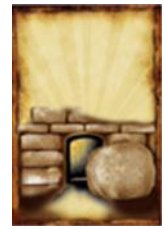


# Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

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



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Try this Lent to pay attention to the people and situations around you. But more importantly, allow Jesus to touch you in your brokenness and joy. He invites you to come along and learn. Take him up on the invitation!

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**Sunday, February 18:** *"Put to death in the flesh, [Christ] was brought to life in the Spirit. In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison"* (1 Pt 3:18-22).

Reflecting on Peter's letter today, the word "prison" captures my attention. We read in the gospel that Jesus begins his preaching after John has been arrested and imprisoned. We understand when Peter refers to Jesus preaching to the "spirits in prison," he means those who have died in the flesh, even all the way back to Noah's day. It's a comforting thought: Jesus returning to bring into the Kingdom those who have died. But something else keeps troubling me.

I'm reading a book, *Poverty, By America*, by Matthew Desmond, released in March 2023. It's an "easy, hard read;" by that I mean, the writing flows well, but the topic is very tough. The author points to the staggering number of people incarcerated in the United States, and how this is both caused by, and a cause for, the high rate of poverty in the richest country in the world.

The troubling image I have is of over 2 million people, mostly men of color, whose flesh still lives, still exists behind bars, but whose spirits are broken, maybe even dead. "Christ, bring these broken spirits back to life."

**Today's Provision: "In prison, and you visited me."** Lord, I am more than happy to feed your hungry and thirsty, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, but visiting prisoners...that's a tough one. It's an easy one to overlook. Prisoners are hidden away, out of sight and out of mind. Many churches and parishes have ministries to aid prisoners by coordinating visits, allowing for written correspondence, and collecting donations. Research what you can do in your community. But another important action is to lobby your local, state, and federal representatives to focus on widescale prison reform. The whole system is deeply flawed, not focused, as Christ would want, on repentance and rehabilitation, but on revenge and retribution. Reflect on what you are called to do to bring the Kingdom to those in prison.

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**Monday, February 19:** *'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill, in prison and visit you?'* (Mt 25:31-46).

Both the sheep—the righteous—and the goats—the accursed—ask Jesus the same question. Have you ever asked Jesus this question?

**Today's Provision: Go ahead. Ask.** Here's something I have added to my nightly examen this Lent: Instead of just reviewing my day and what gave me life and what drained me, where I think I followed God's will and where it was my own will instead, I ask: "When did I see you today, Lord? Was I paying attention? In whom did I find it difficult to see you? Who did I flat out ignore?" Then, I add a prayer to be more aware of Jesus' presence in my midst tomorrow.

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**Tuesday, February 20:** *"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).

*"There are people in your life who've come and gone. They let you down; you know they hurt your pride. You better put it all behind you 'cause life goes on. You keep carryin' that anger; it'll eat you up inside! I've been trying to get down to the heart of the matter. But my will gets weak, and my thoughts seem to scatter. But I think it's about forgiveness, forgiveness"* (from the song, *Heart of the Matter*, 1989, by Campbell, Henley, and Souther).

**Today's Provision: Forgive.** The sin we incur when we don't forgive is a sin against ourselves. If our brother or sister asks for forgiveness and we don't offer it, the sin remains with us; the other is absolved. If the other doesn't or can't ask for forgiveness, and we don't forgive, it still remains with us. It eats us up inside either way. The heart of the matter, the key to our peace is forgiveness. There's no way around it, no shortcuts to take. Forgiveness.

**Wednesday, February 21:** *The king of Nineveh proclaimed: "Every man shall turn from his evil way and from the violence he has in hand" (Jon 3:1-10, abridged). "This generation is an evil generation...Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation" (Lk 11:29-32).*

We can read into this verse from Jonah that the Ninevites pretty much knew they were being evil and violent. How else would they know what to turn away from? Jesus comes along some eight centuries later and calls his generation evil. I wonder if the people listening know the evil he is talking about: the unjust treatment of the poor, the strict adherence to rules at the expense of love, the corrupt leaders who collude with the enemy and profit from their flocks (see tomorrow's reading from Peter). The threat of punishment is the reason the Ninevites changed their ways, at least for a time, and while Jesus does refer to punishment now and then, it is the Good News of mercy he came to share. I guess that was just not as effective a motivation for the people of his generation. Is it enough for us?

