

# Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

First Week of Lent 2020



Our focus this Lent is on the word, "*metanoia*," which means more than repentance. It means a change of heart. Consider this any time you encounter the word repent in the New Testament.

Being sorry and regretful, even making amends are all good things, but do they serve to change our hearts?

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**Sunday, March 1:** *God planted a garden in Eden... (and) made various trees grow, delightful to look at and good for food... The serpent asked, "Did God really tell you not to eat from any of the trees in the garden?"* (Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7)

God plants a garden, beautiful to behold, to nourish and sustain all God's creatures.

The Lord God sows a garden. The serpent—evil—enters that garden and sows doubt.

**Today's Provision: Pay Close Attention to Doubt.** Henry David Thoreau writes, "*Faith keeps many doubts in her pay. If I could not doubt, I should not believe.*" A deep faith that will withstand the storms, a faith that is "*the assurance of things hoped for, proof of things not seen*" (Heb 11:1) is forged in the fires and trials of doubt. But we humans often fall prey to doubt, falling to the weakness it sows.

Paying attention to the doubts we have--confronting them, discussing them with trusted friends, mentors, AND directly with God--is essential to building a real faith, based not on hearsay but on true experience. C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, a masterful stroke of genius, portrays the insidious, cunning ways in which evil and the doubt it sows can infiltrate our lives. If you've never read it, or it's been a while since you have, consider reading it. We've also talked about Ignatius Loyola's rules for discernment to help us look at how doubt might be keeping us from fulfilling God's will. We need not fear our doubts. Look upon them as opportunities to examine and to learn. Seek a trusted spiritual companion if doubt troubles you.

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**Monday, March 2:** *"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, the sheep on his right and the goats on his left."* (Mt 25:31-46)

"Calling all goats! Line up over on the left, please."

Oh, come on now, all of us are goats at least some of the time. We don't mean to be goats. We are just so wrapped up in our lives, the busyness, the running here and there, the hardly stopping for those we know and love much less... the nameless stranger, that hungry, ill-clothed homeless guy, those women imprisoned at the jail on the other side of town.

Forgive me for repeating this for the umpteenth time: WHAT IS ONE THING THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS HAVE IN COMMON IN THIS STORY? NEITHER recognize Jesus in the ones they served or failed to serve. Listen up. This is all about awareness, paying attention, and not being a goat!

**Today's Provision: Don't Be a Goat!** Sheep and goats are often herded together. Goats are more independent and headstrong than sheep. They don't cooperate or pay attention and rarely follow the shepherd like sheep do. Sheep watch the shepherd. Think about the people Jesus engages in Scripture. Yes, occasionally he spars with some with the headstrong, set-in-their-ways elders who are not paying attention. But most of time, Jesus is with the poor, the leper, with sinners—those imprisoned by a society that casts them aside. Do you know why? Because he sees God in them. Let's commit today to watch and to follow our Shepherd, to pay attention to Christ's presence in those we meet, especially those we tend to cast aside.

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**Tuesday, March 3:** *"So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."* (Is 55:10-11)

As Christians, we believe Christ is the Word of God, that the Christ was present at creation and through all eternity, and that Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:1-14). We also profess we are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18). Have you ever considered that that makes us a part of God's vocabulary? That we too are sent from God, not to return to God void, but to do God's will, achieving the end for which we have been sent? What are the words God wants to say through you?

**Today's Provision: Be God's Voice.** And, as Francis of Assisi reminds us, "use words when necessary!" "*May you come to realize what that word is, the message of Jesus that God wants to speak to the world by your life.*" (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*)

**Wednesday, March 4:** *The king of Nineveh proclaimed: "Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; every man shall turn from his evil way...Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish."* (Jon 3:1-10)

Fear makes people do things they wouldn't otherwise do. The Ninevites are Assyrian. Israel is their enemy (which goes a long way in explaining Jonah's initial reluctance to go there). They worship four gods, but according to historians, they had recently experienced two plagues and a total solar eclipse, so they are likely *just a bit* nervous. The king probably thinks, "What do we have to lose?" But their conversion isn't based on faith; it is based on fear. And that kind of conversion doesn't last, as we know from the prophet Nahum's account some 150 years later.

