

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings

Fifth Week of Lent 2018



Sunday, March 18: *"Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness; in the greatness of your compassion wipe out my offense. Thoroughly wash me from my guilt and of my sin cleanse me.... Give me back the joy of your salvation, and a willing spirit sustain in me. I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners shall return to you."* (Ps 51)

After the Passover supper, right before Jesus is led away to die, he foretells Peter's denials. Peter, of course, dismisses this: 'Lord, I will go to my death for you.' But in the two verses prior (Lk 22:31-32), Jesus says an interesting thing to Peter: "*Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift you like wheat, but I have prayed that your faith may not fail; and once you have turned back to me, you must strengthen your brothers.*" The psalmist is really saying the same thing. He prays God will forgive him so he can then teach and strengthen others, bringing sinners back into the fold. Have you ever used your own experience of sin and mercy to encourage another to return to God? The most powerful witness we can give is our lives, and yet most of us are hesitant to open up, to expose the sinfulness of our past. We worry about what others will think; we don't want to bring up those memories again. And yet, to be true evangelizers, our words, actions, and very lives are to speak of the Holy Spirit's presence we have in abundance!

Today's Provision—Strengthen Your Brothers and Sisters: I'm not suggesting we stand on street corners or appear on TV exposing the secrets of our lives (although there are sincere repentants who have done just that). Organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous are based on this idea that our life experiences, when shared in confidence, can be a source of great strength for others battling the same problem. Look around and see if you can be a source of hope for someone who you know is struggling. This is not about being nosy or preachy or trying to "fix" another. It is about being a channel of the Holy Spirit by listening, commiserating, being a bearer of God's great goodness, and sharing the joy of salvation.

Monday, March 19: *When Mary was betrothed to Joseph, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph... decided to divorce her quietly. Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream... When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.* (Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24)

Today is the feast day of St. Joseph, which is why, in the middle of Lent, we hear a passage usually heard in Advent. There's another Joseph and his dream that we read about in Scripture (Gn 37). That dream turned out to be the turning point in his brothers' jealousy and anger, and it took many years of ups and downs for our Old Testament Joseph to recognize God's hand in what had happened in his life. St. Joseph had a lot of struggles too. He likely endured the scorn and whisperings, maybe even the rejection, of others due to his mysteriously pregnant young wife. He too wound up in Egypt on the basis of another dream, leaving behind his business and all he knew to protect Mary and Jesus. He was graced, but I imagine there were times, like when Jesus was lost in the temple, that he had to step back and reaffirm his faith and commitment to that angelic call he received years before.

Today's Provision—Reaffirm your Faith: Do you ever find yourself questioning or doubting the basis of your faith? Well, if so, welcome to the human race! When things are going smoothly, we might be just fine, cruising along with our faith, grateful for our gifts and praising God. But there are times in everyone's life when we need a day-to-day, moment-to-moment reaffirmation to live by faith. And funny thing about challenging times: they can come around when we least expect them. Every morning, make a conscious commitment to live by faith. Say a special prayer to St. Joseph to strengthen you and give you courage.

Tuesday, March 20: *"But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world."* (Jn 8:21-30)

Jesus utters these words, attesting to his role of bringing the Father's truth to the world, no matter the cost. These words are our call to discipleship as well. Jesus sends us forth to tell of his truth and justice to the whole world. Will people listen to us? Not many will. "*When you speak all these words to them, they will not listen to you either. When you call to them, they will not answer you.*" (Jer 7:27) It is God's grace that opens eyes, ears, and hearts to hear his Word, and we pray fervently for God to do just that for those we love and for all humanity. But as the hymn says, "We are the voice of the Living God." Without our voices, our hands, and our feet, God's Word can easily get drowned out by the din of daily life. The one who sends us is true. How will we share the truth with the world?

Today's Provision—Be a Disciple: The word disciple comes from Latin and means learner. Not teacher ("you have but one teacher"), not preacher, not self-righteous one. To be a disciple means to be constantly learning and sharing what we learn by the way we live. Commit to learn something new about your faith today and then put it into practice.

Wednesday, March 21: *"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered, "If our God can save us from the white-hot furnace, may he save us! But even if he will not, know O king that we will not serve your god." (Dn 3:14-20, 91-95)*

Wow, these guys are pretty tough dudes! What amazing faith! Yes, Nebuchadnezzar is ultimately convinced of the power of their God by the fact they survive the furnace, but I imagine he is also pretty impressed by their courage and willingness to go to their deaths for this God they worship. Thank God, such tests of faith are rare in our world (although not unheard of). Often, the biggest challenge we face is to be able to say: 'If my God will answer my prayers and petitions, may he do so. But even if he will not, know that I will never abandon my faith in him.'

