

Provisions for the Journey

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Second Week of Easter, 2023



This Easter season, as the Spirit leads, we will focus on gratefulness.

Sunday, April 16: *They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need (Acts 2:42-47).*

Luke describes the ideal Christian community: the new community spent time teaching and learning the "kerygma" literally, the proclamation of the Good News—Christ crucified, resurrected, and alive. They were a true community who shared many meals together, not just the commemorative meal of the Last Supper. They prayed together and celebrated the wonders and signs they witnessed as more and more people were added to the community. Oh yes, and they shared everything—there was no needy person among them! Of course, by Chapter 6, we start hearing of the problems arising, but hey, for a little while there, they had it going!

Today's Provision: Consider your Christian community. A lot of us in the West—particularly those of us who are affluent—may not be as committed to communal life as the early disciples. We celebrate "rugged independence," at least in the US. This Easter season, we'll hear sermons about the Good News, but as time goes on, we seem to hear and share more about laws, doctrine, or theology. It's tough to keep the Good News alive in the midst of worldly concerns. We pray together, so that's good. We have parish dinners and potlucks and celebrate the good works we do for those who have less. But consider: how comfortable are we when "strangers" show up at our doorstep looking to be included? Are we even aware of the materially or spiritually needy in our faith community? What can one do? Invite members of your community to discuss this passage from Acts and what you could do to become a better Christian community. Look at your own actions and life: what are your needs? Are you willing to welcome those whose lives are different from yours? Luke's ideal community was made up of humans like you and me, and as such, was not ideal for very long! But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try! Be grateful for your less-than-ideal community and be a force to help it grow stronger!

Monday, April 17: *"Lord, take note of their threats. Enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, as you stretch forth your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through your holy servant Jesus" (Acts 4:23-31).*

I'm not positive about this, but I don't recall anyone in the Old Testament, when they were being threatened, *asking* for boldness. Of course, young David was bold when he battled Goliath, and the three guys in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace were certainly bold—their faith was amazing! But I remember with Moses and the prophets, and in the psalms, that those being threatened usually ask for God's protection and rescue (and, in Jeremiah's case, to let them watch God's vengeance!) But boldness? I may be missing some story, but I'll rely on scholars to correct me. How often have I prayed for boldness to speak God's word?

Today's Provision: Pray for boldness. When you think about this, it's kind of scary. You might be inviting rejection. I remember when I first began my studies and work in ministry, how quickly some people I would meet would not-so-subtly end the conversation when I told them what I was doing. It's a far cry from being threatened, but these days, given the breaches within Christianity, I'm sorry to say the malevolence is all too real. Let us pray for the boldness of those early Christians to be strong in the face of threats and those who dismiss Christ's commandment to love.

Tuesday, April 18: *"Taste and see how good the LORD is" (Ps 34).*

Today's Provision: Experience God with all your senses! St. Ignatius, in his spiritual exercises, has a prayer method called the "application of the senses." We can use it in various prayer forms like imaginative contemplation to, for example, imagine the tastes and smells of the food at the Last Supper, the dry and dusty walk to Emmaus, the gentle sound of Jesus' voice, and the sight of him touching the leper to heal him. But, as Paul tells us to "pray always," how about going through your day today tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord in what we consider "the ordinary." When you are eating food, don't just devour it. Slow down. Smell it, look at it, taste all the different flavors and textures. Think about and give thanks for those who brought it to table. When you are out for a walk or going to work or school, try not to rush. Look around and marvel at God's creation (it is spring where I live, so this is an easy one!) When you grasp the hand of another, recall their God image and imagine you are grasping the hand of God. Look for opportunities to rejoice and be grateful for the Lord's goodness!

Wednesday, April 19: *The angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, "Go and take your place in the temple area, and tell the people everything about this life" (Acts 5:17-26).*

So, you're leaving church after spending time with your community (I hope that's not like a prison for you!) Maybe it was a great prayer service or a Mass or a potluck. An angel of the Lord taps you on the shoulder and says, "*Now, go out into the public square and tell the people everything about this life!*" If you are able to get over the extreme shock and fear, you consider the instruction: "Okay, well maybe I am willing to talk about my faith in the public square. But what's 'this life'? What does that mean? What would I say?"

