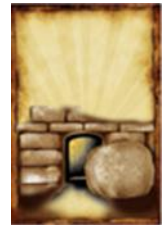


Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Lent Week One, 2025



A reminder of our Lenten focus...How will I: **FAST, PRAY, GIVE, ACT?**

Sunday, March 9: *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil [who] showed him all the kingdoms of the world: "All this will be yours, if you worship me." "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from [this parapet], for it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you. With their hands they will support you.'" Jesus replied, "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test"*(Lk 4:1-13, abridged).

We know world leaders who, while not using these exact words, have tempted people with riches and great things if they follow that leader blindly. We also know people who have given up faith because God did not "do" that for which they prayed. They put God to the test, and God seemingly failed them. (We will hear about some of these on Palm Sunday: *"Let the Anointed, the king of Israel, descend from the cross, so that we may see and believe,"* Mk 15:31-32.) I struggle in the midst of hatred and evil to come to a place of peace with God and God's will. Jesus struggled too, which is why we can turn to him with our doubts and our prayers for courage and strength.

Provision: PRAY "God's will be done." *"The desert is where we encounter God and God comes to meet us"*(Walter Burghardt, S.J.). Sometimes, we must come to a place where the comforts of our faith are stripped away, when we think we are alone without support, to allow God to meet us in our vulnerability. When things are going well, we might find ourselves unwittingly pushing God aside (which is why in today's OT reading, Moses reminds the people to offer thanksgiving sacrifices!) But we pray for understanding, we pray to trust God's will for us and for the world, and that our trust can be a source of hope. Don't stop praying for intentions close to your heart, but as Jesus did at Gethsemane, end your prayer with, "God, your will be done."

Monday, March 10: *"You shall not steal... lie... curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind. You shall not act dishonestly in rendering judgment...nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake"*(Lv 19:1-2, 11-18). *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him* (Mt 25:31-46).

Today's missive from Leviticus lists things we, as individuals, "shall not" do. In the gospel, we hear about the judgement of the "nations." What do you think this means? That governments and leaders of nations will be judged, but those under their rule won't be? Somehow, I don't think that's it. (So, if we are part of a "sheep nation," we won't benefit from their largesse!?) One way to look at these two passages is to contrast the difference between personal sin and societal sin.

Provision: ACT as if your life depended on it. We all get the idea of personal sin, but how do you define societal sin? Jesus' list seems to be about charitable works, but that's a narrow reading of this text. Societal sin includes policies and practices that exclude others from God's bounty, that bring about the need for charitable works: racism, bigotry, "deference to the mighty" (as we hear in Leviticus), injustice, denying people a place at the table, policies that demonize the stranger or ignore care for the earth. Spend time reflecting on societal sin, and how your actions **and** inaction impact the greater good. *"Your life and my life flow into each other as wave flows into wave, and unless there is peace and joy and freedom for you, there can be no real peace or joy or freedom for me"*(Frederick Buechner).

Tuesday, March 11: *"The LORD confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth"*(Ps 34).

In Hebrew, that last phrase is *"to cut off from the earth their names."* I understand what the psalmist is saying here: evil will be forgotten in the face of good. But for me, there's a huge caveat, expressed best by George Santayana's most famous quote: *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."* In the US and some European countries, there is a rise in "neo-Nazism." Let's get one thing straight: there's nothing "neo" about it, and world leaders who, no matter how much they deny it, are, by their words, actions, and policies, supporting this movement. My parents' generation, those who lived through WWII, and, in my father's case, fought against the scourge of Nazism, have moved on to their reward, and it is up to my generation to honor them by making sure the coming generations never forget. Humanity is nowhere near being ready to dismiss the presence of evil. It is front and center right now.

Provision: FAST from turning away. *"You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say again that you didn't know"*(William Wilberforce, British slavery abolitionist). Oh, I know how easy it is to say, "this too will pass, we've survived this before" or "there's nothing I can do" or "someone else will deal with it." But what is happening now is an affront to all those with a moral conscience, regardless of political affiliation. I encourage you to make your voice heard *repeatedly* to your elected leaders. Tell them there is no place for hatred and bigotry in our world.

Wednesday, March 12: *"Everyone shall turn back from their evil way and from the outrage to which they hold fast"* (Jon 3:1-10, Hebrew). *"This generation is an evil generation"* (Lk 11:29-32).

