

Lenten Fasting
Matthew 4:1-11
March 1, 2020
First Presbyterian, Luling

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. The season began on Ash Wednesday, and will continue through the Saturday before Easter. Lent is a season traditionally marked by penitence and repentance and sacrifices and, most importantly, self-examination. Just like New Year's resolutions, we certainly don't have to wait until a special time on the calendar to examine ourselves and decide to turn our lives around, or decide to work on our spiritual growth. That sort of decision can happen any time of year. At least during Lent, though, we are surrounded by others in our communities who are doing the very same thing, who are able to support us in our efforts. That said, there is really nothing very fun about self-examination or penitence or repentance or sacrifice. But it isn't meant to be fun. It is meant to draw us closer to God, it is meant to help us be honest with ourselves, it is meant to strengthen our spiritual lives. And so we walk through the forty days of Lent. We can walk mindfully, and take the opportunity to examine ourselves before God, and take the opportunity to change what needs changing in our lives.

I am in the process of putting together a sermon series for Lent, of which this sermon is the first. We'll be examining and exploring some traditional Christian spiritual disciplines as a way to examine ourselves in different ways than we may be used to. In the next few weeks, we'll hear and think about fasting, about prayer, about study, about self-examination, and about worship, all as spiritual disciplines. If you want me to add or subtract from that list, let

me know. We should expect that some of these personal disciplines will be more appealing to us than others, and that's fine, because we're all different. That is not to say that we should just ignore the unappealing ones, because that may be just where God is prodding us to look at ourselves most closely. Disciplining ourselves as a way of discipleship may not be easy, but I hope and pray it may be fulfilling and strengthening to our spirits.

And so today, we're going to start with the spiritual discipline of fasting. Not something that any of us are really comfortable with, I would imagine, but fasting is a spiritual discipline deeply rooted in Christian tradition and deeply rooted in Scripture. Over and over, throughout the Old Testament, fasting was used by the community as a way to express their repentance when they realized that disaster was coming. They interpreted natural and political events as God's judgment on them as a people, and they believed that their fasting was a sign of repentance before God for their bad behavior.

Fasting was also used by individuals in the Old Testament, as a way of preparing and purifying themselves before undertaking a mission for God. Moses spent forty days and forty nights on Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments, and he ate no bread and drank no water the entire time he was there with God. The prophet Elijah fasted also for forty days and forty nights as he journeyed to that same mountain, to meet God not in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire, but in the still, small voice. Preparing to meet God, in the Old Testament, seems to require this period of fasting, as a way to make oneself ready to encounter the holy in such an intimate way.

Jesus stands in that same tradition, as he journeys into the wilderness after his Baptism. But it is not God who he meets; it is the devil. The devil attempts to use Jesus's fasting to tempt him to use his power for his own good. The fasting has prepared Jesus to meet this temptation as well as the others. The fasting has made him stronger, not weaker. It has given him time and space to know himself and know the strength of God that is within him.

In our culture, our relationship with food is so distorted that fasting seems completely foreign to most of us. We live in a time with plenty of food, a lot of it not good for us. And we live in a time when there are people in our neighborhoods who are truly hungry, who cannot afford food to eat. A time when we can spend more than a day's wages on one meal. A time when we have lost the sense of what real hunger is, when we look in our refrigerators and say, "There's nothing to eat." Or, "I'm starving," when we've eaten just a few hours before. A time when we treat our pain or our worries with a quick trip to the fast food joint. What is fasting in such a world?

Of course, we know that our Catholic neighbors don't eat meat on Fridays during Lent, and that is considered a fast. I remember trading my peanut butter and jelly sandwich for Michael Roemer's roast beef sandwich one Friday in ninth grade—I had no idea why it was so important to him, but I wasn't really attached to my sandwich and roast beef sounded fine to me. Fasting was a little beyond my knowledge at that point, and truthfully, probably beyond Mike Roemer's, too.

Or, if we ever even consider fasting for ourselves we think something like—maybe I should just fast to lose those last five pounds before I need to fit into those pants for that event, or wear a swimsuit this summer. Or, if we are a little more sneaky with ourselves, we set it up so that we will be successful and can feel good about our self-discipline—I know, I'll fast from Brussels sprouts for the next month, or something else I don't even like. That's a bit extreme, but we can't deny that it is easy to congratulate ourselves on our own strength, our own will power, our own efforts in fasting.

If any of these spiritual disciplines that we are exploring are used as a way to feel good about our own efforts or to meet some other, unrelated goal, we have missed the point entirely. These disciplines, and especially this discipline of fasting, is meant to remind us of our total dependence on God, not on our own efforts of any kind.

So how do we decide what kind of fasting we might undertake? We, too, might fast from meat on Fridays. Or we might drink only water and fruit juice for part of a day. Or we might fast from food completely one day, or several days. There are any number of ways that we might fast from food. But doing any of those without prayer, without reflecting about what we are learning about ourselves and about our relationship with God, is pointless. Fasting should grant us the opportunity to consider what it is that we are truly hungry for, what it is we are truly thirsty for.

For some of us, food is not our primary vice, or fasting from food might not be a good choice for us for any number of reasons. In that case, the most helpful thing I read this week was this: *“Behind every fitting choice of abstinence lies the question, What do I do to excess?”*

What I do to excess reveals my inordinate desires, my compulsions, the attachments that have control over me." (Soul Feast, Marjorie Thompson). What do I do to excess? That is the question. That will direct our fasting.

It may be that we do not eat to excess. It may be that we stare mindlessly at the television to excess. Or it may be that we drink to excess. Or it may be that we play around on the computer to excess. Or it may be that we go shopping to excess, just to have something to do. Or it may be that we pack our schedules to excess, so that we don't have any time to think. That is a question that only you can answer. You know, in your heart, when you take time to really look at yourself and your behavior, what it is that you do to excess. What we do to excess is often what we do in order to numb pain, or to avoid looking truthfully at ourselves, or to fill that empty place that only God can fill. Anything that comes between us and God is something that it is worth fasting from.

If there's nothing you can think of that you do to excess, or nothing you're feeling like you want to fast from, nothing tangible, then let's think just for a minute about fasting from another angle. Fasting from something allows space for something else. So if we think about not fasting from food necessarily, but from other habits of thought that are unhelpful, then we open up space for nourishing spiritual habits to take root.

Along these lines, there is a quote attributed to Pope Francis:

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.

So this Lent, during these forty days of preparation and repentance, I invite us all to consider a fast.