**Today's Provision: Knowing what is good and evil in God's sight.** Look at Monday's reading from Leviticus about loving your neighbor as yourself. Go back to last Friday's reading from Isaiah: releasing those bound unjustly, sheltering the oppressed and homeless. These readings are not so much about the evil we do, but the good we don't do, those pesky sins of omission. From what are you called to turn away? To what are you called to turn towards?

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**Thursday, February 22:** *"Tend the flock of God in your midst" (1Pt 5:1-4). "Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to the Gentiles, for God is one" (Rom 3:21-31).*

I've used passages from both the Catholic and Common Lectionaries today. I think they're related. Peter admonishes presbyters to tend to the flock of God right in their midst. That flock is likely not too neat and tidy, comprised of Jews, Greeks, Canaanites, Romans, rich, poor, educated, illiterate...a whole host of people from different backgrounds and customs; "catholic" in the true sense of the word: *including or concerning all humankind; universal*. It's not easy to bring together a group like this, but if we are to be faithful to Jesus's call, then we are to be welcoming to all.

**Today's Provision: Welcome everyone!!** Church communities tend to be local and that can be good. We can easily support the needs of those in our midst. But it's not so good because local communities are usually homogeneous. As one author wrote when moving from the suburbs to the city, it is a whole different experience to share the communion cup with someone who lives on the street. Does your faith community welcome everyone? Is everyone welcome at the table? Reflect today on what you can do to be more welcoming, not only in your community, but in your life.

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**Friday, February 23:** *"If you bring your gift to the altar, and...recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there..., go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:20-26).*

This reading ties into our Lenten theme this year: pay attention. How often do we come "to the altar," going through the motions, not considering what baggage we are bringing: falling out with friends, tension at work or home, unresolved anger, an unwillingness to forgive. It doesn't matter whether it is in church on the Sabbath or at the altar of our "inner room where we pray to God in secret." The gift we truly want to bring to God is a clean, reconciled heart.

**Today's provision: Pay attention to what needs to be reconciled.** This is hard, but hey, it's Lent, a good time to deal with the tough stuff! Find a quiet place and reflect on what is unresolved in your heart. It could be past sinfulness, injustices and hurts that others have done to you (or you to others), misunderstandings and political debates that have mushroomed into outright conflict. Try to reflect without undue judgment of yourself and of others. Reflect, don't ruminate, or relive the situations. It's always helpful to put the rawness of your emotions on paper even if you choose to destroy it immediately. The help of a professional counselor, minister, or wise, trusted friend may be necessary. And pray for God's kindness and redemption to give you courage to resolve what is unreconciled in your life.

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**Saturday, February 24:** *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:43-48).*

There is no passage in the Old Testament that says we should hate our enemies. Ps 26:5 refers to "hating the company of evildoers," and I guess one might assume evildoers are the enemy of good people. Maybe this is what Jesus is referring to. Doesn't matter though: we are to love. Everyone. Not just those who love us or agree with us or are of the same religion, race, political party, etc. Everyone. Even, and maybe especially, those we consider "evildoers!" Come to think of it, that's exactly what Jesus did. *"I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."* And that would be all of us!

**Today's Provision: Who or what is your "enemy?"** I pray none of you have any real live enemies. I can't think of anyone like that in my life, but in this age of "trolling" and unmerited character assassination, one can never be too sure. My "enemies" are things within. So, am I supposed to love them?! Well, "love" is a strong word, but getting to know our enemies and "befriending" them can help take their power away. Pay attention to things and people that keep you from God's will. Don't deny their existence. *"What you renounce you are tied to forever"* (Anthony deMello).