

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Third Week of Lent 2020



Sunday, March 15: *The LORD answered Moses, "Go over there in front of the people...I will be standing there in front of you on the rock in Horeb." (Ex 17:3-7) "And hope does not disappoint." (Rom 5:1-2, 5-8) "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Christ?" (Jn 4:5-42)*

Many of the readings this week have to do with water. But there's another subtle message that comes through as well: having faith and hope in God will not put us to shame. In Exodus, God tells Moses to march up in front of the angry mob that's ready to stone him. Moses is called yet again to trust God despite his doubts and fears. In the second reading, the phrase from Romans in Greek is *"and hope does not prove an embarrassment."* Hope and faith in God will never let us down, even though others may scoff at us. And in the gospel, we see the Samaritan woman (who comes to the well in the heat of the day to avoid the scorn of her neighbors) running into town unabashedly proclaiming that this man she has met knows all her sins! Where did her shame go? Why is she not still hiding in embarrassment? Could it be that his mercy took away her doubts and fears?

Today's Provision: Don't Live in Shame. In this cynical age, there are those who look upon Christian hope with scorn, even shaming or embarrassing those who believe. It happens in the schoolyard and it happens in the marketplace. We may be looked upon as naïve or as an easy target. Jesus warns us such things will take place, but to be unashamed to believe in him and his words (Lk 9:26). Or, perhaps this issue for you is that you hold tightly to shame for the sins of the past. The Lord wants to give us living water and to be free of shame. Let it go.

Monday, March 16: *"Elisha sent Naaman the message: "Go and wash seven times in the Jordan and...you will be clean." But Naaman went away angry...his servants reasoned with him..."if the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it?" (2 Kgs 5: 9-13)*

Poor Naaman. Although he wasn't ostracized as he would have been in the Jewish community, the burden of an unsightly disease weighs heavily on him. He is respected by his king and his army, but you can imagine some pitied him--not something any leader would want. So he travels afar to a neighboring country and this prophet of this God unknown to him gives him a simple instruction for his healing. Naaman is angry but probably but also embarrassed by the thought of returning home unhealed—all based on the advice of a little slave girl!

You can't blame him for wanting a dramatic healing. When we are overwhelmed, we expect the cure for what ails us to be dramatic as well—we like to think our big problems require big solutions. I remember being burdened and embarrassed when I ventured back to the sacrament of Reconciliation after being away for many years. I was consoled by a wonderful pastoral priest, and then walked back out into the light of day. There were no gongs sounding, no bells ringing, or lightening flashing. Just a quiet sense of peace that was simply... extraordinary!

Today's Provision—Seek Peace and Healing: Various faith practices suggest different ways for us to deal with our mistakes and sinfulness. Talking with a trusted person who challenges us to expand our view can be very helpful. Spend time today praying for the courage to seek healing. Ask God to guide you to someone who will listen and support you.

Tuesday, March 17: *"So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." (Mt 18:21-35)*

We've spoken in the past about this parable entitled, "The Unforgiving Servant." We may choose to retitle it, "The Gospel about the Jerk." The king forgives this servant a huge debt but then the servant comes down hard on one of his own small debtors. There's usually a story behind the story, so let's look at why he acted like such a jerk. To receive the King's pardon is surely generous, but instead of looking at it as a gift, the unforgiving servant is ashamed, embarrassed in front of his fellow servants by his inability to meet his commitments. His pride is bruised, so he takes it out on someone he thinks contributed to his failure. That doesn't excuse his behavior, but it does pose an interesting question for us: Do we accept God's mercy as a gift?

Today's Provision—Receive the Gift of Mercy: See if you can remember a time when you wanted to (or have) blamed others for getting you into situations that have required you to seek forgiveness? Or, maybe an easier assignment: think about times when you've accepted God's forgiveness, but not as a gift. Unless we allow our hearts to be opened by gift of God's mercy, we will not be able to forgive ourselves or others. Pray today for your heart to be opened to the joy of God's compassionate love. Share that joy by loving yourself and others compassionately!

Wednesday, March 18: *"Take care and be on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory, but teach them to your children and to your children's children."* (Dt 4:1, 5-9)

What's the old saying? *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."* (George Santayana) In this day and age, it seems like history is what happened last week. I remember my father towards the end of his life talking about World War II, and praying and hoping future generations would never forget the horrors of war. We don't learn very well from the past, do we? We think we are better or not as vulnerable or that technological innovations will save us. Even if we are able to hold onto the truths our own eyes have seen, it's hard to transmit those truths to our kids given the pace of change.

