

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

First Week of Lent 2018



Sunday, February 18: *God said to Noah... "See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants... and with every living creature that was with you: all the birds, and the various tame and wild animals..." (Gn 9: 8-15)*

The animals don't get much attention post-flood. But God makes it clear: the covenant he offers is for all of creation, not just humans. It's interesting: the animals fared better pre-flood—even the unclean ones made the "ark cut." Not so for their human counterparts. Our catechism tells us "by their mere existence they (animals) bless him and give him glory." (#2416) Do we, by our mere existence, bless God? *"The forms and individual characters of living and growing things... constitute their holiness in the sight of God. Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of his wisdom and his reality in them... it declares the glory of God... But what about you? What about me?"* (Thomas Merton) Bless and cherish God's creation this Lent.

Today's provision—Cherish Creation: Have you decided on Lenten practices or sacrifices yet? Gather the family around and come up with some ideas about cherishing and caring for creation. Maybe volunteering at an animal shelter. Instead of fasting from a particular food, fast from waste. See <https://www.usda.gov/oce/foodwaste/index.htm> for information and ideas. Think about cutting your shower time down by a few minutes each day to conserve water (just look at what is happening in South Africa to get real-time impacts of water shortages). As the weather permits, see if your local community is planning an early spring clean-up and make a day of it. Whatever you choose to do, do so with a focus on thanking God for the gift of our earth, the plants and animals, and each other.

Monday, February 19: *"You shall not go about spreading slander among your kin; nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake. I am the LORD. You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. Though you may have to reprove him, do not incur sin because of him." (Lv 19:1-2, 11-18)*

The Book of Leviticus does not make for light reading. It is tedious and in parts, goes into such minute legal detail, it can make your head spin. And yet there are verses scattered throughout the Book that provide sound advice and guidance for the Israelites and for us as to how we are to live out God's commandments. What do you think God means that we should not "stand idly when our neighbor's life is at stake?" I find myself standing idly by when I hear about the young lives lost in the city not 15 miles from my home. What does God say to me about that? While I hope I can claim hatred is not part of my make-up, I sure can have feelings of fiery anger and indignation when I hear the vitriol and hatred spewed by others, especially those at the highest levels of government and religion. How do I come to terms with that reality? Throughout this chapter, God reminds us, "I, the Lord, am your God," as if to say, 'Don't forget, in the midst of the challenges of everyday life, who to look to for strength and guidance, who's in charge.'

Today's Provision—Reflect on God's Message: We've heard the words of Scripture so often that we let them pass without a second thought about their message for our lives. Some, particularly in the Old Testament, may seem to have no meaning in contemporary society. And in some cases, that is true. But human nature has not changed much over the millennia—just take a look at Lv 19: 33! When you read Scripture, make sure to go beyond the printed word in those verses that seem to have no meaning for you. Reflect on the message God is sending you.

Tuesday, February 20: *"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." (Mt 6: 7-15)*

Recently, Pope Francis called attention to this phrase in the Lord's Prayer. What does Jesus mean when he says these words? What do we mean when we pray them? In Matthew's Gospel, there are at least two other uses of the same Greek word for temptation: in chapter 4, we hear Jesus is *led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted*; in chapter 26, Jesus admonishes Peter to stay awake and pray that *he will not be put to the trial or the test*. We read of many instances when God did indeed put people to the test: Abraham, Job, Jacob, and Jesus to name a few. To me, the operative word here is "lead." Some contemporary translations read, "Save us from the time of trial," which has more to do with God protecting us from tests of our faith. And yet, it is when we are tested and turn to God that we receive the grace and strength to persevere. It is when we are tested and fail, and turn back to God that we receive the amazing gift of God's mercy. As Jesus might ask, "What is your opinion?"

Today's Provision—Reflect on Your Request of God: Another opportunity to reflect. Think about these words. What are you praying for? Is there a difference between praying that we not be led into temptation and that we be delivered from evil? Have you ever felt that you were "led by the Spirit" for the purpose of being tempted? Think about the disciples and their bravado about accepted the cup Jesus was to drink. How did they fare on their tests?

Wednesday, February 21: *"Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed," when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth. (Jon 3:1-10)*

There's a small but significant word missing from this verse: We hear the Ninevites "believed God." It doesn't say they believed "in God." Does that little word really matter? Were they reacting to Jonah's message solely out of fear or did they experience a conversion? Well, if we accept the Old Testament view of God's vengeance, we have to assume they went back to their evil ways. Reading further, we learn from Nahum that Nineveh was destroyed some 150 years later. How about us? Do we toe the line just because we are fearful of God's wrath? I guess some would argue we must then believe *in* God. But is that the kind of god we want to believe in? What about "Abba," the God Jesus describes?

