

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fourth Week of Lent 2020



We pray this week for all people impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic: the souls who have lost their lives, their families and friends, but also for the millions who will suffer from the loss of income and security. Find ways to reach out in your local neighborhood and community. Be a blessing to others.

Sunday, March 22: *"Beside restful waters he leads me...He guides me in right paths for his name's sake.... Only goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life."* (Ps 23)

Picture what that last phrase "looks" like. Do you know anyone who leaves goodness and kindness in their wake? Pope Francis comes to mind for me. I imagine those who experience his presence as being left with a feeling of blessing and grace. How do we become such a person? Well, the psalmist tells us very clearly. We allow God to lead us, to guide us in right paths. With God the Shepherd as our model, we too can spread goodness and kindness wherever we go.

Today's Provision: Be a Blessing! I remember reading an article about a monk and being struck by the author's description of the man: "you don't age in his presence." What a lovely way to be! To become the type of person who gives life rather than drains life. We ALL can be such a blessing if we just put ourselves and our egos and our worries aside for a while to be totally present to the other, just as God is totally present to us. See if you can find a chance today to follow our Shepherd's lead. Model for another the loving care of God.

Monday, March 23: *"For I create Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight...They shall live in the houses they build, and eat the fruit of the vineyards they plant."* (Is 65:17-21)

These words from Isaiah hearken back to Genesis when God created humanity to be a delight and to co-create and co-nurture with God the amazing bounty of the earth. God, the ultimate parent, understands how important it is for his children to share in the joy of creating for themselves. In the context of the reading, God is assuring the people that their homes and fields will no longer be taken over by their enemies, that they themselves will live long and fruitful lives on the land they have cultivated. It pains me to see how we have failed to nurture the land and the seas; how instead of co-creating, we are destroying the earth in our self-centered quest for more; how powerful nations have, over the centuries, wrested native lands from their rightful residents in the name of manifest destiny. Consider some steps you can take today to work with God to nurture our common home.

Today's Provision: Bless the Earth! It's difficult for me to understand that some people don't see how our rampant consumerism has negatively impacted earth and her poorest inhabitants. But I know it's also difficult for those of us caught up in the pace of life to recognize the little things we do that contribute to the problem. Truth be told, I am not always good about practicing what I preach. We may throw up our hands and say, "What good can I as one individual do?" Remember the words of Margaret Mead: *"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."* Your civic action and your votes matter. Your choices as a consumer matters. For those in my area, the landscaping products you choose for the spring matter. It's interesting to look at aerial maps of the cities in China and Italy impacted by the pandemic and how air pollution levels have gone down during this health crisis. Worrying about what you can do with the kids when they are out of school? Do an ecological review of your home and the products you use. Bless Mother Earth by taking your role in her health seriously.

Tuesday, March 24: *"...the water had risen so high it had become a river that could not be crossed except by swimming. He asked me, 'Have you seen this, son of man?'"* (Ez 47:1-9, 12) *"God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in distress."* (Ps 46)

Comforting messages as we face the pandemic. The angel of the Lord tells Ezekiel to pay attention, to recognize the power and depth and breadth of the healing and fruitful waters that flow from the Source. He and the people can go back to this image of God's power when they are challenged by difficult times. It's also important to remember that, in times of distress, the fruit borne in such times may not look like what we expect or want.

Today's Provision: Bless Each Other! The reading from Ezekiel talks about the fruitfulness of the trees watered by the sanctuary river. Let's think of ourselves as those trees, watered by the Spirit. Look for opportunities to bear fruit: care for neighbors who are homebound, donate food to food banks (they will surely be in need), help out a friend or neighbor by watching their kids for a day while they check in at work. "Do you see this, sons and daughters?" Remember God's mercy and pay attention to where God is calling you to show mercy to another.

Wednesday, March 25: *"To do your will, O my God, is my delight, and your law is within my heart...I did not restrain my lips... Your justice I kept not hid within my heart...I have made no secret of your kindness and your truth."* (Ps 40)

What a perfect psalm for the Feast of the Annunciation! Mary did not restrain her lips from saying, "Yes!" Through her very being, she made no secret of God's justice and the fulfillment of God's promise. As Jesus grew up and went on to his ministry, Mary may have pondered things in silence, but she, by her pregnant body, shouted from the mountaintops louder than any of the prophets of old! Let us be willing, like Mary, to make no secret of God's kindness and truth.

