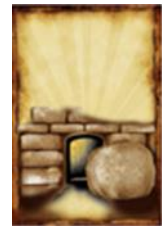


Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

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



Sunday, March 10: *Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn 3:14-21).*

*"Nicodemus came by night, beneath a watching moon, trailing shadows with every step, hiding his hope like guilt" (Steven Charleston, from *Hope as Old as Fire*).*

"Yo, Nicodemus! You who are so fearful of your own conscience! You who are concerned lest you lose your status and the respect of "polite society." You who try to hide your wonder and hope behind all these hypothetical questions. Get out of your head, Pharisee. Follow your heart." Nicodemus provides the bookends this week. We hear Saturday about his feeble attempt to get Jesus a hearing. He backs down when challenged by the Sanhedrin. I dunno...he seems wishy-washy to me. Not saint material, I'd say.

August 31: the feast day of St. Nicodemus. His sainthood is recognized by the Roman and Eastern Orthodox rites. Other than the two references in this week's readings, we hear about him one other time when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in anointing and burying Jesus. We don't know if he was ostracized and joined the fledgling Christian community. (There is the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, but it is considered a story version of Jesus' passion written several centuries later.) So, what merits the mantle of sainthood? Nicodemus took some risks. Nicodemus tried.

Today's Provision: Try! Some 20 years ago while on retreat, I was attempting to improve my relationship with God and with Jesus (the Spirit's always been my devotional God). I wrote an ISO—In Search Of ad—for a savior. It was an enlightening exercise. Later in prayer, I asked Jesus the same thing: "What are you searching for in me?" My heart's ears heard these words: "I want someone who will try. Someone who will try. Try." Of course, I then went about trying too hard, and was likely very "trying" to people around me! One of the most wonderful things about our relationship with God is that our efforts, the intentions of our hearts do make a difference in God's eyes, even if we fail. Let's challenge ourselves to approach each day with the prayer, "Lord, with your help and grace, I will try my best today to be a faithful servant, to follow where you lead, even if that means I take some risks to be a witness to your life."

Monday, March 11: *When he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all he had done in Jerusalem at the feast (Jn 4:43-54).*

"Sure," the Galileans say to Jesus. "Come on down here and start doing some more of those wonderful things we've seen you do before. What will you 'wow' us with today? Never mind that we will one day deny you and raise our voices for your execution."

Today's Provision: Has Jesus "wowed" you today? Think about it. God, Jesus, the Spirit: are they top of mind and heart, or do you let them retreat to the recesses as the day-in, day-out monotony lulls you into routine? Does your awareness of God's presence ebb and flow based on the signs and wonders you see? This happens to all of us. And sometimes, we even deny Jesus by acting in ways that betray what he really means to us. So, let's try throughout the day today to notice and be "wowed" by the little things that show God's great love!

Tuesday, March 12: *"After this Jesus found [the man he had healed] in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you" (Jn 5:1-16).*

This story bothers me. It sounds like Jesus is relating the man's past sinfulness to the illness from which he has just been cured. It contradicts what Jesus says (Jn 9:2-3) when he dispels the long-held (and still believed) notion that something we have done or not done is the cause of a random misfortune or illness that comes our way. I think the key here is in the last phrase: don't sin lest something worse than the illness you suffered from all those years occur. The emotional and spiritual agony of separation from God due to sin is worse than any physical ailment we can endure.

Today's Provision: Holding fast to God. God gets the rap for a lot of bad things. Events like tornados and floods are still called "acts of God" in insurance policies and legal contracts. (It's interesting: God's name has been forced out of so many other things, but still gets the blame here! The late Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote that using the term "acts of God" for such things is tantamount to taking the Lord's name in vain.) Sometimes, people lose their faith when tragedy strikes, or people think they have sinned so gravely they are beyond God's reach. But these are times when holding fast to God is most important. God is the gentle whispering sound that comforts us after the tempest. Our sinfulness and loss need not separate us from God. In fact, if we are open, these can be paths to an even deeper relationship with God.

Wednesday, March 13: *"My Father is at work until now, so I am at work" (Jn 5:17-30).*

It is hard to overstate the significance of the fifth chapter of John's Gospel in terms of the impact it had on the Jews at that time. Jesus calls God, "his Father," time and again. The image of "father" in the Jewish tradition referred more to God being a father to the entire nation; there are not many references to God as father in the OT. Jesus' use of this very personal and intimate term in his relationship with God was arrogant and scandalous to the powers that be.