Today's Provision—Reimagine God: Are you stuck with old, fearful images of God? Jesus taught us pray to God as Father, but as William Barry, SJ, writes in his article, "Teaching Others to Pray," if you experienced abuse from a father figure, praying to God as father may just reinforce the image of an unloving God (1995). If you struggle with unhealthy images of God, seek guidance from a minister, priest, or spiritual director. Barry's book, *God's Passionate Desire*, (2008) can also help lead you to a healthy, more realistic image of a God who loves you unconditionally.

Thursday, February 22: *"I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven." (Mt 16:13-19)*

Jesus doesn't ask Peter if he wants the keys. He just announces that Peter will have the keys. I wonder why he picks Peter. We've talked many times about Peter's weaknesses and faults. I look at my own weaknesses, sinfulness, and faults, and wonder: Why does Jesus pick me?

Today's Provision—Prayer to St. Peter: "St. Peter, You were Jesus' beloved friend and disciple, the one to whom he entrusted the care and nurturing of his fledgling Church. *Pray for me as Jesus prayed for you.* You accepted Jesus as your Savior without question, even though you sometimes did not understand what that acceptance meant. *Grant me a simplicity and purity of faith, in the face of the world's skepticism and my own weakness.* Even when you sinned or when it seemed that Jesus was asking more than you thought you could give, you always returned with a renewed and stronger faith. *Grant me the humility to admit my sinfulness, to look Jesus in the eye when I have sinned, and to accept his forgiveness and the expectations He has for me. Let me never forget that, even in the depths of sin and grief, Jesus welcomes me back with open arms.* Jesus gave you the awesome responsibility of establishing his church on earth, of guiding God's sons and daughters to him. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the responsibility I have in helping to shape souls entrusted to me. *Give me the ears to hear the quiet guidance of the Holy Spirit and the courage to go where it leads. May your life and faith be an example to all men and women as we strive to follow Jesus on the path he has set for us. Amen.* (Ireland, 2003)

Friday, February 23: *"Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked?" says the Lord GOD. "Do I not rather rejoice when he turns from his evil way that he may live?" (Ez 18: 21-28)*

Some of the messages in today's and tomorrow's readings are hard to swallow. We love the sentiment in the psalms of God's great mercy for all of us, but it can stick in our craw that all the good we have done can be wiped out by our turning to sin, and someone who has led a sinful life can be forgiven and saved in the nick of time. God of course, sees into our hearts to know if our repentance is genuine, but God does not rejoice in the death of anyone, sinful or not. We too are called to love and forgive in this way as well.

Today's Provision—Forgiveness: Are you holding anger or vengeance in your heart for a real or perceived hurt, thinking you will derive pleasure from the punishment due? Most of us do this at times, but we probably know all too well that such a state of heart and mind can eat us alive and darken our very existence. Have you hurt another and been too proud or ashamed (two sides of the same coin, by the way) to admit your wrong and ask for forgiveness? Do you feel you're justified in your anger since the other party to the situation cannot or will not ask for forgiveness, or doesn't acknowledge the wrong they have done? The impact we feel is the same. Unresolved hurt takes time to heal, but if we don't bring it to God for healing, we suffer. If forgiveness is an issue for you, you might consider the book, *Don't Forgive too Soon, Extending Two Hands that Heal*, by the Linns.

Saturday, February 24: *"I will give you thanks with an upright heart, when I have learned your just ordinances. I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me." (Ps 119)*

On Tuesday, we talked about reflecting on what we ask God for in The Lord's Prayer. Perhaps the psalmist is guiding us on the same path. Here, the author acknowledges the desire and commitment to keep God's statutes and ordinances. But the psalmist is also aware that he or she can only do so with God's help. "Do not forsake me." 'I need your strength and guidance to discern what is right in your eyes.' Those who wish to walk in the laws of the Lord know the importance of praying always, of being aware of God's presence and call as we go about our day.

Today's Provision—"Thy Will Be Done:" As you go about your day today, especially if you are faced with a challenging situation, whisper "Thy will be done," then consciously open your heart to hear the Spirit's guidance. Get into the habit of repeating these four words and asking God to lead you to his will for you or for those to whom you minister. Give thanks to God for guiding you to do his will, especially when you are called to forgive.