

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Lent Week Three, 2024



Sunday, March 3: *"Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:22-25). "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ...Many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all (Jn 2:13-25).*

"PROVE IT! I DARE YOU!" This playground retort rang in my head as I read Scripture today. I also chuckled at the polite way John portrays the response to Jesus' clearing of the temple. Somehow, I don't think it was that calm! But this did make me reflect on how dependent I am on "signs" of God's presence. All I have to do is look out my window, hear a baby's laughter, see helpers in the aftermath of disaster, or sit down to write these reflections to feel God's presence in my life. In comparison to the vast majority of people in the world, I live a blessed life in so many ways. I try to pay attention and to be grateful every day. And I pray that, unlike the people Jesus could not trust...all those people who began to believe in him...some of the very same people who would then condemn him... that my faith in him would carry me through if all these blessings and signs were taken away.

Today's Provision: Do you trust Jesus? Can Jesus trust you? The good news: God knows our human nature all too well, so mercy is available to us whenever we break Jesus' trust, so not to worry. Just pay attention so you know when you need to seek mercy! The next time you say the creed, ask yourself: "Do I believe, not only 'in' God, Jesus, and the Spirit...but do I believe them and their promises? Do I have trust and faith in what I claim to believe, both in good times and bad, or is my trust contingent on prayers being answered or signs being given? Do I strive to see the presence of God in all things, not just those that are beautiful or joyful? Do I trust Jesus to be there for me always? And can Jesus trust me to be a sign of his presence in the world?"

Monday, March 4: *[Naaman's] servants reasoned with him. "My father," they said, "if the prophet had told you to do something extraordinary, would you not have done it?" (2 Kgs 5:1-15).*

Naaman is ticked off. Not only does this so-called prophet not do anything dramatic to cure his leprosy, but he doesn't even come out of his house! "I'm a mighty, respected commander of a great army! Who does this guy, Elisha, think he is!" Naaman's expectations about how his healing will occur are nothing like what Elisha suggests. Thank goodness, the servants take a risk to advise their master. And I guess we can give Naaman credit for listening to them!

Today's Provision: What do you expect "healing" to look like? A good follow-up to yesterday's reflection. Whether we are praying to be healed from sin and sorrow or for a loved one to be cured, I imagine most of us have some idea of what that would look like. And you know, I think God's A-OK with that. There's nothing wrong with being specific in our prayers and having intentions. The challenge comes when the result doesn't look anything like what we had expected or hoped: no extraordinary signs, no obvious answer. This is where the faith and trust we talked about enters the picture. Two things for reflection: if you are struggling to find God in a difficult situation, consider the counsel of a trusted friend or minister who might lead you, like Naaman's servants, to see things in a different light. And remember: being healed and being cured are not the same thing. We pray to be healed by God's peace.

Tuesday, March 5: *"So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart" (Mt 18:21-35).*

I struggle with this message. If God is all merciful, will God not forgive our hardness of heart when we fail to forgive others? In *The Parables of Jesus*, author, Joachim Jeremias, writes: "*The decisive question is: when does God, at the Last Judgment, use the measure of mercy and when, the measure of judgment? Jesus answers: 'Where God's forgiveness produces a readiness to forgive, there God's mercy grants forgiveness of debts...but he who abuses God's gift faces the full severity of judgment, as if he had never received forgiveness'*" (p 214). Yeesh! Heavy stuff! But let's focus on those last three words: *"from your heart."* This is where we can get tripped up. If we truly accept God's forgiveness in our hearts—indicated by forgiveness of ourselves—then the willingness to forgive others will come as a natural result.

Today's Provision: "You cannot give what you do not have." (A quote from Carroll Wise, from *The Meaning of Pastoral Care*.) I love this quote. It applies in all aspects of life: parenting, caring for others, self-care, forgiveness. If we have intellectually accepted God's forgiveness but have not forgiven ourselves, we haven't really accepted forgiveness at all, and we cannot give what we don't have. This doesn't mean we don't remember our shortfalls and sins, but they no longer cause pain and can actually be a source of praise, gratitude, and joy! (Felix Culpa!) Perhaps we've been sinned against in far worse ways than we have ever sinned or have been victims of abuse. We don't know if we have the depth in our hearts to forgive. Look for opportunities for reconciliation that involve truth-telling. Or, if that is not possible, take your wounded heart to prayer and ask God to heal you and release you from this awful burden.

