but where Christ is actually found: in the peripheries of life, in places of existential need. For many people, their religion becomes the altar at which they worship. Look at your own life and faith. Is it centered on Christ?