

THIS WEEK'S KEYWORD  
**PROVISION**

We didn't have a lot of money when I was a kid. Don't get me wrong, I never missed a meal, and I always had what I needed.

When I was young, my jeans almost always had patches on the knees. It was a huge deal to eat out, even if that meant Burger King or to the Pizza Place where I grew up in Leavenworth, Kansas. And I always wore fashionable clothes — one year after everyone else, when they went on sale at The Jones Store or Macy's.

We lived in a house built during the Great Depression, with no air conditioning and plenty of drafty windows during the winter. Window air-conditioners and fans helped endure the high-humidity summers of the Midwest, and heavy blankets and long-sleeve and long-legged pajamas helped us get through the coldest of nights. It was a big deal when my dad bought a kerosene heater. He bought a good one; he was still using it in that very house up until the winter before his death.

But I'll never forget how hard my dad worked so we could be fed, clothed and sheltered.

He worked his daily shift at Hallmark Cards and then always had a side business — first a farm machinery sales and repair business, then a lawn care service and, finally, a sports field construction and redesign company. There's no way he ever got enough sleep, and he never really had time to himself to relax.

And he never complained.

My junior high years were pretty rough in terms of money, but things got quite a bit better by the time I got to high school. Sure, we never had to consider what we would do with extra cash, but we could do some fun things every now and then. And I don't think I'll ever forget how proud my dad was when people would recognize him for his knack for making things — especially grass — grow in my hometown.

Looking back now that I'm a father and grandfather, I understand much better why he did it all. I know now that it wasn't just about making extra money. My dad saw all that work as accomplishing his primary duty to provide for his family. He saw it as his responsibility to care for my mom and to make sure we had what we needed, even if we couldn't always have what we wanted. He provided for us.

A form of that term, provision, is our word for this week. In many ways, the reflection we engage in during Lent prepares us to recognize the ultimate provision from God: the gift of grace thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Such an enormous, loving sacrifice was and is God's way of provision for all of humanity.

The Bible shows us that God has been doing that all along, even if we fail to see it.

For example, as the ancient Israelites — fresh from the agony of slavery in Egypt — marched across the desert, the Pharaoh suddenly realized that he had let his free labor go. He wanted his slaves back, so he sent his army to re-capture the Jews. The people, led by Moses, see the Egyptian army from a far distance, but they had a huge problem: The army was in front of them, and the Red Sea was behind them. There was no escape.

Or so they thought.

Moses does what God instructs him to do and raises his hand toward the sea. Winds blow, and the waters divide, allowing the Israelites to walk across on dry land. It was a powerful sign of God's provision for the people. On the heels of sending them Moses, and then God showing power over creation with the sending of 10 plagues on Egypt, the people got to see what must have been a tremendous sight, even better than the special effects from the 1956 Cecil B. DeMille epic movie "The Ten Commandments."

Once safely on the other side, God then closes the waters with the Pharaoh's army caught in the middle, ending the immediate threat to the Israelites. In yet another example of provision, God grants the Israelites peace as they now can march toward the Promised Land.

May our hearts and minds be at peace as we reflect this week on the myriad ways God has made provision for us.

#### FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

The Red Sea

Scripture — Exodus 14

Questions for Reflection

1. In what ways does this chapter tell us God made provisions for the Israelite people?
2. Try to think of two or three examples of how God has provided for you throughout your life? Consider things for which you are thankful or difficult events that you have overcome.
3. Chapter 14 concludes by declaring "The Lord rescue Israel from the Egyptians that day." In what ways have you felt "rescued" in more current days?

## MONDAY

Bread from Heaven

Scripture — Exodus 16

### Questions for Reflection

1. The people have seen God bring plagues on Egypt, has seen God part the Red Sea, and saw God close the sea on the pursuing army of Pharaoh. Yet they complain about lack of food. When was a time you complained about your circumstances? What caused you to voice frustration?
2. The people were given instructions about how to gather the manna. What happened when they disobeyed? Why do you suppose they gathered more than they were told?
3. How long did the Israelites eat manna? How would you react to eating it for that long? How would you remain thankful instead of complain about having this food?

## TUESDAY

Esther — Part 1

Scripture — Esther 1-3

### Questions for Reflection

1. King Xerxes quite clearly viewed Vashti, his queen, as a trophy. Such disrespect for women was common in ancient times. In what ways is life better for women now? Where are there still deficits?
2. Mordecai encourages Esther to keep her Jewish heritage as a secret. Think of a time you had to keep an important secret. Was it difficult for you? Why or why not?
3. Haman plots to kill not just Mordecai, but all Jews mostly because of Haman's bruised ego. Is there a time when your bruised ego prompted you to do something you later regretted? What happened?

## WEDNESDAY

Esther — Part 2

Scripture — Esther 4-8

### Questions for Reflection

1. Mordecai explains to Esther that she may have been risen to be queen for this very moment when she could save her people. Has there been a time you are convinced you were placed in the right place at the right time for a purpose? Summarize it below.
2. Esther put herself in danger by going to the king with her concern. How do you think God may have intervened during this exchange between Xerxes and Esther?
3. Mordecai eventually is celebrated by the king. How is this outcome representative of how God provides even in the most dire of circumstances?

## THURSDAY

Jesus, the illegal immigrant

Scripture — Matthew 2

### Questions for Reflection

1. Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to protect their child from danger. In what ways do you see people today doing the same? How would you respond if you were in their situation?
2. Herod is furious at the magi for fooling him, so he orders the deaths of all children 2 and younger in Bethlehem, meaning Jesus may have been as old as 2 when the family fled to Egypt. In what ways does that contradict what we often see in Nativity sets and images?
3. In what ways did God provide for the Holy Family? Consider the gifts the magi brought as well as the messages shared in dreams.

## FRIDAY

### 10 Lepers

Scripture — Luke 17:11-19

#### Questions for Reflection

1. Ten men with skin diseases called out to Jesus. What does this tell us about the men who sought healing?
2. People with skin disease often were banished from villages as “unclean.” What does Jesus’ directions to show their healed skin to the priests mean for these men and their futures?
3. One of the men — a Samaritan, no less — comes back to say thank you. How did this man show appreciation for the way God provided for him? Think beyond the mere saying of the words “thank you.”

## SATURDAY

### Three Friends

Scripture — Daniel 2:46 – 3:30

#### Questions for Reflection

1. This story is set while the Israelites are in exile in Babylon. Have you ever visited a foreign country and/or culture? If yes, what was most challenging for you? If not, what do you think would be your biggest concern?
2. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew avoiding bowing to the idol/statue meant they likely would die, but they stayed loyal to God. Can you think of a time when you had to make a difficult choice, knowing the result may be bad for you? What happened?
3. Who do you suppose the fourth man in the furnace? How might that be another way to look at the provision God made for these three friends?