

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Second Week of Lent 2020



"Metanoia," a change of heart.

Sunday, March 8: *The LORD said to Abram: "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you." (Gn 12:1-4) Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them... (Mt 17:1-9)*

Why does God choose Abram? And why does Jesus choose Peter, James, and John, and the rest of the Apostles for that matter? Why *does* God choose certain people for these big undertakings? Because they are special? Smarter than others? Holier? Better looking? More courageous? One could say Abram is courageous to fold up his tent and leave his homeland, but Peter? Courageous isn't the adjective that comes to mind, at least not at this point. That comes later.

We know God looks into hearts and chooses based not on external characteristics (1 Sm 16:7), but what is it that God sees in our hearts? Some argue it's predestined, but then how do you explain King Saul or other of the kings chosen to lead Israel? I'd venture to say what God sees is openness...a willingness to listen, to learn, to love.

Today's Provision: Listen (to Him). In today's gospel, God shuts Peter down: "Quiet. Stop this nonsense about pitching tents! Be present! Listen to what my beloved son has to say right now." If we are truly open to listen to God, we can learn God's ways. We can love as God loves. God chooses each and every one of us to speak his word in the world, but it's our openness to listen, to change, to trust in God that makes all the difference. Just for today, fold up your tent. Put your own needs aside. Listen. Go forth to where you are called right now.

Monday, March 9: *"Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven." (Lk 6:36-38)*

"Stop. Just stop. Change your minds. Change your hearts." Oh, if it were only so easy, right?

It may seem like an impossible task, and it is if we think we can do it alone. We might have a long list of things we want to change about how we judge and/or condemn. We all tend to make snap judgments about people and occasionally it might be out of self-preservation. There's a difference between making good judgments for ourselves and passing judgment on others. But most of the time, we are totally oblivious to how our judgments dictate the ways in which we think and feel, and how we respond.

Today's Provision: Pay Attention: Don't make this harder than it is. Pick one thing and try to be aware. Don't pass judgment on yourself either. Simply notice what you are thinking. You can learn a lot just by paying attention.

Prejudices are oh so subtle and not always about the things like race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Let's talk about income level. Do you judge people who are wealthy as selfish and greedy? Or conversely, do you show preference for them, judging them to be better than others? Do you make a snap judgment about a person by the political sign they have in their front yard, without even knowing who the person is, much less having a dialogue with them? (Guilty as charged.) Spend some time in prayer today asking God to open your eyes to the judging and condemning you do without even knowing it. Focus in a one thing and bring it to prayer every morning throughout the rest of Lent: *"Lord, help me to fast today from judging others by their (fill in the blank)."*

Tuesday, March 10: *"Wash yourselves clean! Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes; cease doing evil; learn to do good....Come now, let us set things right," says the LORD. (Is 1:10, 16-20)*

Many years ago, I went through a management training program and was categorized as a "realistic optimist." I like that and think it's basically true. I hold fast to the idea that, although humans are flawed, when push comes to shove, our basic goodness emerges. I wonder: Do we need to *learn* to do good? Shouldn't that be innate as part of our God image? Or is it that we need to *unlearn* lessons the "real world" has imposed on us? Do we need to *relearn* God's love for us (or for some, learn and experience it for the first time)?

Today's Provision: Set Things Right with God. God's people are being asked to change their ways and their hearts, to put away sinfulness and selfishness and to set things right. Have an honest conversation with God about what you see is lacking in your relationship. Yes, admitting our sinfulness is a big part of it, but also ask God to help you unlearn the things that have hardened your heart. If you haven't felt God's love in a while (or have never felt it), pray for the gift of intimacy with God. Hit the reset button. Return to your original goodness.

Wednesday, March 11: *The people of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem said, "Come, let us contrive a plot against Jeremiah... let us destroy him by his own tongue; let us carefully note his every word."* (Jer 18:18-20)

If the people of Judah and Jerusalem are looking for work, they can hire out as consultants for this year's election. Noting the opposition's every word and destroying him or her with his or hers own tongue are skills in high demand!

