

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Preparing for Lent, 2023



Fasting is a hot topic in diet and health news these days... "intermittent" fasting, that is. It is touted as a way to lose weight and be more healthy, which is great, but makes "fasting" into a self-serving practice.

I contrast this with a story my mom told me about a girl she knew when she was young who gave up chocolate for Lent. This girl would buy a candy bar everyday and eat all of them on Sunday, which I guess used to be the day of the week you didn't need to fast. I think that girl missed the point!

I wonder: do I miss the point too? Is any fasting I do over these forty days self-serving as well?

I tend to make my fasting about behavior rather than food or drink,

but I have to be careful it is not a pro forma, check-box activity just to fulfill an obligation.

This Lent, we will focus on the topic of fasting as the Spirit leads us. This week's readings provide a good start.

Sunday, February 19: *"Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against any of your people. You shall love your neighbor as yourself"* (Lv 19:1-2, 17-18) *"So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt 5:38-48).

"Be perfect." Yeesch! Like we need to hear that! Those of you who have accompanied me for a while know I always pause at this reading to explain the Greek word used here—"telios"—the meaning of which is more akin to maturity or wisdom or reaching perfection through ripening, as a fruit would. We might look at today's readings and wonder what they have to do with fasting as a way to perfection. Look closely: the reading from Leviticus is about fasting from negativity and grudges. The second reading is about knowing ourselves as temples of the Holy Spirit and learning about God's wisdom. And the gospel reading ties into that by instructing us to fast from "the wisdom of this world" that might lead us to "an eye for an eye" reaction. We try to fast from typical human reactive stances, which are often childish, and instead, respond to situations with God's wisdom, maturity, and "perfection."

Today's Provision: "What would love have me do?" We considered this question last Sunday in talking about discernment, but it calls for continued prayer, especially in these times when we have grown even more impatient with life and each other. We witness childish and spiteful behavior even in the halls of government and from the pulpits of churches. Some seem to cherish the sweet taste of comeuppance and revenge, even though it sours quickly and does nothing more than fuel the fire. This Lenten season, see if you can commit to fasting from reacting, and instead try responding, if not with love, then with patience and tolerance.

Monday, February 20: *"O faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you." ...the boy's father cried out, "I do believe, help my unbelief!"* (Mk 9:14-29).

How about this for a set-up? We talk all about patience and here, Jesus lashes out in impatience! He's human, you know, so take heart. He's just descended from the mountain after the Transfiguration, and I dare say likely a bit dazed! Wouldn't you be? The father in this story is impatient too. He believes, yet is worn down by seeing his son suffer and by trying so hard for so long to "fix" it for his son. Wouldn't you be? A lesson from this passage: Jesus is desperate for his followers to understand what it takes to heal. It's not about what we do. It is about calling upon the God within us.

Today's Provision: Fast from "I can do this myself!" Parents are familiar with this phrase, and in the ministry of child-rearing, it's an important sign kids are ready for some independence. If safety and prudence allow, let them do it themselves. Let them learn from failure and repeated effort. It is how they become resilient which is best learned when they are young—it's not so far to fall. But we tend to do this throughout our lives even in situations where our best efforts will fall woefully short. Jesus tells us about the need for prayer when it comes to healing. What's the malady you've been struggling for years to fix by yourself? If you've prayed about it, what has your prayer been? Has it been only for strength, or have you also prayed for God's grace so you will let go of your expectations in favor of God's will?

Tuesday, February 21: *"Incline your ear and receive the word of understanding, undisturbed in time of adversity. Wait on God, with patience"* (Sir 2:1-11; found in the Apocrypha in Protestant bibles).

Another translation: *"make not haste in times of trouble."* We talked last week about Ignatian discernment. One of the key tenets: don't make decisions in times of desolation or adversity. Instead, turn to God. Wait on God.

Today's Provision: Be in solidarity with those who suffer. We all face adversity; some, like the victims of the recent earthquake, extreme adversity and desperation. For those who survived, waiting on God in complete surrender is the only option. Think about them if you are struggling, trying to rush through whatever adversity you face. Offer that struggle up in solidarity with those who have no choice but to wait on God. In reality, that is all of us.

Wednesday, February 22: *"When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting"* (Mt 6:1-6, 16-18).

