

Provisions for the Journey to Jerusalem

Brief reflections on the week's Scripture readings
Preparing for Lent, 2026



Each year, I pray about themes for the extraordinary seasons in the liturgical year. For ordinary time this year, I picked the theme "Listen. Pay Attention." I still see that as being an appropriate focus for Lent but with one addition: "Choose."

"Listen. Pay Attention. Choose." The readings this week talk about choice and freewill, choosing between life and death, good and evil. It's important that we listen and pay attention so we can discern wisely before making choices. But in the end, "it"—all of "it"—is up to each one of us. And choosing not to choose is still a choice. (As I've tried to do so far this year, I'll occasionally be asking you to pray: "What is your opinion?" "What is your choice?")

Sunday, Feb 15: *"If you choose you can keep the commandments, they will save you"* (Sir 15:15-20). *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill"* (Mt 5:17-37).

If you take the Ten Commandments at face value, most of them address things we shouldn't do. Other than keeping the Sabbath and honoring our parents, the rest begin with some version of "Thou shalt not." It's no wonder we focus so much on sins of commission—choosing to do things we aren't supposed to do.

Then Jesus shows up and tells us he has come to fulfill the law. What does he mean? The Greek word for "fulfill" anglicized is *plerosai* which means to complete or make full. I imagine Jesus' teachings and stories make the commandments "bloom," giving us the choice to bear fruit by doing God's will: "thou shalt" love your enemies, forgive each other, wash each other's feet, show compassion and mercy...not just to friends and family, but to everyone!

Provision: Grow in faith. Some people like to have a list of hard and fast rules. It gives one a sense of control. Jesus, though, invites us to think for ourselves, to move beyond the "thou shalt nots," to mature in faith and develop an informed conscience. This kind of faith comes not just from the head, but from the heart. But these are not mutually exclusive. *"Discipleship to Christ, if radically followed to full maturity, would bring persons to a way of spending and being spent in their lives that would express loyalty to the rule of God"* (James Fowler, from *Stages of Faith*, p. 295). Don't be afraid to move beyond "the rules." Listen to how God might be calling you to grow in faith.

Monday, Feb 16: *"Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters"* (Jas 1:1-11).

James is encouraging the new Christians to persevere through the trials and tests their faith presents, but I think this short phrase is also the essence of a happy and peaceful life: all is joy! Note James uses the word, "consider." He doesn't tell us everything is joy; it surely was not for the early Christians, and it surely is not for us. Finding joy amid suffering requires deep prayer and pondering on our part, and very often the passage of time—lots of time. Discovering joy is a choice. How might God be working through the trials you endure?

Provision: Pay attention to suffering. Most people don't want to do this, but it's almost unavoidable. We all suffer in some way. The suffering of the world and our own sorrows can overwhelm us, but we want to be able to take a few steps back, a few deep breaths in and out, and look with open eyes and an open heart. I don't pretend this is easy, especially in the case of physical pain. If you are suffering from a loss or hurt (and enough time has passed for you to grieve), see if you can notice God's light slowly illuminating a corner of the darkness. Don't go it alone. Seek out the help of a trusted friend, pastoral or grief counselor, or spiritual director. (The Buddhist prayer exercise *Tonglen* is also a lovely prayer: You breathe in the suffering of the world, join it to your own, and then breathe out peace for all.)

Tuesday, Feb 17: *"Each person is tempted when lured and enticed by his desire. Then desire conceives and brings forth sin, and when sin reaches maturity, it gives birth to death"* (Jas 1:12-18).

I like James' Letter. It is short and to-the-point. No detailed references to the Old Testament or complex Christology. One thing I notice, though, is that he's very focused on individual sins of commission. There are a few references to getting along in community, but not much about the general sinfulness of humanity. I think for most of us, the more insidious form of sin that "gives birth to death" has to do with our participation in societal sin. We are often unaware of how our everyday actions or inaction make us complicit in "the sin of the world."

Provision: "Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear?" Read the gospel today. Jesus warns the disciples to pay attention to what is happening with him and to guard against the "leaven" of the Pharisees and Herod. The "leaven" refers to the moral corruption that happens in the pursuit of power. Pretty topical, I'd say! Spend time reflecting on ways you might tacitly support those who support the wanton pursuit of power. What businesses and organizations do you frequent? If you have investments (particularly mutual funds), do you know the companies in which you are invested? Note to self: Pay attention and make conscious choices.