Today's Provision—Be Steadfast in Faith: We hear stories of modern-day miracles, of people cured of terminal illnesses and the like, and perhaps there are people led to faith in God because of these stories. But more often than not, it is our willingness to be steadfast in faith, regardless of God's answer to our prayers, that slowly but surely invites people to get to know the source and reason for our faith. How will you demonstrate steadfast faith today? *"If you had the choice, which would you choose: the granting of your petition or the grace to be peaceful whether it is granted or not?"* (from *Taking Flight*, by Anthony de Mello, SJ)

Thursday, March 22: *Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM." So they picked up stones to throw at him. (Jn 8: 51-59)*

In Hebrew, the term is "mashiach," which means "the anointed one." The Hebrew term, "moshiah" means savior. The Jews were waiting for the mashiach, the powerful king to rule at the end of days. They were looking for a descendent of David, a human leader who would usher in "Olam Ha-Ba," the World to Come. They didn't expect this anointed one to be divine. So this explains their violent reaction to Jesus' claim, "I AM." The name of God was not even to be uttered. Blasphemy was a high crime, punishable by death.

Today's Provision—Broaden our Worldview: In *Stories of God*, theologian John Shea talks about the power of worldviews to dismiss things or people that don't fit our view. *"Ultimate meaning systems have the tendency to preempt the possibilities of experiences."* For most people in the gospels, their actual experience of Jesus' goodness cannot overcome their worldviews and expectations. For many people today, it is the same story. Most decisions made in government or religious hierarchies are made to keep the status quo and those already in power in place. And for us as individuals, we are called to look at our own worldviews as well. Does rigidity and narrow-mindedness keep us from embracing goodness we experience outside our own little worlds? Do we passively support the status quo even when we know in our hearts it is wrong? What will you do today to broaden your worldview?

Friday, March 23: *"John performed no sign, but everything John said about this man was true." And many there began to believe in him. (Jn 10:31-42)*

There are four instances in the readings this week when John talks about the people beginning to "believe in (Jesus)." Things are moving fast in these days approaching the Passover which is why the Sanhedrin decides to convene an emergency meeting. They know they need to douse this flame before it becomes too strong. As a result, many of those just coming to believe in him have the fire of the Spirit snuffed out right when it is starting to take hold. But even those who have believed in him all along fall away as well. Thankfully, the spark of the Spirit burning in their hearts still flickers, to be reignited and brought to fullness in the days and weeks to come.

Today's provision—Have Faith in What You Believe: There's a difference between believing in something and having faith in it. We might believe in love, but if we've been wounded in personal relationships, it can be hard to have the faith and courage to try again. We say we believe in democracy, but can lose faith when we see it being made a mockery of by politicians and laws that fail to represent the majority of the people. St. Augustine tells us, *"Faith is to believe in what we do not see; and the reward of this faith is to see what we believe."* If you struggle to have faith in what you believe, you can find comfort in praying the psalms. (Some suggestions: 62:6-13; 119: 89-94 and 129-135; 121; 131; 143:4-11; 146)

Saturday, March 24: *Many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what Jesus had done began to believe in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. (Jn 11:45-56)*

It appears there are some tattletales in the group! John says some of the stunned mourners at Lazarus' tomb run off to report to the authorities what they have just witnessed. The elders probably have people keeping an eye on Jesus, but I wonder if these tattletales are just common folk, trying to make sense of these mighty deeds, and turning to those in charge to help them discern the truth. We may struggle with the same thing. Often, what I hear in Jesus' words is not the same thing others seem to hear. It's good to have sources on which we can rely, but my advice is this: Pray fervently to the Spirit for guidance. Test the guidance you receive. Does it bring you to peace and a place of calm? Or is there something still causing you concern? Talk to a trusted guide or spiritual friend. Consult scripture. When we stand before our God, we stand not with the elders and authorities, but alone as we are.

Today's Provision—Pray for Guidance: Is there a controversial issue or topic with which you are struggling? Don't ignore it. Ask the Holy Spirit for guidance. Don't ignore the Spirit's promptings either. God may be calling you to take a faithful stand for the truth.