

Why Fast?
Isaiah 58:1-14

One of the spiritual practices most associated with Lent is fasting. I grew up hearing about how Catholics had to decide what to give up for Lent. But if I am honest with you it is not something I ever took very seriously. It is not something my parents practiced and therefore not something I thought much about until recent years. Yes, I was taught that Jesus fasted during his forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. I grew up singing our first hymn “Lord, who throughout these forty days for us did fast and pray.” Jesus fasted but I never thought much about why we should fast. The prophet Isaiah in our scripture today recounts the people asking just this question many years before Jesus ever lived. “*Why do we fast and you do not see?*” So if you are like me you may wonder about the question Why fast? Is it just another ritual we are expected to perform? And what is it all about anyway? Why should we fast?

Fasting is not something many of us do unless we are required to for a medical procedure. And when required to we grumble, don’t we? Even if the time we are required to fast is while we are sleeping! We grumble because we are being told to deny ourselves and the bottom line is we are not very good at doing that. We live comfortable lives and have most everything we need - maybe not everything we want but everything we need. So we ask the question Why fast? Why deny ourselves the pleasure of food or anything else for that matter? In recent years it has become fashionable to give up something other than food for Lent - like social media, or television. And what people have discovered is that it is hard to deny ourselves anything. We are just not very good at limiting ourselves and saying no to the things of this world.

As I began to think about fasting I began to search the scriptures for what it says about fasting.

And what I discovered is interesting. Fasting is not a mandated practice. It is not commanded in the Torah and actually the practice of fasting doesn't even appear in scripture until the time of the Judges. Although we are told that Moses did not eat or drink when he was on Mt. Sinai for forty days and forty nights but it was not called fasting then. When you think about it when the people were wandering in the wilderness food was not a luxury. It was not until they settled that the practice seems to have become common. Jesus did not command the disciples to fast. As a matter of fact the Pharisees confronted Jesus because it wasn't something he encouraged his disciples to do like John's disciples did. Scripture just states that Jesus fasted. It was a given. It was part of their life. Just as it clearly had been for Moses. A practice that became meaningful to them.

There appear to be two forms of fasting in scripture - private fasting and public fasting. Private fasting seems to have been a common practice - an act of personal devotion. Usually associated with prayer and fasting or mourning. Public fasting became a common practice by the ninth century when fasts were proclaimed for all the people as an act of worship. These are the majority of the times we hear of fasting in the Old Testament - when the people are called to public fasting. It is this public fasting - that had become rote and lost its purpose - that is called into question in our passage tonight. A passage that is the longest most detailed passage about fasting in scripture. And this passage directly addresses our question this night Why fast?

Scripture reveals there are three main purposes for fasting. First, fasting is a way of preparing for something. Just as we prepare for a medical procedure so our bodies will be ready for the test fasting is a way to prepare us to hear God speak. Fasting, the act of denying our bodies food or other pleasures, enables us to remember the source of our food and all that brings us joy. It prepares us to seek God and the things that matter to God. Fasting is a way to make space for God to meet us. Moses did that on Mt. Sinai and Jesus did that in the wilderness. The Israelites fasted before battles

and leaders throughout the years fasted when they were trying to make decisions or as they prepared to lead the people in battle.

That is why fasting is a spiritual practice especially appropriate for the season of Lent. It is a time of preparation. Forty days to prepare us - to open our hearts - so that we might hear God speak. I would venture to guess it is why most of you are here tonight. The masses do not celebrate Ash Wednesday. The faithful are those who are drawn to this service. Because we value preparing our hearts for what is to come. We know that we need to confess our sins - to start again - to be worthy to stand at the foot of the cross. For me that is one of the reasons that our practice of burning our sins is so powerful. It is part of the process of preparing my heart to receive the greatest gift ever given. It is not an outward show of our faith but an inward revealing of the places where we need to concentrate to become more Christlike.

The second purpose of fasting is to help us focus on God and Christ. When we are not consumed with thinking about where our next meal is coming from we can use that time and energy to focus on God. Think a minute about how much time you spend every day preparing meals or thinking about what you are going to eat next. It consumes a good bit of our day. If that time were spent focusing on God I wonder how different our lives might be.

Public times of fasting were for just that purpose. They were meant to focus the people on God sometimes because they had strayed from God and needed to refocus and at other times in gratitude for what God had done for them. When Jesus fasted in the wilderness he was focused on God's call and what it meant for his life. The temptations teach us that he would need that focus to endure what was to come.

Maybe one reason fasting is so hard for us is because fasting requires self-control. It requires a focus on God and not on the material things of this world. Today there is a new health craze known

as intermittent fasting. This is the process of fasting - going without food for a period of time - basically limiting the hours that you eat. Such as eating during a span of 6-8 hours a day and fasting the remaining 16 to 18 hours. This is probably more what the faithful have done through the ages. Not forty days of fasting but periods of time when they spent time with God instead of eating.

James Packer says that fasting is “a way of focusing totally on God when seeking God’s guidance and help, and of showing that you really are in earnest in your quest; it’s also, at times, an expression of sorrow and deep repentance, something that a person or community will do in order to acknowledge failure before God and seek his mercy.” Packerd goes on to note that “We tend to think of fasting as going without food. But we can fast from anything. If we love music and decide to miss a concert in order to spend time with God, that is fasting. It is helpful to think of the parallel of human friendship. When friends need to be together, they will cancel all other activities in order to make that possible. There’s nothing magical about fasting. It’s just one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with him, sorting out whatever is necessary, and you have cancelled the meal, party, concert, or whatever else you had planned to do in order to fulfill that priority.” (James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986, p. 14)

What our passage of scripture this night reminds us most clearly is that we do not fast so God can see us. We do not fast so others see us and will think highly of us. Fasting at its roots is about preparing us, focusing our minds on God and God’s will for our lives so that our hearts and our actions will be changed. Friends, why fast? So we can remember God’s commands about how we should live and care for one another and what Jesus taught us about loving God and one another.

The prophet’s words as translated by Eugene Petersen make this message clear.

*“This is the kind of fast day I’m after:
to break the chains of injustice,*

*get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed, cancel debts.*

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:

*sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.....*

*“If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people's sins,*

*If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out....*

Friends, we are called to fast so that as Isaiah says we can become known “*as the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*” We can only do that when we learn self-control - and self-control is what the practice of fasting leads to. It is what the season of Lent is about. Spending time with God remembering what Christ taught us and how we are called to live as his disciples. Not living as the world lives with material goods as our major focus but with God's words to care for our world as our focus and our guide.

In 2017 Pope Francis in his Lenten address challenged his flock to rethink fasting and what it means. His words have been flooding social media ever since for they are powerful:

Do you want to fast this Lent?

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.

Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.

Fast from anger and be filled with patience.

Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.

Fast from worries and trust in God.

Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.

Fast from pressures and be prayerful.

Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.

Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.

Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

As we come this night

to prepare our hearts for this journey through Lent

by confessing our sins and recommitting our hearts

and very lives to following Christ daily

may we commit this Lenten season

to spending some time everyday fasting

not just from food but from the ways of the world

that draw us away from Christ's teaching

so that we might focus on Christ's commands,

see the world as Christ did

and choose to spend our days caring for others.

Claudia Hernaman wrote the hymn "Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days". There is a third verse - at the heart of her poem - that is not in our hymnal.

As you did hunger bear and thirst,

So teach us, gracious Lord,

To die to self, and always live

By your most holy word.

That my friends, is what the practice of fasting can teach us to do....