

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings.
Lent Week Four, 2023



Sunday, March 19: *The LORD said to Samuel: "Do not judge from his appearance...Not as man sees does God see, because man sees the appearance but the LORD looks into the heart"* (1 Sm 16: 1b, 6-7, 10-13).

Robert Alter suggests a translation that's a bit different: *"For man sees with the eyes and the Lord sees with the heart."* Alter writes that regardless of how one reads it, the importance here is that the heart—God's or our own—is the seat of understanding and wisdom, of real "seeing." I'm comforted by the idea of God seeing us with his heart. God looks with understanding and compassion, beyond not only our external being, but also what might be a wounded heart burdened by sin. Something to reflect on: do we judge or dismiss others we consider to be sinners?

Today's Provision: Fast from judging. Jesus says this very plainly in Luke's Gospel: *"Stop judging and you will not be judged"* (Lk 6:37). Period. That doesn't mean we don't make good judgments for ourselves—this is an important distinction to explain to our kids—but in doing so, let's refrain from casting aspersions. We may avoid spending time with certain people because their opinions or behaviors might make us angry or tempt us to sin, but that doesn't mean these people are sinful. We may avoid situations that make us uncomfortable, but that doesn't make that situation wrong. And of course, in this day and age, when so much is based on appearance, let's make a point to look past externals to see what's inside. Learn the stories of others. Like God, "see" with a compassionate, understanding heart.

Monday, March 20: *"It was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith"* (Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22).

Today, we celebrate the Feast of St. Joseph. His actual feast day was yesterday, March 19, and I am so glad we didn't skip over it. St. Joseph, along with St. Peter, are important saints in my life: Joseph for his compassion and unwavering faith in God, and Peter for his tenacity in the face of failure and denial.

Joseph knows the law and what the law has to say about his betrothed who is "found with child." The Holy Spirit's role in all this is not known to Joseph at this point. Mary returns from being with Elizabeth and she is pregnant. But despite a broken heart, Joseph chooses compassion so as not to expose her to shame. He knows the law, but he listens to God's voice in his heart, and through his righteousness that comes from faith...no, he does not inherit the world with his own descendants. Instead, he helps to change the very course of the world!

Today's Provision: Rely on your faith. Are you faced with a challenging situation that calls for a measured response, balancing "the law" with compassion? Justice is necessary for civil society, but that doesn't preclude compassion, mercy, and peace. *"Kindness and truth shall meet; justice and peace shall kiss"* (Ps 85:11). The truth doesn't have to hurt; justice can be rendered in a way that brings about healing. Respond rather than react.

Tuesday, March 21: *I saw water trickling from the [temple]. [The angel] walked off to the east with a measuring cord in his hand, he measured off a thousand cubits...Again he measured off a thousand... but there was now a river through which I could not wade... "Wherever the river flows, every sort of living creature shall live"* (Ez 47: 1-9, 12).

This image of water trickling out of the temple brings to my mind the blood and water that flowed out of Jesus' side after the crucifixion (Jn 19:34). The temple of his bruised and battered body provide the headwaters for a stream of Living Water that becomes a mighty river, giving life to all it touches.

Today's provision: Be a life-giver. I read a description once, one person describing a holy man he'd met, saying, "You don't age in this holy man's presence." Wow! Being someone who is rather dramatic, I think I probably subtract at least of few minutes from most people who meet me! But seriously, being a life-giver is about encouragement, bringing joy and happiness and hope to the world. Being a rivulet, no matter how small, nourishing others with the Living, Loving Water of Christ. Look for ways today to be a life-giver!

Wednesday, March 23: *"Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you"* (Is 49:8-15).

How does this image of God from Isaiah match up with *your* image of God? An essential foundation of prayer, along with setting aside time to listen for God in silence, is our image of God. If God is a taskmaster or a vengeful tyrant, then our prayer will likely be stilted, unfulfilling, maybe even scary. I am not going to spend time in silence with someone I am afraid of. Part and parcel with our God image is our perception of God's image of us. This passage from Isaiah is one that provides us with a loving, nurturing image of a parenting God...a God that will never forget us...a God that values and loves us.

Today's provision: Accepting God's Love. This goes deeper than belief, and maybe even faith. We can believe in God, we can have faith in God's power without having an intimate, loving relationship. Belief. Faith: these are essential for our union with God after we die, but we miss out on heaven right here and now if we fail to accept God's unconditional love for us. If you struggle with your God image, consult a pastor, priest, spiritual director, or God-friend. Allow them to lead you to the knowledge of a God who looks at us with great tenderness.

Thursday, March 24: *But Moses implored, "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).

Reading this passage, Jesus' beatitude comes to mind: *"Blessed are the peacemakers."* It's interesting to think of Moses in this role, trying to keep the peace between God—who is pretty mad (and maybe the basis for that image we talked about yesterday)—and this miserable lot Moses led out of slavery. (It's so funny that God says, **"Your** people whom **you** brought out of Egypt" as if God had nothing to do with it!) It's not the first or the last time Moses will be called into the role of peacemaker. Moses, God's trusted friend, was a true leader who sacrificed his own needs, his own ego for the cause of peace.

Today's Provision: Be a peacemaker. We are probably not much better than the Israelites with our own "golden calves." Moses was a peacemaker for his community. Jesus intercedes for us. Are there rifts in your family or community? What can you do to channel God's grace to Moses and Jesus to bring about a peaceful resolution, or to bring someone estranged from God to a place of quiet peace with God instead?

Friday, March 25: *"Merely to see him is a hardship for us, because his life is not like that of others, and different are his ways"* (Wis 2: 1a, 12-22).

Imagine Jesus comes to your city or town. He's sort of disheveled as are the folks he hangs with, among whom BTW, are a few unsavory characters. No change in his messages about the poor and the rich, or loving your enemies, or losing your life to save it. Maybe some of his language is different, but the *crux* is exactly the same. Would you follow him? Invite him to dinner to learn more...or to debate or make fun of him? Call the police on him? Commit him? Conveniently find excuses to get as far away from him as you could? Kill him? Answer honestly now... we know of people who have lost their lives trying to live his message; there are people today doing the same.

Today's Provision: Fast from hypocrisy. Oh boy this is a tough one, for me at least. When I do my nightly examen, I look at what has transpired that day and ask myself how well I lived Jesus' message. Thank God we get some credit for effort! I am often embarrassed by my hypocrisy, but I do think God looks at our awareness and our attempts to rectify the things we preach but fail to practice. Take time today to reflect on how well your life aligns with this man whose life was and is so different from others.

Saturday, March 26: *"Behold, I come to do your will"* (Heb 10:4-10). *"May it be done to me according to your word"* (Lk 1:26-38).

Words of God's prophets. Echoes of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary. A foreshadowing of Gethsemane. The disposition to heed God's will is rarely without some trepidation: *"Please, Lord, send someone else!"* (Ex 4:13); *"Woe is me, I am doomed...a man of unclean lips"* (Is 6:5); *"I know not how to speak!"* (Jer 1: 6); *"How can this be?"* (Lk 1:34); *"Father, take this cup from me, but not my will but yours"* (Mk 14:36).

Today's Provision: Be a prophet. Where are you called to be a prophet? A real prophet, not one like Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 who tells people what they want to hear. A real prophet cautions and challenges, all the while making sure to communicate God's love and commitment. What keeps you from being a prophet for God?