

exploring

THE SUNDAY READINGS

YOUR GUIDE FOR THE MONTH OF OCTOBER 2010

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OPENING PRAYER

Let us pray... Lord God, you give us the guidance of your word as a lamp to light our way. Keep us faithful and attentive to the great story of salvation, for we are often in need of the rescue you alone can provide. Through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

October 3 | LECTIONARY 141C TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

THE GIFTS WE'RE GIVEN

FIRST READING

HABAKKUK 1:2-3; 2:2-4

Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily.

If you had to describe yourself in a phrase, what would it be? If folks around you were to describe you, what might they say? Chances are the two images would not be the same; nor would the truth lie entirely with either perception. So if I describe Habakkuk as a bit of a yowler, you'll understand this prophet might have viewed himself otherwise. Habakkuk looked at the world around him and didn't like what he saw. He asked God for an explanation, and didn't care for the one he got. So God gave him good advice: Write it down, save it for later, give it some thought, watch what happens next. Time often changes our appreciation of what's going on, and seasons of suffering may turn out to be blessings in disguise.

- » **How has your perspective on the past changed over time?**
Which events have you re-evaluated in a new light?

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 1:6-8, 13-14

For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control.

Reading someone else's mail is tricky. It's illegal without permission. If it's in the Bible, however, it's downright encouraged. The trick in reading half of a correspondence is guessing what's happening on the other end—in this case, Timothy's. We sense he's nervous, reluctant to assume the leadership role with which he's been invested through "the imposition of hands." He has good reason: His mentor's in jail for doing precisely what he's asked to do now! Timothy is reminded of three spiritual gifts that will get him through this ordeal: power, love, and self-control. These can seem contradictory: Power is an assertive force; love is persuasive. And while both power and love move outward, self-control reins in. Leadership, as Timothy will learn, requires all three.

- » *Consider a situation in which you have led. **How did you balance power, love, and self-control?***

GOSPEL

LUKE 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

Sometimes the apostles sound like over-stimulated children on Christmas morning. Jesus gives them his own fantastic presence, wisdom, and example. Yet they keep asking for more. When they demand bigger, better faith, Jesus tells them the tiniest bit of faith can do miracles. All they have to do is exercise it.

Jesus tells the story of servants who expect no reward for their service. They simply do their job, just as parents who change diapers don't get standing ovations, and teachers grading papers until midnight don't get their pictures in the paper. Is such service heroic in its own way? You bet it is. But anybody who expects an Oscar for fulfilling his or her commitments is heading for disappointment. While they wait for the photo op, someone else is quietly on the job, planting that mustard seed.

- » *Who presents to you an example of quiet, faithful service, **exercising the gifts they've been given?***

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

FIRST READING

2 KINGS 5:14-17

“Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

A therapist friend often reminds me that a sure dividing line between mental health and mental illness is the capacity for gratitude. People who are never grateful are prone to mental imbalances. They tend to be aggrieved, feel entitled, grasp for more, express dissatisfaction no matter what they get. They're prone to self-righteousness, self-justification, cynicism, and anger.

Naaman, the leper in the story, was once simply Naaman the general. It must have been a comedown for him to endure a disfiguring ailment—not Hansen's disease but a socially distressing and painful condition nonetheless. His situation propelled him all the way to Israel to seek a cure from a foreign prophet. Once liberated from pride, he was healed in two ways: His flesh was restored, and so was his gratitude.

» **For what am I grateful?** *How do I express and demonstrate thankfulness?*

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 2:8-13

But the word of God is not chained.

How can we be grateful in times of suffering? It's one thing to give thanks for a promotion; another thing entirely when you lose the job. Some people grow more deeply faithful to God in times of illness, disappointment, or upheaval. Other folks find in the same events reason to become bitter. Our biblical Sufferer-in-Chief, Job, once said, “Naked I came forth from my mother's womb, and naked shall I go back again. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!” (1:21). Brave words—but that didn't keep him from saying soon after: “Perish the day on which I was born!” (3:3). It would be unnatural to be glad to suffer—but we might find something to be grateful for even in the dark times. Paul deeply mourned his imprisonment, but was happy to declare that God's word was still at liberty.

» **How much of your prayer** *is devoted to asking and petition? How much is thanksgiving and praise?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 17:11-19

“Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine?”

