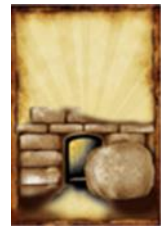


Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Preparing for Lent, 2024



A few framing thoughts before our Lenten Journey: In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, the second movement or "week" is spent walking closely with Jesus as he ministers in Galilee. This movement invites us to get to know the human Jesus, to observe what he does and how he responds to the people and situations around him. We try to enter these stories either as observers or participants. Getting to know Jesus in this very real way helps foster intimacy as we accompany him during Holy Week.

One thing to notice as you observe Jesus: he pays attention. He makes himself available. He doesn't always assume he knows what is needed, but he sees and touches both the joy and the brokenness in those around him. Try this Lent to pay attention to the people and situations around you. But more importantly, allow Jesus to touch you in your brokenness and joy. He invites you to come along and learn. Take him up on the invitation!

Sunday, February 11 *"A leper came to Jesus and begged him..." If you wish, you can make me clean." ...he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said... "I will do it. Be made clean" (Mk 1:40-45).*

During a retreat on the second week of the Exercises, we focus on this reading as a perfect example of Jesus' ministry. We hear in today's OT passage about the pain, indignation, and isolation someone with leprosy endures in Jewish society. Jesus could have easily cured this man without touching him, but it is his touch *before* the cure that is important.

Today's Provision: Touch. A loaded word. With pandemics and sexual abuse always in the news, we avoid touching anyone other than those closest to us. But Jesus' ministry was not just about physical touch. We tend to focus on the miracle stories of the curing of disease and not as much on his ministry of touching through empowerment: Zacchaeus up hiding in his tree, the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, the crowds who hear the Beatitudes.

We know loneliness and isolation is rampant in our communities and that people often hide their brokenness. So, let's learn from Jesus. As you go about your day, pay attention. Look for opportunities to "touch" others with your smile, your greeting, your willingness to listen. If you are one in need of comfort, pray for Jesus to touch you and allow you to open yourself to his touch from others.

Monday, February 12: *"The testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance be perfect...lacking in nothing. ...the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind" (Jas 1:1-11).*

I agree with James' first point: perseverance is important, but I think resilience is even more so. Resilience, the ability to bounce back from adversity, to "make lemonade out of lemons," is an attribute psychologists say is essential for good mental health. But the idea that one should be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"? I'm not so sure about that. It is in my imperfection, my incompleteness, my doubt where I truly meet the God of mercy. Oh, James, and one other thing: even driven, wind-tossed waves eventually make it to shore.

Today's Provision: Resilience. I never miss the opportunity to remind people that when you see the word "perfect" in the New Testament, the root Greek word is *teleion*, which is closer to our translation of mature. Perseverance and resiliency are both signs of maturity. Resiliency is something I stress with parents of young children. Let them learn—before their adolescent angst kicks in—about coming back from failure. We need to let them fail in small ways, so when the inevitable failures happen as they grow, they know what it means to persevere and bounce back. I think we all would do well these days to focus on this provision. If you are struggling with any issue, be it personal or global, rely on faith in God's power and mercy, to "accept the things I cannot change, and change the things I can" (Reinhold Niebuhr).

Tuesday, February 13: *"God is not subject to temptation to evil...Rather, each person is tempted when lured and enticed by his desire" (Jas 1:12-18). "Give us rest from evil days" (Ps 94).*

*"The disciples of Rabbi Pinchas were talking with animation when their master entered...Upon his arrival, they fell silent. He asked, 'What were you talking about?' They replied: 'We were discussing our fear that the evil inclination will pursue us.' He replied: 'You need not worry. You have not yet reached so high a plane. For the time being, you are still pursuing it!" (from the 18th century Chasidic, from *Gates of Repentance*).*

Today's Provision: Pay Attention. I love this story. It's a good reminder when I'm feeling high and mighty about something and God gives me a sharp jab to the ribs: "Get over yourself, sister!" It is good to pray for rest from evil, but make sure to allow for that rest. There is a lot of focus on evil out there. This Lent, consider fasting from the newsfeed, or at least from looking at it more than once a day. Pay attention to things that tempt you to dwell in darkness.