This year, the Spirit has led in a totally different direction with this gospel, so bear with me. Perhaps it's because I'm hearing so much about the rise in suicides. Many people hide their suffering. Instead of the hypocrites—the "playactors" as described in the Greek—who show off their fast by being gloomy, those who really suffer often hide behind a mask of cheerfulness, the "oh, everything is just fine" face. They are "playactors" as well, but not hypocrites at all. Instead, like wounded animals, they hide, afraid in their vulnerability. Jesus invites all of us to come out of hiding, to show our true selves, so we can be healed.

Today's Provision: Pray for the grace of authenticity. I think I'll be spending more time with this one. Those who are desperate don't need to be told they are being inauthentic. That's not what I am getting at. Jesus invites us to put aside playacting, to be our real selves. No, we don't show off our piety like some badge of honor (which sometimes shows itself in judgment of others). Those of us gifted with knowing God's mercy and compassion need to fast from self-centeredness, to be more aware of those who put on a good face while suffering in silence; to look into the eyes of those we encounter, to be a source of hope, and to invite their real selves to a place of comfort and healing.

Thursday, February 23: *"He is like a tree planted near running water that yields its fruit in due season and whose leaves never fade"* (Ps 1).

What kind of tree are you and where are you planted? I love natural images to describe our lives. I'm particularly struck by the image of running water. Ever-changing, bringing new nutrients and life from high atop the mountains. The tree, as a result, is ever-changing as well, nourished by the flowing water that makes all things new. I am afraid many of us are stuck near stagnant pools, running dry on nutrients that keep us from growing closer to our Creator.

Today's Provision: Fast from stagnation. "Wait a minute: I'm planted already. Am I supposed to uproot and start over?" For some, this may be where God is calling, but it requires patient discernment and is not the only way to affect change. Questions for you: Are you bearing the good fruit of love and welcome and compassion? Is your faith still a vibrant source of hope that doesn't fade? Then, I'd argue your pool is not stagnant, but that still water runs deep. What about inviting new sources of living water into your pool? Instead of the "same old, same old," choose a modern translation of Scripture or read an author whose views on faith challenge you to open your mind and heart. Send your roots even deeper into the pool by reading the writings of the mystics to learn to become one yourself. *"The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or they will not exist at all"* (Karl Rahner, SJ). (Frankly, I think we are seeing this in real time. I'm not sure much of what is being portrayed as Christianity today has much to do with Christ.)

Friday, February 24: *"Do you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?"* (Is 58:1-9a).

OK, I can't say our theme for Lent is fasting and ignore this line. What do you call a fast? The kind of fast that would make your voice heard on high? This reading from Isaiah is very clear and to the point, and is always used by our Jewish relatives in the Yom Kippur morning service as a reminder of what constitutes a sincere fast.

Today's Provision: Fast like you mean it. For many of us, at least in the West, a sincere fast may have something to do with our calendars. Look ahead over the next few weeks. We all have responsibilities and obligations, but I'm not talking about those. Nor am I talking about time allotted for **true** self-care: prayer, exercise, etc. (No, I don't usually have that time allotted either!) Tomorrow, Isaiah talks about keeping the Sabbath—a day of rest—what a concept! What can you do—or not do—in a meaningful way so that you might fulfill the kind of fast God desires: freeing those oppressed, feeding the hungry and homeless, allowing God to be your "rear guard" as opposed to whatever it is now—money, "likes," "stuff," busyness. (I'll leave you to contemplate what that means in your life!)

Saturday, February 25: *"Repairer of the breach, ' they shall call you, 'Restorer of ruined homesteads'"* (Is 58:9b-14).

This honorable title—Repairer of the Breach—is a powerful biblical image for me. I use it a lot in my own prayer. It is that much more striking in the face of the physical breach and the images of ruined homesteads in Turkey and Syria. I struggle when disasters like this happen, feeling impotent to do much of anything, so I pray. Donations to reputable aid organizations are also essential right now, but what else can we do to alleviate suffering?

Today's Provision: Fast from helplessness. I just did a quick internet search looking for Turkish and Syrian organizations in my community. Every metropolitan area has these organizations. Contact them to see if there are any **practical** things you can do. I read about local folks working with an international aid organization to pack medical and hygiene supplies for shipment. (I encourage you to make financial donations to well-known aid organizations: <https://www.charitynavigator.org/discover-charities/where-to-give/earthquakes-turkey-syria/>, Catholic Relief Services, Doctors Without Borders.) Maybe you have Turkish or Syrian neighbors. Reach out to them with compassion. Let them share their grief. And continue to pray, pray, pray for God's mercy.