

Provisions as We Become A New Creation

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Third Week of Easter 2021



Sunday, April 18: *"You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you."* (Acts 3:32-35)

I wonder what happened to Barabbas. There's very little we know about him other than that his name means "son of the father" ("bar"—son of, and "abbas" – the father). As you might imagine, there's a lot written about this naming coincidence. Some suggest Barabbas and Jesus are one and the same—one representing his humanity and other his divinity. Or, more logically, the name indicates Barabbas' father is unknown. The most plausible explanation to me is that he metaphorically represents all humanity, freed by Jesus' sacrifice. But I do wonder: Does he run away as fast as he can, ecstatic about his freedom, unaware and uncaring about the one who is to take his place? To continue the metaphor, do we imagine he is forgiven and freed from sin? Does he ever experience pangs of guilt? It begs the prayerful question, "How do I react to the idea that Jesus died for me?"

Today's Provision: Accept Jesus' sacrifice. If you were to poll people – Christians and non-Christians alike – about what puzzles them most about Christianity, I'd venture that the questions, "Why did Jesus have to die for our sins?" and "If Jesus died for our sins, then why is there still so much sin in the world?" would rank pretty high on the list. So, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't have the answers either! That's why it's called a mystery. What I do know is that the cross and the empty tomb are inextricably linked, that suffering and then rising up in hope is elemental to our human experience. Jesus died to teach us that nothing—not even human death—is ultimately death-dealing. That is why, when all is said and done, *"We are Easter people and Alleluia is our song."* (St. Augustine)

Monday, April 19: *"Though princes meet and talk against me, your servant meditates on your statutes...Make me understand the way of your precepts...remove from me the way of falsehood. The way of truth I have chosen."* (Ps 119)

We've talked a lot recently about truth and falsehoods and how it can be hard to know what to believe anymore. Within denominations and churches, within communities and families, there are major disagreements. While we might agree on what and who we believe in, the way our beliefs are manifest in real-world situations are often diametrically opposed.

In Thursday's gospel passage (from John 6), Jesus quotes Isaiah: *"They shall all be taught by God" – "All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be their peace."* (Is 54:13) To find our peace amid the confusion, let's allow God to teach us.

Today's provision: Read--and pray with--Scripture. This topic may make some church leaders uncomfortable. It may make some believers uncomfortable as well. It can be easier to just have someone else tell us what we are to believe. And there is much in Scripture that benefits from scholarly study and interpretation. I by no means discount the wisdom of scholars; I rely on scholarly texts all the time and always seek advice if something is confusing or unclear. But if we enter into Scripture prayer with a sincere heart, and leave behind as many presuppositions and assumptions (or justifications!) that we can; if we are willing to understand and accept the context and entertain ideas that challenge what we have learned in the past, the Spirit will be our counselor and help us understand God's way.

Tuesday, April 20: *"Into your hands I commend my spirit."* (Ps 31)

We know this line well. We read it in Luke 23:46. These are the last words Jesus utters. We also hear something similar in Acts today as Stephen, being stoned, cries out, *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."* But if we think of these words as just a prayer to proclaim at the end of our lives, we are missing the point.

To commend means *"to entrust for care or protection."* Isn't that something we would want every minute of every day? Imagine the peace you will experience if you consciously and sincerely entrust your spirit each day to God's care!

Today's Provision: Commend your spirit—right now! If you struggle to find time to pray, consider saying these words a few times every day, and not just in times when surrender is called for (although honestly, surrender IS called for all the time)! *"You can't fake authentic surrender. For it is the moment you unclench your hands...accept what is and finally let go...that the fertile space is provided for Divine intervention and unimaginable possibilities."* (Kristen Jongen)

Wednesday, April 21: *"Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me."* (Jn 6:35-40)

Isn't this the way in which we all should be living?

