

Provisions for the Journey to Pentecost

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Third Week of Easter, 2024



(Note: Our theme for this liturgical year is "Another way, something new." Our theme for Lent was paying attention. As you consider the readings for this week, see if you can discern an interplay between these two themes. The followers of "The Way" were fostering something entirely new. Let's pay attention to how the messages and lessons they learned might apply in our own times.)

Sunday, April 14: *"Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away"* (Acts 3:13-15, 17-19).

Peter is talking to the crowd who stand dumbfounded at the healing of the man crippled from birth. He asks them why they are so surprised. "Well Peter, let's just say this is not an everyday occurrence!" He explains the healing is the work of the suffering servant, Jesus, who, BTW, they put to death not so long ago. He excuses this horrendous transgression by blaming it on "ignorance," and tells them it is time to do two things: repent and be converted.

Today's Provision: Consider both steps. *The Message* translation reads: "Now it's time to change your ways! Turn to face God so God can wipe away your sins." The Greek word for "repent" is *metanoia*—change your mind and heart—indicating something beyond the typical transactional repentance for things we do wrong. And although we tend to repeat the same sins and mistakes, we might be able to break that cycle if we spend time reflecting on the root: vulnerability and weakness caused by low self-esteem, fear, bitterness, depression, to name a few. True repentance is achieved by paying attention when we perceive threats to our vulnerability. (That's why the nightly examen is so important!) But then, the second step comes into play: Turn and face God in your weakness. Imagine God looking at you. Perhaps the conversion we really need is to accept the depth of God's mercy and unconditional love. Be willing to take that step.

Monday, April 15: *Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working great wonders and signs among the people* (Acts 6:8-15).

We don't know the great signs and wonders Stephen was working. What we do know is that he moved up the hierarchical ladder pretty quickly. You might remember that, earlier in this same chapter, he, along with Philip who we will read about later this week, were among the seven Hellenists commissioned to serve at table, making sure the widows got their fair share of the daily distribution. It seems serving the community was just an entry level job!

Today's Provision: Follow the Spirit's call. All kidding aside, Stephen followed the Spirit's call which led him to take a visible, active role in evangelizing...one that ultimately cost him his life. But not many of us are called in such a dramatic way. While quiet, behind-the-scenes service to our communities might not make headline news, keeping things running smoothly, making sure the vulnerable are cared for in a just and equitable way is an important means of evangelization, and can work wonders for the people we serve. If you are called to serve in a simple way, "rejoice because your name, too, is written in heaven!"

Tuesday, April 16: *Stephen said to the people, the elders, and the scribes: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?"* (Acts 7:51-8:1).

It might seem like I am picking on Stephen, but something strikes me from this reading: he uses the term, "your ancestors." Stephen is a Hellenist Jew, but it is assumed he was born a Jew rather than being a convert (see Acts 6:5: Nicholas of Antioch is the only one listed as a convert). These "ancestors" he accuses are his ancestors as well. In the literal translation, the word used is "fathers," and scholars suggest Stephen is speaking not so much about bloodlines but about hardness of heart. Stephen is presenting another way, something new, and it doesn't go over well.

Today's Provision: Recognizing the sins of the past. A very dear friend of mine is working to acknowledge deep wounds of community division caused by the actions of some of his ancestors. Rather than denying the sins of the past, he is calling them into the light to begin a process of truth and reconciliation. It is painful indeed, and yet his own life has been one of promoting justice and equality. He has broken the cycle of hate. It may seem easier to let sleeping dogs lie, to hide or even deny the past, to present a revisionist history. This happens in families, communities, religious organizations, institutions, and in countries. The pain of the past cannot be denied or hidden, or it will continue to fester and grow. If you struggle to come to terms with the "sins of your fathers," don't keep them buried. Access professional and spiritual help to bring them into the light. Don't harden your heart. Open it to new birth in the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday, April 17: *"Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me" (Jn 6:35-40).*

Go back to John 3:35: *"The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him."* So, when Jesus says today that everything the Father gives him will come to him, he means...everything!

Today's Provision: Have faith, hope, and love. I can get so riled up about the awful things going on in the world, and that we've not improved at all as a species (which, if viewed from an anthropological standpoint, is not true. We have made great progress. It just seems we could do a lot better!). A dear priest friend of mine reminds me to take the "million-year" view. In other words, God's timing is not my timing. It's not for me to throw up my hands in disgust and despair. Faith tells me that in God's good time, all will be well and all will be welcome! But it is for me to bring hope and joy into our world. Let's all try to do our best today to be people of faith, hope, and love.

Thursday, April 18: *The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, "Get up and head south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, the desert route." ... Philip came to Azotus and went about proclaiming the good news to all the towns until he reached Caesarea (Acts 8:26-40).*

Well, we know one thing for sure: Philip is definitely getting his steps in! The journey from Samaria to Jerusalem is about 35 miles, not to mention the additional, arduous miles to Gaza.

There are four instances in the readings this week when we hear the short command: "Get up." The angel of the Lord says it here to Philip, and then Jesus says it to Saul (after he is knocked silly); and again, God calls to Ananais (who hesitates but gets up anyway). Peter says it to a paralytic, with the additional instruction to "make your bed." It is as if Jesus is saying, "Look, I got up. I suffered and was raised, so now it's your turn."

Today's Provision: How are you called to get up? I am not a morning person, so when the alarm goes off, I usually hit the snooze button. I do this in my life as well: "God, I'm just not ready to get up and get on the road today." And yet experience has told me that when I listen to God's call (and not my own ego—see tomorrow's reflection!) I will not only have the energy and grace to follow God's call but will be rewarded with joy! Consider how God is calling you to get up.

Friday, April 19: *Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus... Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus (Acts 9:1-20).*

What a difference a few hours can make! Saul goes from "breathing murderous threats," ready to drag followers of "The Way" off in chains to having to be led by the hand, blind and dependent, a shadow of his former self. The brash and zealous young man is brought to his knees in a most humiliating way. The good news is that he regains his sight and his zeal, but now for the commandment of love and nonviolence. Whenever I find myself getting testy with Paul and some of his pharisaic declarations, he reminds me just how much humility changed his heart, and how I must allow humility to change mine as well. *"By the grace of God, I am what I am"* (1 Cor 15:10).

Today's Provision: Practice humility. Some of us tend to take responsibility for things and situations that are not really ours to take on. We may not say it, but we think it: "I can do this better than anyone else!" And you know what? Maybe we can, but that doesn't mean we should. Sometimes, we need to be knocked off our high horse to allow others to lead, others to take responsibility. We put aside our vision of what is supposed to be to allow something even greater to emerge. Look at the day ahead: are there opportunities for you to cede control? Go for it and see what happens.

Saturday, April 20: *As a result, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer walked with him (Jn 6: 60-69).*

Has this ever happened? You have high hopes about someone or something, only to have your hopes dashed. What you thought would be is not what is, and so you walk away. I imagine this is how some of the disciples feel today. Some may be embarrassed to have put their trust in this man who is now talking some sort of nonsense about eating his flesh and blood. Some may feel relieved to return to their former lives, as the temperature around this preacher is getting *a little* too hot. This happens in our faith life as well. We pray for things to turn out a certain way and are disillusioned when they don't. We may doubt our faith and our God. Or we feel God is calling us outside our comfort zone. We would rather just stay right where we are. We may even turn away. We are truly blest that God never turns away from us.

Today's Provision: Be courageous. *"Be a disciple! Care more than others think necessary. Trust more than others think wise. Serve more than others think practical. Expect more than others think possible"* (Anonymous).