People go to great lengths to discredit anyone saying things they don't want to hear, particularly if it's critical of them and the way they live. Group-think mentality was real for the Israelites and it is real for us. It's tough to stand up against the crowd. We like to fit in and be accepted. Jeremiah's life was in danger, and while most of us don't imperil ourselves by speaking out against hypocrisy or injustice, we do risk ridicule, losing social status, or alienating our friends and family. It takes great courage to be a prophet. How are you called to take a stand?

Today's Provision—Have Courage: If we read further in Jeremiah, we know the prophet is driven to speak for God by a "fire burning in his heart." It's as if he has no choice. It's all too easy to turn away when confronted with a wrong that needs righting. Pray for the courage to receive that fire, the strength to have no choice.

Thursday, March 12: *"More tortuous than all else is the human heart...who can understand it?"* (Jer 17:5-10)

The Hebrew translation: *"More crooked the heart than all things..."* It reminds me of a saying attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, *"God writes straight with crooked lines."*

The informal definition of crooked is deceitful. Interestingly, the Hebrew word—*aqov*--is also the root for the name Jacob, one of the more deceitful characters in the OT (and who is more proof God writes with crooked lines)! The formal definition means 'bent out of shape or twisted.' Something crooked is often not the most efficient way or attractive specimen. There may be many twists and turns. Danger may even lurk nearby. But there is also a uniqueness, a kind of terrible beauty to be found in something crooked. A crooked path may not get one to one's destination the fastest, but might instead impart greater learning and wisdom. A crooked limb might tell a story of survival—even flourishing--despite storms and hardships. A crooked heart continues to beat in rhythm in spite of abuse or hurts or walls being built up around it. Who can understand a crooked heart? God can. And God does.

Today's Provision: Offer God your Crooked Heart. God does indeed write straight with crooked lines because frankly, God doesn't have much choice! But God knows our stories--where we've been, what hardships we've endured, what our crooked paths have taught us. God continues to write the ongoing story of humanity and creation, despite the crookedness and confusion of our hearts. Offer up to God—and to others if you can—the story and the struggles and the insights of your crooked heart.

Friday, March 13: *"There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey."* (Mt 21: 33-43, 45-46)

It's obvious Jesus is talking about the centuries-old practice of rejecting the prophets and how the current leaders are doing the same by rejecting him. That's the lesson of this parable and the elders hear it loud and clear. But let's look at it in a broader way. The vineyard is our earth. God puts so much work into our earthly vineyard, providing all that is needed for it to be productive and protected. Then he entrusts it to our care with the expectation we will share its bounty and use it for his glory. You and I are tenants, not owners. How well are we tending God's vineyard?

Today's Provision—Care for God's Vineyard: Are we skeptical about the warnings of abuse and overuse of our planet, rejecting those who caution us? Do we share the bounty, but keep the best for ourselves? Do we take, take, take without replenishing our piece of the vineyard? What will you do today to care for God's vineyard, our earth?

Saturday, March 14: *"Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders...But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf." He said to him, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours."* (Lk 15: 1-3, 11-32)

I heard a story recently about a religion teacher asking some kids about this parable and who was the most disappointed about the younger son's return. One bright child answered quickly, "The fattened calf!" Bingo!

What the father says to the bitter, disgruntled older son is literally true: *"everything I have is yours."* Since the younger son wasted his inheritance, everything left did indeed belong to the older son. I wonder what happened after the father died. Did the older son hold onto his bitterness and kick his younger brother out? Or did he allow the father's great mercy to change his heart?

Today's provision: Let God's Mercy Change Your Heart. If you sit in prayer with this parable, or any of the stories in Scripture about God's abounding mercy, and focus on what is expected of us, we really don't have a leg to stand on when it comes to being unforgiving...unless, of course, we don't think we need forgiveness. Unless, of course, we don't believe God has forgiven us. If it's hard for you to forgive, or it's hard for you to accept forgiveness, make this the focus of your prayer for as long as you need to. Make sure you've allowed for enough time to pass for you to truly give or receive forgiveness. (A good book to consider: *Don't Forgive to too Soon* by the Linns) Seek the counsel of a spiritual mentor. Pray for a heart changed by God's mercy.