Today's Provision: "I am the way." When Jesus tells us he is the way, he means it literally: "Watch the way I live. That's how you need to live as well." Everything the Father gives to Jesus comes to him because he is willing to accept what the Father gives. Am I? Jesus does not reject anyone who comes to him. Do I? Jesus is on earth, not to do his own will but the Father's. Do I ever take time to discern the Father's will for me? Take an unvarnished look at the way Jesus lives his life and the way you live yours? What areas are in need of some review and prayer?

Thursday, April 22: *Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and he baptized him. When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, but continued on his way rejoicing.* (Acts 8:26-40)

The stories in Scripture about people being "snatched away" or appearing or disappearing out of nowhere can cause us to be skeptical. If I pay too much attention to those sorts of details, I tend to miss the message the story has to tell me. Here, Philip disappears but the eunuch does not despair. He continues on his way, rejoicing over the gift he has received. His faith is not dependent on Philip's presence. Philip was a channel for the Spirit, but gets out of the way and allows the Spirit to take over. I like to think that this eunuch (who was likely unable to worship with the Jewish community in Jerusalem) returns home to form a community of believers in his own country.

Today's Provision: Listen to the Spirit within. This is not to say a community is unnecessary for our faith to flourish. It is surely a great help to be active in faith with others so we can provide mutual support. But if our faith is tied too closely to what some human person or group of people does or says—particularly if we are somehow ostracized from society-- we need to step back and take a good look. Cults of personality can be stealthy and very dangerous. If something does not feel right, pay attention. The True Spirit will always guide you in the right direction.

Friday, April 23: *But the Lord said, "Go, for this man (Saul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and children of Israel, and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name."* (Acts 9:1-29)

When does the Lord show Saul what he will have to suffer to be God's chosen instrument? I guess he is going to be one that learns on the job! I wonder if these first few days are not a lesson in themselves. Saul is learned and zealous in his Jewish faith. As he goes forward in his Christian mission, one gets the impression he likes control and he likes to be right! He's big on declarative statements! So, here he is knocked silly, loses his sight, and becomes dependent. He does "a 180" on the person of Jesus Christ, and as a result, is distrusted, questioned, likely scoffed at, and avoided. Neither the Jews nor the disciples of Christ want to touch him with a ten-foot poll. Perhaps the greatest suffering Saul experiences, at least in the beginning, is learning humility.

Today's Provision: What do I need to suffer in order to learn humility? Remember when we talked about the story of the rich young man and how Jesus homed in on what the young man idolized more than God? We asked ourselves what Jesus would call us to give up. Now we look at Saul's conversion and ask this question: What lesson am I to learn about humility? How might I be persecuting Jesus without even knowing it, or by thinking I am doing God's will? What is God calling me to renounce and leave behind — even at the risk of admitting I've been wrong — so that I may become God's instrument? Some provocative thoughts for prayer today!

Saturday, April 24: *"How shall I make a return to the LORD for all the good he has done for me?"* (Ps 116)

What if this was the prayer with which we begin and end each day? It is at least a question we should ask every day. It of course encourages us to consider the good God has done for us, another way of suggesting that we count our blessings — always good advice! The Examen prayer does this as well, always having us start with thanksgiving for the gifts God has given us, even the ones we are still unaware of. And especially the gift of God's mercy, present to us every day. So how does the psalmist say we make a return to the Lord? By continuing to offer thanks and to call upon the Lord, recognizing God as the source of all life and blessing.

Today's Provision: Pray with this psalm. I suggested this psalm during Lent as well. It is a perfect message for the times in which we are living. It's just 19 verses, so read the whole thing slowly and purposefully. Make it real by adding examples from your own life: *"I felt agony and dread..."* (think about a time you were worried or anxious). *"Return, my soul, to your rest; the Lord has been good to you..."* (remember a time of God's peace and comfort). *"I said in my alarm, 'No one can be trusted..."* (think of times when your trust in others has been tested).

Note: remember when reading the psalms: some can sound quite dramatic, and the situations described dire indeed. The Old Testament writers used this technique — sometimes referred to as "Hebrew hyperbole" -- to get their points across. Jesus used it as well. Seek to make the psalms real in your life even if it's not so dire and dramatic!