

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Lent Week One, 2023



Sunday, February 26: *At that time Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for 40 days and 40 nights (Mt 4:1-11).*

I just read a very sad story—maybe you saw it too—about a 39-year old evangelical pastor from Mozambique who died earlier this month attempting to recreate Jesus' 40-day fast. He went 25 days without food or water, experienced organ failure, and by the time they got him to the hospital, it was too late. I mourn for his family and congregation. Rest assured anything anywhere this extreme is NOT at all what God desires. While I don't know this pastor's motivation—I trust it was to be one with Jesus in his suffering and not driven by pride—I imagine God mourns as well. We know from last week's passage from Isaiah 58:6-7 the kind of fasts God desires. And so...

Today's Provision: What are you fasting from this Lent? *"Is this not, rather, the fast I [God] choose: releasing those bound unjustly...; setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?"* What do these kind of fasts look like in your life? I would guess many of us opt for sharing bread by giving food to food pantries or serving at soup kitchens; clothing the naked by donating used clothes. These things are always needed, but what about the other options? Breaking yokes by working and advocating for affordable housing and criminal justice? Accompanying on an ongoing basis people who experience challenges with physical and mental health, or visiting the elderly? Perhaps there are people in your own family who are in need of emotional and practical support. If you've not decided on a fast yet, maybe this year, do something different, out of your comfort zone. A bit of wisdom: you will know a real, Spirit-motivated fast by the change you feel in your heart.

Monday, February 27: *"You shall not lie or speak falsely to one another. ... Show neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the mighty, ...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...all the nations will be assembled before him" (Mt 25:31-46). "The command of the LORD is clear" (Ps 19).*

Today's readings call for serious reflection, repentance, and action. A few things that stand out for me: The Lord's commands are crystal clear. There's no need to read between the lines: lying, false statements, prejudice, preferential treatment of the powerful, standing by idly when our neighbors' lives at stake—I think of the gun violence that happens daily in the US while most of us do nothing or run and hide—these are the things on which we will be judged. And, as we hear in the gospel, we will be judged not as individuals, but as nations. Dr. Ian Boxall, a New Testament scholar at Catholic University, says the translation from Greek *"suggests a universal judgment of all humanity, Jesus' followers included, not specific groups"* (Jerome Bible Commentary for the 21st Century, p. 1227). This makes me shudder and calls me to work for change, not just in my own life, but in the life of my country and faith practice.

Today's Provision: Take a public stand. This can be a tough assignment. I am not aware of any nation, with the possible exception of the Vatican state, whose government/political parties totally align with Jesus' teachings; as Christians, it is the entirety of Jesus' teachings we follow. And I do believe God considers our individual efforts to live as Christ taught, but I wonder: if I am only concerned with the salvation of my own soul, will that be enough? Will God also look at my efforts to change the world around me so more people come to practice honesty, to treat the weak and oppressed with dignity, to work to end war and violence? What is your opinion? Pray with these questions today.

Tuesday, February 28: *"If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions" (Mt 6:7-15).*

"Many promising reconciliations have broken down because while both parties come prepared to forgive, neither party come prepared to be forgiven" (Charles Williams).

Today's Provision: Fast from bitterness. Look at the disagreements and fallings out you've experienced in your life. While there may be some caused by one party, as in the case of abuse, often both parties have played a role in the falling out. And even if the disagreement is due solely to one person's mistake, all parties suffer pain just the same. Is it worth it? Maybe the other person has never asked for forgiveness. Forgive them anyway. Maybe you're scared the other won't forgive you? Ask anyway. If they don't forgive you, the burden is then on their shoulders, not yours. Release yourself and others from the ball and chain of unresolved hurt.

Wednesday, March 1: *"This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation"*(Lk 11:29-32).

What does "the sign of Jonah" mean? One explanation I've heard has to do with Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale and Jesus' three days in the tomb. But I came across an intriguing explanation that's new to me. Dr. Boxall (who I cited in Monday's reflection) suggests Jesus' use of this phrase refers to the fact that it was Gentiles (the hated Assyrians in Nineveh, and the Queen of Sheba when she visited Solomon) who were willing to listen to and believe in God's power. The sign of Jonah is the indication of acceptance by those other than God's chosen. Jesus foresees his own fate, to be rejected by his own people and accepted by foreigners and pagans.

Today's Provision: Fast from taking faith for granted. Some who call themselves Christian can be smug about their faith, believing they've got everything wrapped up nice and tidy, but woe to others whose beliefs are different. Let's not forget: *"Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven"*(Mt 7:21). And what is the Father's will? We talked about that on Monday, too: Mt 25:31-46. Yes, give thanks each day for the gift of faith, but don't take it for granted. Make it real. Live it.

Thursday, March 2: *"Do to others whatever you would have them do to you"*(Mt 7:7-12).

Today's Provision: Fast from self-centered love. Think back over your life: Can you remember times when you thought you were showing love to someone and they took it the wrong way? (Most couples in long-term relationships probably have a few choice memories!) Maybe this has happened when you were serving the poor—you assume they would accept anything, or would want what you want. But is it always that they took it the wrong way, or could it be that you were showing love from your perspective, but not in the way the other needed? This golden rule thing can get messy if we don't acknowledge our essential human need: to be loved in our uniqueness, to receive love as we need it, not to be shown love based on the other's view. It is not about imposing our definition on others, but showing hospitality that recognizes the other's true need. Now of course, there are times, particularly in the ministries of parenting and caregiving, that our response might not meet the "wants" of the other. We are entrusted to understand the real needs of those we care for. This is good fodder for deep conversations with those we sincerely love the best.

Friday, March 3: *"If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he committed, ...[he] shall not die. None of the crimes he committed shall be remembered against him. ...And if the virtuous man turns from the path of virtue to do evil, ...none of his virtuous deeds shall be remembered...because of this, he shall die"*(Ez 18:21-28).

This passage, as harsh as it sounds, has to do with growth and metanoia—a change of heart. Of course, the wicked person's heart would have had to change, not just their behavior. God looks at the heart, so even those whose behavior has deteriorated over the years due to illness, addiction, or life circumstances, God will still recognize their brokenheartedness and always be close to them (Ps 34).

Today's Provision: Always seek God's mercy. Who has God given up on? No one, not one person, ever. No matter how far you have fallen from the path of virtue, no matter if you were never on that path to begin with, God's mercy is there for the asking...*"How much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him"*(Mt 7:11).

Saturday, March 4: *"For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers and sisters only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?"*(Mt 5:43-48).

This reading makes me think about the "echo chamber" in which I and many of us exist. This has become much more prevalent as technology and algorithms curate what we read and see and hear. Instead of increasing knowledge of our global community, in many ways, we are becoming more tribal and nationalistic, closing our minds and hearts to people whose life experience and beliefs are different from ours. It takes work to venture outside our comfort zones to learn from and accept people whose opinions, religion, and political party don't correspond to ours.

Today's Provision: Fast from your "echo chamber." I find this pretty difficult. I don't often engage in conversation with people with whom I little in common—or think I have little in common with. I don't listen with an open mind to opposing viewpoints. But if I think I have the truth, then I shouldn't be put off by differing opinions. If there is someone you know whose world view is quite different from yours, invite them to dialogue. Set ground rules—one might be to not talk politics or religion. And no proselytizing! Another might be for an agreement to stop if anything gets heated. Learn about their life and let them learn about yours. Will you become BFFs? Not likely, but you may build a bridge and make a new acquaintance, not an enemy. Who knows? You might even learn a thing or two!