My friend Dale died ten years ago. Yet in many ways he remains my mentor on the journey of faith. An inspiring layman, he worked for the church in wonderful humility and simplicity. Dale was the sort of endearing fellow who would take cut flowers out of the garbage, remove a few damaged petals, put them in fresh water, and consider it a fine rescue. Tiny things made him happy. A kind word could elicit his tears. When Dale was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer, he spent one hour absolutely furious about it. He said everything you could say angrily, in about seven languages. Then—and for the remainder of his life—he went back to being Dale: generous, appreciative, funny, and wise. Before retiring each night, he would say to his caregivers: “Thank you for another beautiful day.” And heaven help me, he meant it.

» *Have you known any “tenth lepers” who knew **when and how to give thanks?***

HOLINESS: IT'S NOT FOR QUITTERS

FIRST READING

EXODUS 17:8-13

As long as Moses kept his hands raised up, Israel had the better of the fight.

If I were an artist, I would paint this scene: Three old lion-hearted men perch on a hillside. Linking their iron wills deeply into God's will, they procure the victory for a generation of young men below. Maybe

what every generation needs is three elders who know how to pray like Moses, Aaron, and Hur. Maybe every parish should have a Hilltop Club, lifting up prayer for the young people who might otherwise be lost.

Yes, we grow weary with praying prayers that seem to evaporate as soon as we utter them. Muttering Hail Marys while pushing beads around and around can seem hopeless in the face of the world's great need. Hours spent before the Blessed

Sacrament feel very long sometimes. That's why Moses needed friends to support his arms, and why we find consolation in numbers when we pray.

» *Where do you go to find **support when you pray?***

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 3:14—4:2

Proclaim the word; be persistent

whether it is convenient or inconvenient.

In his book *This Sacred Moment*, Franciscan radio priest Albert Haase describes how to write the word “persistence” in Chinese. Chinese languages use characters to represent whole words rather than letters. The character for persistence comes in two parts known as pictograms: The first looks like a knife pointing downward. The second is like a vulnerable heart bared below. The meaning is clear: In a situation that feels like a knife in the heart, you need the spirit of endurance the most.

Early Christians moved through their world with that knife in the heart. Perhaps modern folk are less persistent in faith because we don't experience that same urgency. Participating in church life may

seem like a hassle or burden, but it's hardly life-threatening. Maybe the worst thing to hit Christianity was its legalization.

» **If Christianity were banned tomorrow, would you persevere?**
At what point might you reconsider?

GOSPEL

LUKE 18:1-8

“Will not God then secure...his chosen ones who call out to him day and night?”

Prayer is an inseparable component of Luke's gospel. If Jesus isn't slipping off to pray alone, he's taking his three favorites—Peter, James, and John—with him. And whenever Jesus teaches the

crowds, prayer is on his list of topics to cover. Jesus experiences exalted moments of contemplation, as on the mountain of Transfiguration, poised between Moses and Elijah. He also knows desperate and lonely hours, like his final anguish in Gethsemane. Most of his last sayings from the cross were psalm prayers surrendered to the God he trusted was still listening to him, even though he appeared abandoned. What is most apparent is how Jesus demonstrates the primary example of what he teaches: that we must pray always and not lose heart. There is no hour when our prayer is in vain.

» *About which matters do you routinely lift your thoughts and heart in prayer? **How does the way you pray affect the way you act?***

October 24 |

BIG MERCY

LECTIONARY 150C
THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

SIRACH 35:12-14, 16-18

The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow who pours out her complaint.

At a recent party, everyone arrived with a medical report. One woman was in chemotherapy; another was swollen from a drug administered in her doctor's office; a man couldn't sit because of back trouble; someone else faced surgery soon. As the conversation moved around the room, everybody had a problem to report, some sadness or pain that was keeping them from sleep or making life burdensome. If we'd been members of a single family living under one roof, there would hardly be enough sympathy to go around. To God, of course, the world is one family, and God never goes away and shuts out the trouble of the world to seek some personal peace. If the Lord hears the cry of the poor, heaven must be filled with constant lamentation.

» *When have you been tempted to “compassion fatigue” by the sorrow in the world?*
How do you keep compassion alive?

SECOND READING

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18

The Lord stood by me and gave me strength...and I was rescued from the lion's mouth.