Wednesday, March 6: *"Take care and be earnestly on your guard not to forget the things which your own eyes have seen, nor let them slip from your memory as long as you live"* (Dt 4:1, 5-9).

Today's Provision: In other words: Pay attention! All religions, spiritual philosophies, and guides for a better, healthier life say the same thing: Be aware, pay attention, and engage reality. The first two steps are important. Reality can be harsh, so being aware is essential: be aware of what is happening and how you are reacting, how you are impacted. Then pay attention to these feelings so that your actions are a response rather than a reaction. Many of us today walk around buried in our phones or so distracted, we don't realize what is happening around us. (What if Jesus had been looking at his cell phone? He would have missed Zaccheus up in the tree!) Engaging reality is not about scrolling the newsfeed or watching TV, although I'd argue we need to pay even more attention doing those things. This engagement calls for us to look for God, the Divine, the Spirit, the Cosmos—whatever we call it—look for how mystery is being manifest in the everyday events around us. Do not let memories of profound "God moments" slip away but go back to those times to regroup and refresh yourself. Use today to pay attention and look for God.

Thursday, March 7: *"Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters"* (Lk 11:14-23).

These words of Jesus are among the most demanding that he speaks, but they get lost in the references to Beelzebul and kingdoms being laid to waste. In his essay, *"Followers, not Admirers,"* philosopher Søren Kierkegaard explains, *"Admirers are only too willing to serve Christ as long as proper caution is exercised, lest one personally come in contact with danger. They refuse to accept that Christ's life is a demand."* These days, when following Christ seems to mean diametrically opposed things to different groups of "Christians," the call to be a disciple might be confusing. Jesus is very clear: are you gathering, or are you scattering?

Today's Provision: Pay attention to your conscience. "But it's easier just to follow what our leaders, priests, and ministers tell us. They speak for God, don't they?" If you believe you are to be judged by God, you will be judged standing on your own and not with a bunch of Bible-thumping politicians and clerics shaking in their own shoes. Any talk of nationalism, exclusionism, and party loyalty is about scattering. Gathering means welcoming, bringing in, building bridges. Pay attention to your conscience. If something doesn't sit well or sound like something Jesus would say, bring it directly to him in prayer. Seek the Spirit's wisdom and guidance.

Friday, March 8: *"Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, He is One and there is no other than he. And to love him with all your heart, your understanding, your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices"* (Mk 12:28-34).

Today's Provision: What does loving your neighbor as yourself mean to you? First question: How do you want to be loved? Some people take this commandment so literally that they fail to recognize other people might not want to be loved in the same way they do. Each of us wants to be loved as individuals in our uniqueness and to be treated with respect and dignity. This realization comes into play in our charitable work, not assuming someone needs or wants the same things we would want. It impacts our closest relationships and can be the cause of conflict if we are not careful. It applies in how we evangelize and if we think bringing people closer to God means converting them to believe what we believe. Understanding this truth, combined with keeping God front and center in your life, makes all the difference and is worth more than all the rites and rituals, penances and prayers. Second question: do you love yourself? Remember, you can't give what you don't have. Pray today the Spirit will guide you to love all, including yourself.

Saturday, March 9: *"Your trust is like a morning cloud, like the early dew that melts away ...For trust did I want and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God more than burnt offerings"* (Hos 6:1-6, Hebrew translation).

When I read the Hebrew, I thought, wow, what a wonderful summation of what we've talked about this week! We started with the word "trust." We typically use and hear the words "belief" and "faith," but for me, "trust" has a more personal, intimate connotation. Trust is essential in love. It is trust God wants and not sacrifice. We also talked about paying attention to our own consciences. To do that requires a knowledge of God that is not gained by listening to someone else talk about God. True knowledge of God is experiential and involves this intimate encounter God desires.

Today's Provision: Repeat! Throughout the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius has us repeat prayer experiences. He invites us to return to those prayer sessions that gave us consolation and peace, but even more so to the ones that were challenging and uncomfortable. For me, there's been a lot to take in this week: much to think and pray about, several opportunities to look more closely at my expectations and behaviors. Do I really accept the demand that Christ's life places on me? How worthy of God's trust have I been?

We are midway through Lent, a good time to refresh our prayer (or get it started as the case may be). What words from Scripture this week have spoken to you? What prayer reflections—these, others, or your own—have moved you? Go back to these in prayer and ask the Spirit to illuminate your reflections or show you things in a different light.