Wednesday, February 14: *"Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them...pray in secret...anoint your head and wash your face"*(Mt 6:1-6, 16-18). Jesus is, of course, talking about our intent, not our actual actions. He performed righteous deeds in front of others all the time (even though, initially, he wanted to keep them quiet). He went off by himself to pray, but his disciples knew exactly what he was doing. The only time we hear of him fasting is in the desert after his baptism, and we hear Friday what he thinks about fasting. When we perform righteous deeds in public, but without any fanfare or implied judgment, we give an example to others, just like Jesus did.

Today's Provision: Why do you do what you do? Some people perform righteous deeds because Jesus tells them to. Others do them because they want to go to heaven. Some give out of their need to give. Yes, there are those who do it for the accolades or to assuage guilt. And there are those who give simply out of the goodness of their hearts. I'm not being judgmental—clearly, the world would be a much better place if everyone gave to others, regardless of their motivation! But think about this question as a prayer exercise: what was Jesus' motivation? Why did Jesus do what he did? How can he be a model for us and how we give? (Reflect: In keeping with our Lenten theme, Jesus spends, not money, but his time paying attention and filling the real needs of others. What does that mean for you?)

Thursday, February 15: *"The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected...and be killed and on the third day be raised. "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"*(Lk 9:22-25). I can be hard on the disciples at times, wondering why they continually don't seem to "get it" (remember the gospel on Tuesday?). The scene in today's gospel follows on the heels of Jesus asking the disciples who they think he is, followed by Peter's declaration that Jesus is The Anointed. Jesus then tells them of his coming suffering, death, and resurrection (like, what is *that?*), and oh, by the way, if you want to hang with me, you've got to want that same thing, too! I wonder how I would have reacted. How do I react to that call today, knowing what I know, believing what I believe?

Today's Provision: Choose—at least for today. In the OT reading, Moses presents the people with a choice: life by following God's commands or death by rejecting them. Jesus' words seem to present, at least on the human level, the opposite: choose to die with him following his commands in order to live. Pray with that. This choice is not a one-and-done, not even for those who have opted to forego living in the secular world. It is a conscious choice we make each day: "Jesus, I desire to die to myself today so that I can better follow you. Please give me the grace and courage to do so."

Friday, February 16 *"Is this the manner of fasting I wish, of keeping a day of penance: That a man bow his head like a reed and lie in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"*(Is 58:1-9). Oooh, I love it when God talks like this, especially when God talks to me this way! I don't see it as God's judgment, but a wake-up call. The God of the OT also gets exasperated when I fail to "get it," which is a lot of the time—IF I am not paying attention.

Today's Provision: Ask God what fast He wishes from you. "Well, I don't want to trouble God about things like this. I will go ahead and pick my own fast for today." That is so much easier, isn't it? What if you were to start each day with a simple request: "God, make me pay attention today. Grant me the grace to see the fast you wish from me." Keep a record in your journal and see if a pattern is developing. It can be very enlightening!

Saturday, February 17: *Jesus saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him* (Lk 5: 27-32).

Levi (Matthew), a tax collector, has a pretty comfy life: lots of money and a big house to hold banquets. Sure, people disdain him and don't want their kids playing with his, but he's rich, so they sidle up to him anyway. He knows he's despised but the local synagogue is happy to accept his tithes (Take note: do our institutions do the same?). Then Jesus shows up and out of the blue asks him to follow. He gets up and turns the job over to the junior tax collector. Was it just Jesus' presence, or could it be that all Levi was waiting for was someone to ask him, someone to invite him to a better life? Someone willing to ignore his obvious sinfulness and treat him with respect? Someone to overlook his unworthiness and invite him on a journey towards redemption?

Today's Provision: Extend/accept the invitation. Do you know any Levis? People who seem to remain outside? There are those who choose to and we respect their wishes. But we can usually tell if someone doesn't think they are worthy or capable of being included. Try reaching out and inviting them in. Be patient. Change rarely happens as quickly as it seems it did for Levi. Do you consider yourself to be a "Levi?" Please note that Jesus calls Levi right where he is, right in the midst of his sinful activity. He doesn't have to purify himself or do some involved penance. He just has to say yes. God comes to each of us as we are, where we are. Accept the invitation.