

PSALM 91:1-2, 9-16

¹You who live in the shelter of the Most High,
 who abide in the shadow of the Almighty,
²will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress;
 my God, in whom I trust."

⁹Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
 the Most High your dwelling place,
¹⁰no evil shall befall you,
 no scourge come near your tent.

¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you
 to guard you in all your ways.
¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.
¹³You will tread on the lion and the adder,
 the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

¹⁴Those who love me, I will deliver;
 I will protect those who know my name.
¹⁵When they call to me, I will answer them;
 I will be with them in trouble,
 I will rescue them and honor them.
¹⁶With long life I will satisfy them,
 and show them my salvation.

LUKE 4:1-13

¹Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ¹²Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

SERMON

As a church season, Lent is famous for a few key features: we put purple everywhere, we know that Easter is on the way, we have a lot of church services, we don't sing or say the word "alleluia," and finally, we're supposed to fast. For most of the church for the past several hundred years, fasting hasn't been the literal abstention from all food, but some sort of idea of giving something up for spiritual purposes. But we don't often talk about fasting as a spiritual discipline, a practice of our faith, and so I think we sometimes do it without understanding why or how or what. So today, I thought we'd take a few minutes to talk about fasting, what it can be as a spiritual discipline, and what it maybe shouldn't be in this season of Lent.

I've been the poster child for every possible kind of fasting mistake and stereotype you can think of. First, let's start with the list of things I've fasted from for Lent: I've done caffeine, sugar and various kinds of desserts, obviously including both ice cream and chocolate, the classics. I've fasted from meat, I've gone full Vegan, which was hugely frustrating to my parents. I've given up television, facebook, internet games and other so-called time wasters, I've given up food in general for days in a row. I drank only water for 40 days in a row one year. Suffice it to say, if you can think of a stereotypical thing

people give up for Lent, chances are very good that I've tried some version of it.

Next, let's talk about the reasons I've given things up for Lent: I've done it because it seemed like the thing I should do...as a good Christian, I should fast, it's commanded in the bible or something, right? I mean, that's pretty much my reason every year, at least what I tell people. But below the thinly veiled righteousness, my real motives lie: I've fasted from sugar and various kinds of food because I'm really hoping to give religious justification to my desire to lose a few pounds. I've fasted from caffeine and tv and other ingrained habits of my life because I've heard they might be bad for me. I've fasted because I hope that I'm setting up a pattern I'll continue: if I stop eating so many desserts for 40 days, then I'll get into a new, good habit and continue it after Lent is done. Which of course, isn't a fast. By definition, in a fast you give something up for a period of time and you intend to pick it up again after the fast is done. I've fasted from things that are trendy, because it allows me to fit in with my peer group. I've fasted for Lent because I'm trying to impress someone...this was big during high school. I was always secretly hoping that some boy or another would see my fasting and be, like, impressed? By my piety? Is that a thing boys like? No, it's not, but you have to remember I was (and still remain) kind of a weird, sheltered church nerd.

The long and the short of it is that I'm pretty much an individual repository of every example of unnecessary things to fast from and terrible motivations to engage in a theoretically religious season of fasting. And I doubt I'm alone in this. But once again, here we are, beginning of Lent, and fasting is on our minds, in our scripture, even

popping up on facebook. So, it begs the question: what is a religious fast? Why do we do it? What should we fast from? How should we go about this practice? What's the point?

So, our story today is of Jesus, right around his 30th birthday. Up until this point in his life Jesus has been one of those kids who never moved out of his parents' house. He's been back in Nazareth, perfectly pleased to live and work as a carpenter alongside his father Joseph. But then, around the age of 30, things start to change. He sets out on this path toward ministry, and to begin his ministry, Jesus gets baptized and heads out into the wilderness to fast, and this should sound familiar, for 40 days. This is, of course, why we fast for a period of 40 days in Lent, copying his 40 days in the wilderness.

For 40 days and nights Jesus goes without food, out in the desert wilderness, praying, communing with God, and, scripture tells us, being tempted by the devil. And we get this wild story about Jesus' temptations. So, this devil shows up and starts offering Jesus things which really do hit at the fundamental desires of the human heart: first, you're so hungry, use your power to make some bread. Prove it to me that you're really the almighty with the power to turn bread to stones. Second, bow to me, and I'll give you all the glory, fame, honor, and power that the nations of this world can afford. Third, if you're God is so powerful, test it. Prove it to me, again, prove it to me that your God will save you. And although this story of Jesus is somewhat mythic in its presentation, I think we can relate to the underlying temptations here: to prove our own power and worth, to gain fame and power in the eyes of others, to be so sure of the

presence and power of God it can be proven in concrete, visible ways.

And in each case, Jesus turns away from the temptation, quoting scripture and drawing on some deep well of connection to God in order to turn down the tempting offers of the Devil. And when the temptations have passed, from other parts of the Bible, we are told that God sends the angels to Jesus, and they tend to his needs, offering him food and rest after his exhausting and draining fast in the desert. And then, Jesus picks himself up and goes on his way, entering into the three years of public ministry we know so much about: preaching, teaching, healing, and offering care to the world around him.

So, if this story is our primary example, the fast from which our own Lenten fast derives, what does Jesus do here? Why does he do it? What should we learn from? What should we emulate?