The underpass was narrow, dark, and clearly marked: “Bicycles do not enter. Use walkway at right.” Of course, no one wants to drag a bicycle up a long flight of steps and back down the other side. Bikes regularly whipped through the underpass regardless. One night, a bus flew down the road shortly after a biker disappeared into the tunnel. Onlookers held their breath, expecting the squeal of brakes, smashing glass, a final cry. Seconds later, the bus reappeared on the other side, still careening at top speed. Then the fellow emerged, his

bike smashed to metal ribbons beneath him. He was shaking, couldn't explain what happened. “It's like the bus went through me,” was all he could say. He'd escaped without a scratch. I think of that man when I consider how many times God has rescued me from my own poor choices in ways that defy explanation.

» **When have you experienced a rescue** *you didn't expect or even “deserve”?*

GOSPEL

LUKE 18:9-14

“O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Most of us understand why God loves orphans. Whose heart isn't wrenched by those tiny, needy faces? And of course God loves widows and widowers. If marriage makes two people one, the death of a spouse tears the survivor in half. In many cultures, too, a husband's death leaves a woman economically

vulnerable. God's love for strangers is a little more suspect. Still the Bible testifies often that God has a special love for these three groups because they stand outside the normal protections of society. God loves these three because

they need divine help more than most. God's love for sinners, however, leaves us rather cold. What's the attraction? We're more inclined to hate sinners because of the pain they cause. Then we remember: We're sinners too. Good

thing God's mercy is bigger than ours.

» **How do you show mercy to each of God's special favorites: the needy, the lonely, the stranger, the sinner?**

October 31

GOT FAITH?

LECTIONARY 153C
THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

FIRST READING

WISDOM 11:22—12:2

And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it...?

The great book on God the Gardener has yet to be written. But everyone who owns so much as a flowerpot can appreciate the idea. First, God planted the earth in Genesis, and made the first couple gardeners too—in the divine image. God is the vineyard owner, the sower of seeds, or the harvester in psalms and parables from Isaiah through Jesus. God plants, waters, sustains, and gathers. Then the sorting comes: some for the barn, the rest for the fire.

In your flowerbox, you too are supreme. You plant what you like, water as needed, keep what pleases, tear out what fails to satisfy. Nothing remains on your bit of earth without your permission. So as we look out over the wide world, we realize that all exists because God wills that it does. Creation groans in God's direction. Everything serves its purpose.

» **Why might God "will" the thorn as much as the flower, in nature and in society?**

SECOND READING

2 THESSALONIANS 1:11—2:2

Do not be alarmed by a "spirit" or letter to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand.

Some things pose more problems for people of faith than others. But the things that trouble you may be different from those that puzzle the person next to you. Doctrines like the Trinity can bend minds, while the problem of evil and suffering can confound hearts. In the early church, a big challenge for many was the matter of this mysterious "day of the Lord." Christ would come again—but when? And how? And how should one prepare for this game-changing event?

False alarms were called often enough to freak out some communities, like the Thessalonians. Paul tried to refocus their attention away from "that day" and toward the Christian calling that should shape and influence every day. Jesus IS coming, so don't just "look busy." Get busy!

» **What have you done today to prepare for the day of the Lord?**

GOSPEL

LUKE 19:1-10

Now a man there named Zacchaeus...was seeking to see who Jesus was.

What separated Zacchaeus from everybody else in Jericho? True, he was a tax collector, he was rich, and he was short. But none of those elements made him remarkable. What makes Zacchaeus memorable is that he wanted to see who Jesus was. Not just to gawk at him, like everybody else. Not just to get a healing from him, which a sinner like Zacchaeus sorely needed. What Zacchaeus wanted was to "get" Jesus, really understand him.

Why was this so important? Because Zacchaeus was despised for doing what he did, for extorting money from his own people and collaborating with the Romans. No doubt he'd heard that Jesus traveled with a tax collector, Matthew; that he routinely ate with such people. Just maybe, he reasoned, Jesus might accept him too.

» **Consider:** *What's the worst thing about you? (Don't tell anyone!) Do you believe that Jesus knows this, and still wants to share a meal with you?*

LET US PRAY...

God of mercy and forgiveness, we have nothing to fear because of your abundant compassion.

Liberate our hearts so that we can offer compassion to our sisters and brothers who need it most

Amen.

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