

Provisions for the Journey

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



Sunday, May 14: *"Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame"* (1 Pt 3:15-18).

I love the first few phrases of this passage about being a person of hope, gentle and reverent to those who might question me. But it sounds like Peter (through his disciple who wrote this letter) tells me to do this so that those who malign my hope will be put to shame! I don't think he means that enjoying a sense of comeuppance is the main reason we show gentleness in hope! The author, of course, writes from the context that the Christ will be returning soon, so all will see his followers are justified in their hope. But here we are, 2,000+ years later. Skepticism about hope in God's promise runs rampant in secular society. While I can say I've never been outright maligned, I surely have been dismissed for being a person of faith and hope. Has this ever happened to you? What would Peter tell us today?

Today's Provision: "Let Your Life Speak." We hear in today's reading from Acts, the people in Samaria come to faith by paying attention to Phillip's words and the signs he works. Now of course, his signs were pretty convincing, but that's not to say the way we live will not entice others to learn more. We read throughout Acts that Paul and some other scholarly disciples get into long, drawn out debates with synagogue officials about the Christ (see Saturday's reading). This type of evangelizing rarely works. It is our actions, the way we live in joy and hope that will change hearts and minds. Pay attention today. Does your life speak of hope? (*Let Your Life Speak*: a great book by Parker Palmer about finding one's vocation.)

Monday, May 15: *On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there* (Acts 16:11-15).

We've talked about how, after hearing the stories from Acts year after year, we can lose sight of how dramatic the actions of the Jewish disciples of Jesus really are. Later this week, we find Paul roaming around looking at statues of Greek gods, a violation of Jewish law likely punishable by death! Here, it's the Sabbath: Jewish men are to be in one area in the synagogue, the women in the other and do nothing but pray. Maybe the disciples wander outside the city thinking they will find a synagogue? Or maybe they just decide to pray on a riverbank with a bunch of Gentile women, one of whom invites them to stay with her! Shocking, isn't it?

Today's Provision: Follow the Spirit where she leads. I struggle with this. Too often, the "tapes" of my childhood religion start playing in my head—all the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts." These can get in the way of my attending to the Spirit's guidance. Does this happen to you too? It can be pretty subtle, but worth attention and prayer. (I'm going on a silent retreat soon to attend to just this issue.) Look back on your life. Can you recall a time when the "shoulds," the "musts," and the "rules" actually kept you from following the Spirit or held you back from following Jesus' commandment to love? Spend time in prayer and discernment when these roadblocks to love arise.

Tuesday, May 16: *"When I called, you answered me; you built up strength within me"* (Ps 138) *"But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you"* (Jn 16:5-11).

The disciples heads are just spinning! "TMI: Too much information!" I imagine some are thinking, "Oh no, Lord, oh no! It is certainly NOT better for me that you go!" *Just stick around please and continue to do all the things you've been doing. What you are saying and commanding us to do is way more than I can understand!* But the Trinity never desires to be the dictator, even a benevolent one. God has given us free will so that we can be friends with God, partners with God, not slaves (Jn 15:15). God will make "strength well up within me," God has my back: *While from behind, a voice shall sound in your ears: "this is the way; walk in it"* (Is 30:21). God wants nothing more than to have us come to the fullness of love by the works of our own hands and hearts.

Today's Provision: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking at the sky?" (Acts 1:11). How often I cast my eyes skyward about some seemingly hopeless situation! It's a normal reaction, even for people who are not religious. We search the heavens because we feel lost here on earth. But as Moses reminds the Israelites, *"Who will ascend into heaven and proclaim [God's commands] to us so we may obey it?" ...No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it"* (Dt 30:12-14). Don't look up. Look inside.

Wednesday, May 17: *"The Lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands...indeed he is not far from any one of us"*(Acts 17:15, 22-18:1).