Outrage: as a noun it could be both a horrible, violent act, or the reaction to a horrible, violent act. In the NABRE translation, I guess it's the former: the violence the Ninevites "had in hand." But we know an outrageous act can easily spark an outrageous and equally violent response. Violence begets violence, which is why Jesus' words to his evil generation can likely be said to all generations. How do we work to turn back from our evil ways, from violence?

Provision: ACT nonviolently. I am a bit of a hothead. I've calmed down some in these, my later years, but my outrage can be sparked quickly. What's interesting about our current political climate is that there are a lot of people who are outraged, but we are not all outraged about the same things. Some are outraged by elitism (I'm not saying, "so called," because I think this is grounded in reality). Others, like me, are outraged by the current political situation and the leaders in my country. They have deceived the very people to whom they have promised greatness (go back to Sunday's reflection) and are destroying democracy to feed their own egos and bank accounts. Considering Jesus' comment about an evil generation, let's go back to Monday's reflection as well. Is Jesus talking just to the leaders or to all of us? How can we calm and channel our outrage into nonviolent and compassionate ways to "repair the breach?"

Thursday, March 13: *"Help me, who am alone and have no help but you, for I am taking my life in my hand"* (Est C:12, 14-16, 23-25).

Esther is scared. She is taking a big risk. Her husband, the king, is a powerful and mercurial dude (although we hear God changed his anger to gentleness), but she doesn't know that walking into his throne room. She prays fervently to God to give her courage to speak truth and goodness to treachery and evil.

Provision: PRAY for courage. It takes courage to speak out against evil. For Esther, it could have meant death; for Jesus, it did (along with MLK, Gandhi, recent activists in Russia, and I'm sure many other saints around the world). For me, it is awful to see the cuts to USAID given the number of good people who have put their own lives at risk over the years to fight illness and evil around the world. It takes courage for us to speak out today. The threat of violence and slander is very real. Not all of us are called to take a public stand, but that doesn't mean we don't speak out, nonviolently, to call out evil we see. *This is a time, folks, when the rubber of our faith meets the road, and that means friction; friction causes heat. Pray today for the courage to endure the heat, to take a nonviolent stand within your community.*

Friday, March 14: *"If the wicked one turns away from all the sins he committed, if he... does what is right and just, he shall surely live, he shall not die. ...And if the virtuous one turns from the path of virtue to do evil, the same kind of abominable things that the wicked one does... none of his virtuous deeds shall be remembered"* (Ez 18:21-28).

An important thing to remember here: God sees and knows the disposition of our hearts. This is not about "thou shalt not" sins of commission. The virtuous person who appears to *do* nothing wrong may have a cold, hardened, judgmental heart. The one deemed as wicked because of their actions may have a warm, loving, merciful heart. (I have witnessed many times the compassion and love of those that society looks down upon for their sins.) You can't fool God. *"You are the ones who are offering justifications of yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; because that which is lofty among men is an abomination before God"* (Lk 16:15).

Provision: FAST from judgment. These words of Jesus hit me: *"that which is lofty among men is an abomination before God."* I know people who judge others favorably based on the amount of money or power they make or have accrued. But then, I need to look at how I judge people who judge people that way! We all judge others. It's human nature. Heck, Jesus did, but he judged based on the actions rather than on the person (an important distinction; he saw everyone as a child of God). But today, let's each of us look at the criteria with which we judge. How do these standards align with how we imagine God judges? *"Do not pay too much attention to fame, power, or money. Someday, you will meet a person who cares for none of these, and then you will know how really poor you are"* (Rudyard Kipling).

Saturday, March 15: *"Today, I am making this agreement with the LORD: God will be my God, and I am to walk in God's ways"* (Dt 26:16-19, adapted).

Provision: GIVE this PRAYER a try! (I didn't have any "GIVES" this week, so we will go with this one!) Each morning, imagine you are making an agreement with God. What are you agreeing to? Where might you be challenged to keep this agreement (say, you know you will encounter "this person" or "that situation" today)? And do this with the knowledge that God keeps God's commitment. God will never abandon the promises to us! Yes, we might need to "repair a breach" or two this evening, but God awaits our return!