Well, I'd like to propose three lessons of fasting that I see here:

First, let's talk about the purpose of a fast. Fasting isn't about personal piety, it's not about losing weight or improving ourselves in superficial ways, it's not about breaking a bad habit or creating a new positive habit. Fasting is about stripping away all of the extra stuff we carry, even some necessary things, like food for a season, so that we can see more clearly who we are and who God calls us to be. After 40 days of fasting from food, Jesus is in a very sensitive and open position. He's at a point where a lot has been taken away, the image we get here is that he's very open to the presence of God...and the temptations of the Devil. It's not surprising that the Devil

appears to him at this point, these aren't arbitrary temptations which are offered. These temptations reveal something important about the core of the human heart, and the core of Jesus' heart. He was legitimately tempted by these three things: to reveal his own power, to receive the glory of the nations, to prove the existence of power of God. While the surface details might be a bit different for each one of us, I think the desire for power and control are pretty universal human temptations, right? Jesus was able to experience these edges of himself, to see the potential pitfalls of his own heart because he had intentionally engaged in a season of fasting, prayer, and communion with God. Fasting was a part of the spiritual preparation he did before entering into years of ministry.

When we fast well, when we remove something that costs us something, something we're constantly reminded of losing, that's going to reveal truths about our own hearts. Fasting reveals painful things about our own relationships: our relationships with food, our dependence on luxury, our desire to consume, literally and figuratively. Fasting shows us where our patience runs thin, it reveals shortcomings in our generosity toward others. Fasting thins out our tough outer shells a bit, and it creates vulnerable, tender places where God can reach in and stir our hearts toward becoming more who we are created to be. In short, we fast because it brings us closer to God and closer to one another, even through the process can be physically and emotionally trying.

Now the second thing I hear in this story is that we should fast from something necessary. In this story, Jesus literally gives up food. Which is the most classic and quintessential definition of a fast. But in giving up something core to his very existence, Jesus is creating a

constant space to be reminded of his fast. We're never more than a few hours away from thinking about food. We eat at least three times a day, it's always on our minds. And when you fast from food, hunger is a constant companion, it's a visceral, physical reminder of the fact that you are giving something up. Now, not all fasting needs to be literally from food, but I think it's important to consider fasting from things that are necessary. Fasting should be a costly endeavor for us. We should be reminded throughout our days of the lack of the thing we're giving up. It's a big deal for me to give up tea, coffee, Diet Coke and other caffeinated beverages. I notice it multiple times a day when I go to the cupboard to make myself a cup of tea. I notice it in the headache I get at the caffeine withdrawals. It's a costly fast for me in many ways, a noticeable loss in my life.

Which leads me to the third thing I see in this story of Jesus. We should make sure our season of fasting has a start and an end. Fasting isn't about some kind of misguided hope for self improvement. Kicking a bad habit long term. That's a selfish motive. Fasting, by its own definition, is a limited activity. Jesus did it for 40 days. We start our fast on Ash Wednesday, it ends at Easter. During Advent our fast is even shorter. In the Islamic tradition, Ramadan is a month of daily fasting, but it has both a start and a clear end. This clarity of the time frame does a number of important things for us. First of all, it eliminates the selfish motivation of using fasting for self improvement. This isn't about a long-term life change or whatever, it's a season of deprivation for a religious purpose. Second, it makes giving up something precious do-able and endurable. We can do a lot of hard things if we know it's for a set season of time. Humans have remarkable endurance when we can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

This year the Pope encouraged Catholics to fast not from food or coffee or chocolate or whatever, but to fast from their indifference to others. To honestly try for this whole season to care deeply about the situations and challenges others find themselves facing, to allow our own hearts to be troubled by the troubles of others. And on one hand, I want to say, YES. I love this Pope, and I do think we are far too indifferent to the pain of other people all over the world. But at the same time, I actually think this is an impossible fast to maintain. Or at least it would be for me. Part of the reason I've fasted from so many physical things is because I need the reminder. I need to feel hungry or pine after sugar or miss watching my favorite tv show or whatever in order to be physically reminded to consider the ways God is asking me to change. And perhaps one of those ways is being less indifferent to others. Maybe I'm a lot less spiritually developed than the Pope, I suspect that I am: it's a nice idea to me to be less indifferent....but my own indifference is so ingrained I'd ironically forget to fast from this without the reminder of something more concrete.

So, here's the invitation for us in this season of Lent. Fasting can be a part of our spiritual practice. Please don't hear what I'm not saying: I am not telling you all to go home and give up food for the rest of Lent. I'm not telling you all that everyone needs to fast in order to be a real Christian or close to God or whatever. What I am saying is that fasting is one of the many practices, alongside prayer, singing, study, service, conversation, and so many other practices we can take up as Christians. It's a possible avenue for learning more about ourselves and seeking to get a little closer to God. It's an option, not a requirement. And it doesn't have to be about literal

food. So long as you fast from something that gives you a reminder of what you're doing and why you're doing each time you notice the lack, I think that works.

I know that I'm grateful for this spiritual discipline, even if I'm positively rubbish at doing it well. Each Lent, each Advent, I try a bit more, and I hope that in time I'll be able to practice more of what I preach. Because, for me, the discipline of fasting does draw me closer to God, even when my own motivations are all off. I'll be super honest about the fact that I haven't yet decided if I'm fasting for Lent this year, or what I might be fasting from. I wish I had been more on the ball, but I wasn't, and I think Jesus is going to work with me anyway. But it's good to have this story, this reminder and invitation into a spiritual discipline people have practiced for thousands of years, one more way to enter into the presence of God a bit more fully, in our own partial, fumbling, and very human ways. And I give thanks for the fact that I can take at least one motivation off the table: at least I'm not doing it to impress a boy this year. Thanks be to God!