Today's Provision: Say Yes... when it is easier for you to say no. Look for opportunities today to do God's will, and delight at the chance to give birth to Jesus in a world that sorely needs him.

Thursday, March 26: *"You search the Scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. But you do not want to come to me to have life."* (Jn 5:31-47)

Wait a minute...aren't we supposed to read Scripture? Of course! Jesus is not telling us that reading Scripture is unimportant. He *is* saying we had better pay attention to what we are reading. The Pharisees are caught up in the letter of the law as the key to eternal life. In the translation I use, it appears Jesus is criticizing them because they think by their actions, they can control God's judgment — a typical Old Testament view. But they overlook entirely the prophecies telling of the coming of the Christ. They search the words, but miss the meaning. They are driven by the desire to control their destinies, and in the process, deny themselves and their flock the life Jesus offers.

Today's Provision: Pay Attention to the Message. It would be so much easier, wouldn't it? Follow these church rules and check those boxes, and we'll be a shoo-in for everlasting life. Jesus' message is simple, but living that message can be pretty messy. Keeping the Sabbath is a cinch compared to visiting prisoners or sheltering the homeless. Fasting and receiving the sacraments are a piece of cake (pun intended) compared with working with immigrants or indigent patients. I'm not discounting the importance of the law, nor am I saying our acts of mercy need to be dramatic. But our adherence to the law and our acts of kindness need to be real and from the heart. Jesus calls us to come to him and have life. Accept his invitation by paying attention to and acting on his message today.

Friday, March 27: *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves.* (Ps 34)

"Part of the greatness of the Psalms, part of the source of its enduring appeal through the ages, is that it profoundly recognizes the bleakness, the dark terrors, the long nights of despair that shadow most lives, and against all this, evokes the notion of God's caring presence that can and does reach out to the broken-hearted." (Adapted from *The Hebrew Bible, A Translation with Commentary*, by Robert Alter)

Today's Provision: Don't Forget the Mercies of God. The pandemic the world is now facing is causing great angst and suffering. Between the time I write this and you read it, perhaps hundreds of thousands more people will have contracted the virus worldwide, and many will have died. This can be cause for great despair or a time for great spiritual unity. Let us all hearken back to instances in our individual lives when God has endowed us with great courage and has shown us mercy and healing. This is not a time to comfort ourselves and others with platitudes about God, but a chance to reach down into the deep well of compassion we each have inside. Don't forget when you have risen anew in God's grace, and have confidence God will raise you again to be of service to those who suffer.

Saturday, March 28: *Nicodemus...said "Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him...?" They answered, "...Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." Then each went to his own house.* (Jn 7: 50-53)

The big debate ends and the Pharisees go to home. There has been contention and argument, then each goes his own way to be with his own thoughts. I imagine at least of few of them went back to their scrolls to research the words of the prophets; some of them just went to sleep, confident in their decision. I wonder about members of the Congress in my own country, or in every other country that has some semblance of democratic rule. Do they think to themselves: "Do I go along with the party line, do I succumb to "group-think" or do I allow my conscience to guide me?" It's a sorry state of affairs when party loyalty is given higher accolades than a person's individual moral compass.

Make no mistake. Jesus was a revolutionary and what he preached was considered sedition. He would likely be tried and "crucified"—maybe not literally, but politically for the stances he took.

Today's Provision: Look at Your Moral Compass. The truth revealed by this activity often keeps me up at night. I look at how I live and what I have and I shudder. I shudder to think of what Jesus sees when he looks at me. How often do I dismiss my moral compass for what is expedient or more acceptable or along the path of least resistance! I'm not talking about big things here. I am talking about the everyday decisions I make without thinking, or worse — as we talked about earlier this week --thinking, "What difference am I going to make—if I buy this product, if I invest in this company's stock, if I support this particular cause because it is more beneficial to me?" This is a tough assignment. Most scholars say the Christianity practiced in the modern world would be unrecognizable to Jesus's early followers. *"Christianity should not be criticized. It hasn't been tried yet."* (G.K. Chesterton, adapted) Give true Christianity a try today.