Ash Wednesday, Feb 18: *"Working together, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2Cor 5:20-6:2).*

Second Corinthians is Paul's attempt to deal with a crisis occurring in the new Christian community. We don't know the details, but these early conflicts were often due to varying interpretations of theology and "the rules" by members and leaders of the community. Paul appeals to the people to work together, with each other and with him, so differing opinions don't stand in the way of God's grace working in the world. Wow! How relevant this is for us today.

Provision: "Seek more to understand than be understood." Boy, am I preaching to myself here. I don't understand and I don't seek to understand. That would require me to shut up which is not something I do well. I believe I have opened myself to receive the grace of God; I wouldn't be writing these reflections otherwise. This Saturday, this OT reading includes one of my favorite images in Scripture, "Repairers of the breach." Isaiah is referring to Israel's breach with God and yet, if we are separated from each other, we are separated from God as well. Take a look at the website, *Braver Angels* (<https://braverangels.org/>), an organization dedicated to facilitating dialogue across the political divide in the US. Or, for those more committed to progressive social justice, see Rev. William Barber's *Repairers of the Breach* (<https://breachrepairers.org/>). Seek to understand or at least to agree to disagree in a peaceful way.

Thursday, Feb 19: *"If you obey the commandments of the LORD, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes, and decrees, you will live (Dt 30:15-20). "Whoever wishes to save their life will lose it" (Lk 9:22-25).*

Chapters 5-28 in Deuteronomy are Moses explaining in gruesome detail—literally and figuratively—the commandments of the Lord. Just prior to today's passage, Moses tells the people these 24 chapters of rules are not distant from them, but in their hearts already! I wonder how anyone could keep them all straight. This, of course, is a story. We have no way of knowing when and where and to whom this missive was directed. The first version of what we know to be Deuteronomy (which means "repetition of the law" or "second law") was said to be found in the seventh century B.C.E., some 700 years after the purported time of Moses. Jesus' explanation is brief and direct but oh! so challenging!

Provision: How will you lose your life today? Go back to our reflection from Sunday. The rules can overwhelm us and for some, can cause them to miss living life to the fullest, the way God wants us to live. The rules can also blind us to the Spirit behind the law. We will live, we will save our lives by putting our pride and our egos aside, by looking for the joy hidden in the everyday trials and inconveniences (see Monday), and by asking ourselves, "what is the next loving thing I can do?" Look ahead to the challenges of each day, and ask, "How will I lose myself for love today?"

Friday, Feb 20: *"You call this a fast? ... This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke" (Is 58:1-9).*

What is your opinion? How do these words from Isaiah apply today? Who, in your view, are those bound unjustly and oppressed? Are you willing to take up God's version of a fast?

Provision: How will you fast this Lent? Don't just read this passage, pray with it. This is not just the history of the Israelites. Like almost all of Scripture, it is an account of our interaction with the Divine here and now. Fast from fear and apathy. Fast from tacit acceptance. Fast from anger. Jot down in your journal how you will fast this Lent.

Saturday, Feb 21: *"Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do" (Lk 5:27-32).*

The psalm we read on Thursday says, *"Blessed the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked nor walks in the way of sinners, nor sits in the company of the insolent."* It's no surprise the Pharisees (and probably some of Jesus' own disciples) question his choice of dinner companions! I used to struggle with this story until I realized that we all need a physician, we are all "sick" in some way. Do we judge or scorn those we deem to be more sinful than us? Do we make a show of our "holiness" to impress others? Do we ignore or avoid the plight of the oppressed?

Provision: "Seek the Physician:" This poem is by Kabir, the 15th century Sufi mystic (from *Love Poems from God*, translation by Daniel Ladinsky). What is your sickness? Where is your pain? Seek the comfort and healing of the Great Physician, our brother Jesus. He can show you how your pain can bring you to the joy of his companionship.

"I had to seek the Physician because of the pain this world caused me.
I could not believe what happened when I got there—I found my Teacher, my Beloved.
Before I left, he said, "Up for a little homework yet?" "Okay," I replied.
"Well then, try thanking all the people who have caused you pain. They helped you come to me."