Today's Provision—Read Scripture: I am always astounded when I read the Bible how little we have changed and progressed over the millennia. No, our innovations have not and will not save us. (Some say that instead they are dividing and destroying us.) Now one could find this a source of great discouragement, even embarrassment as we face God in prayer. But turn it around. Look instead at the real story of Scripture—falling yes, but rising anew. That is the "leitmotif"—the overarching theme that runs through the Bible and through our lives and it is all based on the unconditional, unfailing love of our God. See if you can begin to read Scripture, not as a history with literal stories, but a glimpse into the reality of our human condition. Make God's word real for yourself and your children.

Thursday, March 19: *"For this reason, it depends on faith, so that it may be a gift...not to those who only adhere to the law but to those who follow the faith of Abraham."* (Rm 4: 13, 16-18, 22)

What does Paul mean when he uses the phrase, "the faith of Abraham?" In Genesis 12, we learn of Abram's great faith in following God's directive to "go forth," abandoning his homeland and his kin. Then the story gets weird. We hear in that same short chapter, Abram fears for his life in Egypt on account of his wife Sarai's beauty. He has her lie about their relationship, calling her his sister and giving her over to the Pharaoh as a wife. What is the lesson we can take from this? Could it be that Abram has faith in God's great plan, but that faith doesn't serve him as well when faced with a crisis?

Today's Provision—Go Forth Despite Imperfect Faith: As we mentioned yesterday, remember that stories and legends from the Old Testament reflect the culture of the time, so might not have literal application to our lives. On the other hand, it is an amazing study of human nature. Abram isn't perfect. He feels threatened so he behaves like a human being. Gee! We may find ourselves in similar situations, having faith in God's grand plan, but struggling to keep faith when faced with personal difficulty. Don't despair and don't give up. God understands our weakness and our imperfect faith. Go forth from each setback and forward in faith. It will make you that much stronger.

Friday, March 20: *"Return, O Israel, to the LORD, your God; you have collapsed through your guilt. Take with you words, and return to the LORD."* (Hos 14:2-10)

"Take with you words." Hosea is telling the people: 'Listen. Keep your bullocks in their stalls, your sheep in their pasture, and your grain in your storehouses. The Lord God does not want the fat of rams. God doesn't want you sitting around in sackcloth and ashes, or worse, running and trying to hide. God wants you to return and talk with him, to admit your wrongdoing, to allow God to take away the guilt and shame into which you have fallen. And the Lord God will respond: *"I will heal you. And I will love you freely."*

Today's Provision—Talk to God. St. Ignatius Loyola calls this dialogue a "colloquy." A discussion, a back-and-forth between two parties. He suggests we warm up before talking to God by first having dialogues with Mary and with Jesus (It's called a "triple colloquy!") Often, we pray "at" God. God can't get one word in! Remember our provision on Wednesday? Pick up scripture. Choose a passage for the day, or a random passage, or one that has nudged you in the past—even one that makes you uncomfortable. Read it and then be quiet—not for 15 seconds, but for several minutes. Mull over the words. Don't be embarrassed or ashamed to speak honestly with God: "What am I to learn from your word today?" Then listen with your heart. Don't be discouraged if you don't "hear" anything right away. Burning bushes don't show up every day. Keep at it. God answers us when we are most open and ready to listen and learn.

Saturday, March 21: *"He will come to us like the rain, like spring rain that waters the earth."* (Hos 6:1-6)

Do you remember the photos in the news a month or so ago of people in Australia dancing in the rain that fell after the apocalyptic fires had decimated their land? (Maybe some of you actually lived through that.) Such relief to feel the mud between one's toes! I've seen photos recently of new buds breaking through the scorched earth, of injured animals being made ready to be released into the wild as their habitats regenerate. There's a name for this: It's called resurrection. It's called hope.

Today's Provision: Revel in God's Living Waters! Spring is beginning to emerge in the part of the world where I live. The chilly darkness is abating, even as we are just in the heart of the Lenten season. How blest we are to have the knowledge of rebirth the early disciples did not! Yes, their faith was tested and most of them failed. But they came back. They did not turn away in embarrassment and shame for their sins. They allowed themselves to be washed clean by living water raining down from God! If there is only one thing you take from Scripture, let it be this: learn to dance to the refreshing, invigorating music of God's mercy!