

March 1, 2023



Center for Spiritual Development

# *Daily Reflections*

## JOURNEYING THROUGH LENT

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### I WILL HAVE MERCY

By Father David C. Robinson, SJ

#### Excerpt from Today's Reading

*Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed," when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

*When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in the ashes. Then he had this proclaimed throughout Nineveh, by decree of the king and his nobles: "Neither man nor beast, neither cattle nor sheep, shall taste anything; they shall not eat, nor shall they drink water. Man and beast shall be covered with sackcloth and call loudly to God; every man shall turn from his evil way and from the violence he has in hand. Who knows, God may relent and forgive, and withhold his blazing wrath, so that we shall not perish." When God saw by their actions how they turned from their evil way, he repented of the evil that he had threatened to do to them; he did not carry it out.*

## Reflection

Often enough in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, we read of the impending catastrophes to befall the peoples who have been unfaithful to God's call and God's promise. These narratives portray the people as ignorant and foolish, and God as righteous and vengeful. This hardly feels like a venue that provides an intimate view of the emerging covenant of heart that is lauded in the Pentateuch. From our contemporary perspective we are faced with a dilemma: How do we read these threatening portrayals of God's way with humanity? Do we simply turn our gaze away from the seeming vindictiveness of the One who created our universe? Or do we look for some stringent interpretation of our own roles and responsibilities as people of faith, who are answerable for the righteous status established by our choices and actions?

Perhaps we can plumb the cultural notions of loyalty and obligation that marked the role of fealty, of subject and royalty, in the era of the prophets, to discover the images of God and his covenant people that informed our scriptural history. From the period after 1780 BCE, the Code of Hammurabi became the cornerstone of legal thought throughout much of the ancient world. It was the first to propose a principle of *innocence* in a legal procedure. It also provided a legal structure for public and economic relationships, and a detailed set of prescribed punishments for violations of its precepts.

In attempting to outline a model for divine justice, the Hebrew imagination might well have adapted some of the edicts that were circulating in surrounding cultures. Hammurabi's Code was the source of the "an eye for an eye" model of justice that colored many legal systems through the centuries. It is not surprising that the Hebrew sense of God's righteousness would include severe punishment for transgressions. As the people's awareness of God's great tenderness and abiding mercy grew, encouraged by the voices of the great prophets, repentance began to replace retribution. In the teaching and ministry of Jesus, the richness of God's love became the central theme. The ancient focus on violent justice no longer held sway as the touch of healing became a hallmark of the Messiah.

In a 21<sup>st</sup> century world, with so much emphasis on geopolitical power and military dominance, our notions of justice, personal and national, can become tinged with a desire for revenge rather than reconciliation. This Lenten season offers us a time of reflection to consider the multitude of ways our judgments separate us from the blessings that Jesus' vision of justice can bring—a

community of grace rather than condemnation. This path is neither simple nor painless. It is a path that reflects the great admonition of Jesus in Matthew 18, when Peter inquires: **“Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”** In the moral calculation we often apply, that seems a generous offer in the face of repetitive ‘insults’ (in Hebrew tradition, 7 represented completeness or fullness). However, Jesus recognizes that it is not a quantity but a quality of mercy that matters when he responds: **“I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”** Let the count begin!





"I Will Have Mercy" - Los Altos Retreat Center  
Photo by Fr. David Robinson

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### For Pondering and Prayer

- Do you feel that Jesus' call for 77 times of forgiveness is extravagant or simply an exaggeration for emphasis?
- Where do you most feel the call to respond with mercy to persons/situations in your world that cause you anger or harsh judgment?
- If you do not feel any true desire to seek a spirit of mercy within, would you consider exploring the renowned maxim of St. Ignatius—If you do not have the desire to do what you know you ought to do, pray for the “***desire for the desire***”? Ignatius wisely understood that our inner resistance may seem immovable, but we can always pray to God that we discover within a desire to be converted to that spirit of mercy we cherish in the life of Jesus.

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