

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings.
Lent Week Three, 2023



Sunday, March 12: *In those days, in their thirst for water, the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "Why did you ever make us leave Egypt? Was it just to have us die here of thirst with our children and our livestock?"* (Ex 17:3-7).

Escaping slavery is hard and scary. I think of the courage of the slaves in the US in the 1800s. I think of those who risk their lives today to escape the slavery of oppression and violence. I think of people who fight every day against the slavery of addiction or mental or physical illness. As the saying goes, it can be easier to live with—and even die with—“the devil you know” rather than to venture out to seek freedom, especially when your very survival depends on this sometimes confusing thing called faith. Like the Israelites, we ask, *“Is the Lord in our midst or not?”* And for some, “slavery” is quite comfortable, thank you; we might not even think of it as slavery. “This is the way we’ve always done things,” we may say, and rather than risk growth or change or a deeper relationship with the Divine, we stay stuck in our old ways, disputing (“*meribah*” which mean dispute!) the invitation to quench our thirst with fresh, living water.

Today's Provision: Fast from what enslaves you. Well, this sounds pretty heavy. My slavery is holy “busyness.” Wonderful, life-giving work in the Kingdom that keeps me from deepening my relationship with God, from taking time to discern God’s invitation. It’s *nothing* compared to the slavery of poverty, oppression, sin, and self-hatred I see in the lives of those I encounter in the Kingdom, and yet this slavery keeps me from accessing the living water we all need to do God’s work. What enslaves you? Reputation? Perfection? Scrupulosity? Money? Shame? Give thought today to what keeps you from spending quality, quiet, faith-filled time alone with the Source of Living Water. Pray for courage.

Monday, March 13: *“A thirst is my soul for the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?”* (Ps 42).

The Spirit’s sense of humor strikes again! In the past, I’ve always thought the word “When” should really be “Where.” I remind myself and others that God’s presence is everywhere—we don’t have to wait or go to some altar or mountain to behold God’s face. Even in yesterday’s gospel, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, *“The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...[but] in Spirit and truth.”* And yet, following from yesterday’s reflection, the “when” is indeed very appropriate!

Today's Provision: Take the time to seek the face of God. I truly believe all of us can find God in all things, everywhere. Even in things that trouble us, God is present. But if we fail to carve out time “when” we focus solely on God and God’s embrace, the finding God everywhere becomes much harder. Too often, my prayer time winds up focused on the “what” that I need to do, rather than on praise and gratitude, focused just on God. Let’s look at our busy schedules this Lent. See if you can find a day or weekend retreat *when* you can leave the “to do” list behind and allow God’s face to shine upon you.

Tuesday, March 14: *“...unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart”* (Mt 18:21-35).

Several of the readings this week have to do with insincerity: insincere repentance that passes away like the dew (Hos 6). Insincere sacrifices like burnt offerings (Ps 51). Insincere forgiveness we read about in the gospel today. We are human, not God, so sincere forgiveness doesn’t mean we forget the hurt. In fact, sincere forgiveness calls upon us to forgive continually, especially when the hurt, for some reason, creeps back into our memory. Sincere forgiveness doesn’t erase the scar but, with time, can erase the hurt and bitterness of the wound.

Today's Provision: Fast from superficial forgiveness. I’ve learned a good way to sincerely forgive is to remember I am capable of the same sin or worse. I look at my past and see God’s forgiveness and mercy. I consider the things or ideas...say, for subtle revenge or worse...that sometimes pop into my mind (which, BTW, are not sins) that I dismiss and do nothing about other than pray for whatever or whoever I am angry with. I acknowledge without shame that I am a sinner loved unconditionally by God, and to the best of my ability, I strive to do the same for my fellow human beings. If you struggle to forgive, consider whether you’ve forgiven yourself; we talked about this last week. It might be keeping you from sincerely forgiving others.

Wednesday, March 15: *"I teach you the statutes and decrees as the LORD has commanded me...Observe them carefully, for thus will you give evidence of your wisdom and intelligence to the nations"* (Dt 4:1, 5-9).