Today's Provision: What's your name for God? *"Would you come if someone called you by the wrong name? I wept, because for years, He did not enter my arms; Then, one night I was told a secret: Perhaps the name you call God is not really His, maybe it is just an alias. I thought about this and came up with a pet name for my Beloved I never mention to others. All I can say is—it works" (Ra'bia, 8th century Sufi Poet, translated by Daniel Ladinsky).* What is your name for God? Those whose experiences with father figures were troubled may not want to relate to God as father. Don't be afraid to have your own name for God. Talk to God today and let God know what you cherish in your relationship, or as we talked about Sunday, what you desire God to be in your life. Run the name by God and see what happens!

Thursday, March 14: *The LORD said to Moses... "Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them... then I will make of you a great nation." But Moses implored: Why, O LORD...should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent he brought them out, that he might...exterminate them from the face of the earth' (Ex 32:7-14).*

This dialogue between God and Moses is just great! Moses is basically saying, "God, you can't do that! What will the neighbors think? The Egyptians will say you are just horrible, burning up the people like that." The God with whom Moses interacts is humanized, temperamental, and easily upset.

But it's the Israelites who incite God's wrath. They too, are showing the "neighbors" the god they worship is no different from the false gods left behind in Egypt. Their calf-god is made of gold as well, but lifeless just the same. The Israelites are not representing the God of their fathers in any way that embodies the Spirit of the one, true God.

And how extraordinary is Moses! He doesn't want a great nation for himself. He's only concerned for this ungrateful lot he brought out of captivity. You can almost imagine him saying, *"Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do."*

Today's Provision: Being God's representatives. When people look at us, do they see an approachable, compassionate God? Do we demonstrate for the world the love of the one, true God? Or do they see a vengeful, spiteful god? A god bent on getting even? And how do *we* see God? Jesus died once and for all to "remove the reproach" of captivity from our souls. We honor his sacrifice when we represent him as he truly is: the God of mercy and love.

Friday, March 15: *"Let us beset the just one, he is obnoxious to us... He judges us debased...and boasts that God is his Father. ...With revilement and torture let us put him to the test...condemn him to a shameful death" (Wis 2:1, 12-22).*

In her extraordinary essay, "Truth to Tell," author Barbara Brown Taylor relates this story: *"I remember being at a retreat where the leader asked us to think of someone who represented Christ in our lives...When it came time to share, one woman said, 'I had to think hard...Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?'"* (abridged from *Bread and Wine*, p. 91). I read this book every Lent, and every Lent, this essay stops me in my tracks. How willing am I to look in the mirror that is Christ Jesus? How willing am I to look at myself?

Today's Provision: Coming close enough to see clearly. I heard a saying once that the closer we get in our relationship with Jesus, the more we see our deficiencies and faults. Most of us don't like doing that, so we keep Jesus at arms' length. And yet, that is the very way that we can fall deeper in love. If you can, ask Jesus to bring the mirror today.

Saturday, March 16: *"Nicodemus...said to them, 'Does our law condemn a man before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?' They said to him, 'You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.' Then each went to his own house (Jn 7:40-53).*

I imagine one of the Pharisees coming home after a hard day at the Sanhedrin office and relating the days' activities to his wife. He makes a comment: "Gosh, he's such a wise man, that Nicodemus, but he seems to be waffling a bit on this Jesus character." He settles down with a nice glass of wine but decides to take out his scrolls. His wife raises her eyebrows: "Are you double checking?" she asks. "No, no, no," he replies. "The High Priest has spoken and told us the party line. I'm just wondering what old Nic might be thinking." Slowly, the rumor mill begins, and our friend, Nicodemus starts to get some sideways glances. Old friends avoid him and speculate that his mind might be going. And so, the path of rejection, the path to sainthood continues....

Today's Provision: Listen to your conscience. Yes, we had this provision last week, but we can't hear it enough, particularly in these times of extreme partisanship and divisions in faith traditions. It's disturbing that so many people seem to refuse to think for themselves and revel in the thought of revenge. In today's OT reading, Jeremiah desires to witness God's vengeance, but sorry folks, this is not Christianity—not at all. Don't get caught ignoring your own conscience, toeing the party line, and winding up on a path that leads away from Christ.