**Today's Provision—Replace Fear with Faith:** It appears the Ninevite King accepted Pascal's Wager about 1,300 years before good ol' Pascal proposed it! In simple terms, Pascal's Wager says we have two choices: to believe in God and live accordingly, or not to believe in God. If we choose the latter and there is a God we risk eternal damnation; if there's not a God, the only thing we risk is giving up some pleasures of the flesh. He tried to make his wager more acceptable to religious skeptics by suggesting that by believing out of fear of damnation, we could come to genuine faith. (Hm...there are still religions that evangelize based on this idea!) Fear-induced faith can never comfort us. Fear-based faith denies God's mercy and dismisses the sacrifice of the cross. It is not what God wants for us. If fear is a problem for you, consider Forrest Church's accessible and helpful book, *Freedom from Fear*.

**Thursday, March 5:** *I will give thanks to you, O LORD, with all my heart.* (Ps 138)

We are focused this Lent on changing our hearts. One of the best and easiest ways to do just that is to cultivate gratefulness. Gratitude has an amazing way of changing our perspective on just about everything. We've talked about how often the frustrations we experience have to do with our blessings. Instead of griping about having to wait in line for whatever—to see a show, to get money from the ATM, to board the plane, to (fill in the blank)—step back and be grateful for the blessing at hand. Want to be humbled? Go serve at a soup kitchen. In my experience, it is the very rare person who arrives at the counter after waiting in line—sometimes in the rain or cold—who does not express genuine gratitude to the people serving them their only hot meal for the day. It is those of us who have all we need or could want at our fingertips that often forget to give thanks.

**Today's Provision: Cultivate a Grateful Heart.** Meister Eckhart tell us if the only prayer we ever say is 'thank you,' it will be enough. Our thanks to God recognizes all the gifts we've received and the source of those gifts. Challenge yourself today, or pick a day coming up you think will challenge you. Look in the mirror that morning and say, "I will be grateful for EVERYTHING that comes my way today! Every last thing!" There are blessings to be found in every encounter, even those that come wrapped in sorrow or difficulty. Fast today from frustration. Be grateful.

**Friday, March 6:** *"You say, 'The LORD's way is not fair!' Hear now, house of Israel: Is it my way that is unfair, or rather, are not your ways unfair?"* (Ez 18:21-28)

This is the passage that says the sinner who repents will be forgiven, but if the one who has been virtuous falls into sin, they will die. It is preceded by a whole section that explains children will not be punished for the sins of their parents and vice versa. I've always been puzzled as to why Israel—or anyone for that matter—thinks God's way is unfair. I guess I've always seen myself as the sinner in need of forgiveness; surely, the OT is full of stories that make us think Israel should be pretty happy with this approach as well! God's way is mercy. God does not delight in the death of anyone. God wants all his children home. Mercy is God's name.

**Today's Provision: Be Merciful.** Oh my, is our world in need of mercy! From the gang-ridden streets of our cities to the halls of government, retribution and pay-backs are the name of the game. It can be so disheartening and yet, I need to start with myself. First, I have to accept God's mercy that is bestowed upon me over and over again. Then I need to forgive myself. Next, I turn to those closest to me and forgive the hurts and bitterness I harbor. Healing the world through mercy can only be done if we heal ourselves, our families, and communities. Make a commitment today to show mercy to someone who has hurt you, especially if that someone *is* you.

**Saturday, March 7:** *"This day the LORD, your God, commands you to observe these statutes and decrees. Be careful, then, to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul."* (Dt 26:16-19)

This week alone, there are 10 uses of the word "heart" in the readings and psalms: "A clean heart, contrite and humble." You are "the thought of my heart, rejoicing my heart." "God is close to the brokenhearted." "Seek God with all your heart." Our hearts are at the heart of the matter. It is not how well we can quote Scripture. It is not how diligently we fast or do penance or sacrifice. It is not dotting every I and crossing every T when it comes to doctrine or theology. It is about a humble heart that knows the source of Love and readily turns back when it has turned away. Open your heart. Give God's grace the opportunity to change your heart 'for good.'

**Today's Provision: Give God your Heart.** *"Immature love says 'I need you, therefore I love you.' Mature love says 'I love you, therefore I need you.'"* (Eric Fromm) Does God have your heart because of what God does for you? Or does God have your heart because you love God? Think about giving your whole heart to God. You'll be amazed at how much more love you'll have then to give.