Today's Provision: Consider—What is 'this life' for you? I'd guess Peter and John talked about the wonder of Christ alive. They'd talk about God's salvation manifest in Jesus of Nazareth. They'd describe the communal life, of people gathering and sharing and loving without concerns about rank or status or wealth. They might discuss the risks but also the great joy of living their lives with faith in Christ's light. And they'd talk about hope. Make this a prayer exercise today: How would you describe to someone else what "this life" means to you?

Thursday, April 20: *The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things (Jn 3:31-36).*

There is debate as to whether these are the words of John the Evangelist or a continuation of John the Baptist's discourse, "*He must increase, I must decrease.*" The point is that those of us who preach do so with insight and knowledge that is earthly. That's not to say "earthly things" are bad; in fact, we know God saw earthly creation as "very good." Even Scripture, though divinely inspired, is still channeled through human eyes, ears, biases, translations, and context. It is the Spirit who guides us always.

Today's Provision: Access the Holy Spirit. St. Ignatius has rules for discernment as to whether something is "from above," earthly, or from the "enemy of our human nature." Here are a few insights: if a particular scripture passage makes you uncomfortable (what Ignatius calls "desolation"), it could be a sign this is something about which you need to pray; there could be a profound message for you. Same for other situations that disturb your peace. Pray for the Spirit to lead you to know if this feeling is of God. If you get good feelings about something (what Ignatius calls consolation), you need to be patient. Not all consolations are of God, and not all of them are wrapped in neat, pleasant packages. One can receive great peace from God in a situation that, from an earthly perspective, is not "good" at all. Patience is needed to see if the peace you have received is short-lived or a peace that does not fade over time. Turn to the Holy Spirit to guide you. Have patience so you can respond to a situation or a call rather than to react.

Friday, April 21: *Gamaliel... "I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:34-42)*

I don't imagine the great teacher, Gamaliel, has doubts about Jesus; that perhaps his claim of being the Son of God is true. No, he, like all the members of the Sanhedrin, is just trying to keep the peace, maintain the status quo: "*This will pass just like the others.*" He's being the voice of reason, asking for patience. When you think about it in the story's context, it's not bad advice. Patience is almost always the right answer. Truth will always prevail.

Today's Provision: Patience. A good follow-up to yesterday's reflection. When I look at the evil in the world, I get impatient. "Do something about this, God! How can you allow your children to die at the hands of murderers and warmongers?" God reminds me that his time is not my time. I believe God is being patient too, waiting for us to tap into our divine nature, our God-image, waiting for us to begin to understand that love is the only answer. If we truly believe Christ is God, we must be patient and continue to spread the Good News in the face of the world's doubt.

Saturday, April 22: *The disciples of Jesus...embarked in a boat, and went across the sea to Capernaum....They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat...arrived at the shore to which they were heading (Jn 6:16-21).*

So, I have a question here: Why did the disciples leave Jesus on the eastern shore of the lake and head back to Capernaum? We hear just prior to this that he "withdrew to the mountain alone" because he knew the crowd was going to make him king. Maybe he told the disciples to go back without him, but I can see old Peter objecting to that plan! John's Gospel can be challenging. He believes Jesus knows he is "God's Word," from the start and so knows what is going to happen to him. Perhaps he knew this would be an opportunity to demonstrate his power to the disciples yet again by walking on the water. It is interesting though: John writes they couldn't take him on the boat because they had reached the shore. One translation says, "the boat they were in ran aground on the shore."

Today's Provision: Faith. How often when I try to figure things out with Jesus do I "run aground" as well? As we talked last week, we have our doubts and questions. These are part of having faith. The great Jewish rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote, "*We are closer to God when we are asking the questions than when we think we know the answers.*" But the most important words in today's gospel passage are: "*It is I. Do not be afraid.*" Faith in Jesus, in the Divine, in a higher power can banish our fears. If you are struggling with fear right now, trying to get answers to questions of which you are not even sure, turn to God. Thank God for being with you through all the stormy seas and dark nights and in the good times too. Pray that God will decrease your fear by increasing your faith.