Paul is in Athens and *"exasperated at the sight of a city full of idols."* He wants to make it clear to the Athenians that the true God does not exist in statues or buildings or somewhere up in the clouds. As we talked about yesterday: God is not far from us. Indeed, "the Word is very near you." I wonder: would Paul have uttered this same thing—that God does not dwell in man-made sanctuaries—when he visited the Temple in Jerusalem?

Today's Provision: Find God right now. I mentioned last week I found it difficult to pray in the grand Baroque cathedrals I visited on my vacation in Europe. Just too over-the-top for me! It was much easier to give God glory in the midst of the beauty of the mountains and on the bustling city streets! I had to remind myself of the reality: God is present everywhere, not limited to place or time. Where or when is it difficult for you to find God, to pray to God? The next time you find yourself challenged to see God, make a point to spend extra time seeking (or as Paul says today, even "groping") to find God in the present moment.

Thursday, May 18: *Crispus, the synagogue official, came to believe in the Lord along with his entire household* (Acts 18:1-8).

Crispus and his whole family—practicing Jews—come to believe in Christ. Isn't that great! He's out of a job, of course, but still, it's just great! I doubt the synagogue will keep him on the payroll after he has chosen to follow Jesus. Have you ever experienced something like this? We hear about it a lot in the news these days, from both sides of the political divide: teachers, librarians, and other public servants choosing to forfeit their jobs so as not to violate their beliefs. Regardless of what side of the political aisle you are on, it takes courage to stay true to your convictions.

Today's Provision: Pray for courage. Religious persecution is a reality. For most of us, it is usually subtle: others rolling their eyes or scoffing at our faith. In some places in the world, people still lose their lives to stay true to their beliefs. (You'd think as a species, we would have come farther than that, but we seem to be regressing!) It is often just easier to go through the motions, to fit in with the prevailing culture, but at some point—perhaps it will come at the end of our lives—we are all confronted with the question: "How true have I been to my convictions?" Take a good look at your life. What are my convictions? Do I have a good handle on what is essential in my life? Am I living in a way that demonstrates my convictions? Go easy on yourself: most of us fall short at least some of the time. Each day, say a prayer for courage to live true to what you believe.

Friday, May 19: *"I will see you again"*(Jn 16:2-23).

Parents of infants are told to expect their babies will likely go through "separation anxiety" at some point. Not all do, but when infants see their main caregiver disappear from sight, they can get very agitated. This is normal, and the more times they experience their loved one going and coming back, the more they learn to trust. Jesus promises us he will see us again. This is easier to bear if we pay attention to the times each day when his Spirit is present to us.

Today's Provision: Don't be anxious. Unlike our human caregivers and loved ones, Jesus' Spirit never leaves us. We just fail to recognize his presence. Don't suffer separation anxiety any longer. Jesus is right by your side. Take a deep breath and relax. You may need to close your eyes in order to "see" and feel the Divine embrace. Rest in Jesus' arms for a while.

Saturday, May 20: *A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, an eloquent speaker, arrived in Ephesus. He was an authority on the Scriptures ...He vigorously refuted the Jews in public, establishing from the Scriptures that the Christ is Jesus* (Acts 18:9-18).

Apollos is a heavy-hitter. I imagine all the converts in Ephesus are SOO happy to see him show up to confirm their conversions, but as we talked about Sunday, vigorous intellectual debates rarely change the opponent's mind, and often makes them dig in their heels even deeper. It is our lived existence, our gentleness, our joy, our willingness to turn the other cheek and treat all with dignity that speaks volumes. While this non-combative demeanor might not convince the person we are debating, it can surely plant seeds, both in that person and in those who observe us.

Another thing the stories in Acts illustrate is the importance that people of all walks of life—simple tentmakers and scholars, slaves and synagogue officials—join together as equals in community. I wonder how many of us see this in the communities in which we participate.

Today's Provision: How open is your community? I remember reading an essay a while ago. The author wrote that sharing the cup takes on a whole new meaning when the person in front of you is homeless, just off the streets. We learn about faith and hope, not from eloquent scholars, but from lived experience. Go outside your comfort zone. See what you can learn by being in community with those whose lives are different from yours.