The Book of Deuteronomy means the Book of the Second or Repeated law. It is Moses' instruction to the people before they cross over to the Promised Land. He reviews again all the statutes and decrees the Lord has given for the people to learn and follow by their hearts. Wisdom is the focus of this book: How will the nation of Israel be wise in following these decrees? How will they apply the Spirit of the law to situations they confront? Of course, there come to be some 613 laws that describe lots of situations, but the question is still: How do we wisely apply God's will in a way that demonstrates God's closeness to and love for us?

Today's Provision: Do our lives demonstrate wisdom and God's love? We read in Friday's gospel how a scribe asks Jesus about the law, and he summarizes the whole law in these few words: Love God and love your neighbor. How often we can get caught up in the minutiae of the rules and miss the entire point of love! How often we are seeing this in our churches today! One way I try to address this is to ask myself in any situation: "What is the next loving thing I can do?" I don't think it has ever been to condemn or turn away, although I can't say I am always on target. Pray to the Spirit throughout your day to beg for wisdom and to be a channel of God's love.

Thursday, March 16: *"Whoever does not gather with me scatters"* (Lk 11:14-23).

Jesus uses agriculture as a metaphor for many of his sayings and parables. This one strikes me as pertinent today. What harvester can you imagine that would scatter perfectly good grain? Instead, wise harvesters gather as much as they can. If they are good and generous people as well, they share that grain with those who don't have enough, not by scattering the remainder, but by inviting others to share in the bounty.

Today's Provision: Fast from "scattering." I fear lots of people these days are scattering: dividing people into tribes and sects based on who or what "outsiders" some others in their community welcome into the fold. We see it in nations, we see it in our churches. Lots of self-righteous "pharisees"—like the one in Saturday's gospel—who judge others and work to exclude, to scatter. Are you a gatherer, working with Jesus to bring people together? Or are you one who scatters, leaving good grain that doesn't fit your "recipe" to rot in the fields or to be taken by vultures?

Friday, March 17: *"I will heal their defection, says the LORD, I will love them freely... Let him who is wise understand these things; let him who is prudent know them"* (Hos 14:2-10).

"I will love them freely." How beautiful are these words! Imagine God saying your name and speaking, *"I will love you freely."* Ah, it brings tears to my eyes! And I also pray in any situation I encounter, that the Spirit of Wisdom will always help me, if not to understand, then to at least accept this mystery of this God who loves me freely!

Today's Provision: Accept God's love, freely given! This being St. Patrick's Day (and with the last name of Ireland, I can't let it pass!) and with our discussions these past few weeks, I share this Irish proverb: *"If there are skeletons in your closet, you might as well learn to dance with them!"* God loves us freely, skeletons and all. I think of King David, with all his sins, dancing with abandon before the Lord! Lent can be a rough time of repentance and difficult self-reflection, so never forget in the midst of it all: God loves you unconditionally and freely. Soak it in!

Saturday, March 18: *"It is mercy I desire, and not sacrifice"* (Hos 6:6). *"For you are not pleased with sacrifices; should I offer a burnt offering, you would not accept it. My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit"* (Ps 51).

A good bookend for this week. In the psalm text, the psalmist is pleading with God to forgive *me*, to wipe out *my* offenses and cleanse *me* of *my* sin. It's a personal confession and prayer for forgiveness. The author trusts in the Lord's mercy, and then in turn, God responds: "Don't offer empty sacrifices or fasts or severe penances to thank me for my mercy. Instead, offer this mercy and love to others: give to the poor, release the oppressed, lighten the burdens of others, and remember that this Lenten time is not just about you and your sins. Rest assured in your sincere confession: you are taken care of and loved freely. *Now... go and do likewise"* (Lk 10:37).

Today's Provision: Show mercy. We're more than half-way through Lent. Is there someone or some situation in your life that calls for mercy? (Remember, mercy involves pardon in the face of justice.) It doesn't have to be a big thing. Maybe it's a debt that hasn't been repaid, or a slight that hasn't been acknowledged that gets in the way of a relationship: Is it worth the resentment? Where can you share God's mercy?