



March 6, 2022, Lent 1

Luke 4:1-13

Even in the Desert (on the edge of Lent)

*Prayer: God of deliverance and freedom, you taught the people of Israel to acknowledge that all things come from your bountiful hand. Deepen our faith so that we may resist temptation and, in the midst of anxiety and trial, feast on your word, and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives, now and forever...*

We have arrived at the edge of Lent 2022. Lent is this 40-day season before Easter. It is traditionally a season of fasting and prayer. But I'd like to consider this season the other way around with you this year.

They are calling it pandemic version 3.0 right now. Or maybe it's almost over. Or maybe it will never be over. Hartford county is in the yellow, Glastonbury is in orange. The local schools went to masks optional this week. All of us have given up things in the pandemic no one in their right mind would have suggested. It's been 2 years now of fasting from some of the best things life has to give: hugs, handshakes, high fives, time with loved ones, weddings, dancing, lingering over meals in a restaurant heedless of someone coughing nearby, crowded theaters and Christmas Eve services. Dating. You've given up gathering to mourn loved ones, time with friends and family, dinner parties, lunch out, brunches. We haven't been able to visit the sick; we have risked our own health when we have. Many of us have lost loved ones to covid19, in my husband's family it's two people who are gone now. Yes, both of them had underlying health problems, but they were alive and coping with these issues until Covid took them. I didn't attend either funeral. I was encouraged not to by people who love me. It wasn't safe. And I could go on and on, pastoral care has been profoundly affected: praying with people over the phone while they are in ICU, dis-inviting people from funerals, weddings, baptisms. We don't want a crowd, it isn't safe. We have been fasting, all of us, together. It's been hard.

The Exodus was 40 years in the desert wilderness, Noah was 40 days in the arc, Jesus was 40 days in the desert. It isn't easy.

I am not going to encourage you to give up anything else this year. Not when you've already given up so much. Instead I'd like to encourage you to think about what we've all been calling those "silver linings" in the pandemic, more time in nature, more time with those at home including pets, more time to explore your own interests, more sleep, more time to learn to connect with people in other ways... and bring that to your understanding of what Jesus was doing in the desert on his fast. You go into a fast in search of something important.

Even in the desert God is with him. Even without food, Jesus is *feasting* on other things. In other words, Jesus was not even thinking about fasting in terms of deprivation. (40 days without food, how did he survive? That's just a detail, and don't let it fool you, that's not the hard part.) He went into the desert to focus, to get his head together, to seek an experience of abundance on his own terms for his own life. Turning from one focus, (regular meals, dinner parties, hanging out with his friends) to focus in another area. And for Jesus, this experience in the desert is something that makes him stronger, a time to consider his options, a time to decide who he is. This is a banquet of opportunity, a serious season of discernment, a time when he gathers his strength for his ministry. And he does come out of this fast strong.

At the wedding banquet in Cana you heard him tell his mother that his time had not yet come, after his fasting in the desert – he no longer waivers about who he is and what he is about.

He is tempted by

1. self-sufficiency: seeking to satisfy himself instead of God "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."
2. Power: Manipulating God to attain power and fame "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. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."
3. Prestige: To be as God. To have it all the devil[c] 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..."

Jesus fasts from these temptations, and feasts instead on the deeper meaning in the scriptures, to serve only God:

1. "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"
2. "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"
3. "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

These temptations are the temptations of a very capable, bright, and able young man in first century palestine. Your temptations may be different...your results may vary...

When Jesus taught his followers to fast he tells them: "whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your

head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

He’s encouraging them to do their own internal work without burdening others. Pull yourself together and keep it real. The kids today might say that you need to “Pull looks” while you’re on your fast, contemplating change. Keep the rest of your life together. Let your focus be on the important thing that is the focus of your fast. Don’t make fasting about fasting. Don’t pull others into your drama. This is not navel gazing. This is not diet culture. This is about focusing on an important change, getting stronger, overcoming an obstacle. It shouldn’t set you back, or make you weaker, it needs to move you forward, get you ready to engage your life.

Jim Littlefield who is a CT historian writes that the month of March in colonial times appears more often than other months as the date of death on CT tombstones. He says that there is a connection between seasonal periods and the spread of infectious diseases...studies show that winter depresses our immune systems...early spring appears to be problematic. That has traditionally been the time when we emerge from our winter dens, bringing our depressed immune systems and low vitamin D levels along with us...the link connecting low vitamin D levels with disease has been studied by the medical community for well over a century now.

I’m not inviting you to weakness, I’m inviting you to strength. This image is an image (on your bulletin cover) of abundance, the first fruits which were offered at the Temple. A 10% gift, a tithe of wealth. In Jesus’ time many people lived their whole lives with very little money. Yet they were prosperous if you consider the resources they had at their disposal. In their economy, if you are making and bartering most of your daily needs, money becomes something only for wealthy people and tax collectors to worry about. Plan to feast on the gifts of God, with gratitude.

Jesus was criticized for not fasting enough. In Luke 5 the Scribes and Pharisees say to Jesus: “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.” Jesus tells them “You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?” Is that a note of defensiveness in that answer?

So if you are going to fast this year, fast from sin, and feast on faith:

Fast from anxiety, feast on patience

Fast from bitterness, feast on joy

Fast from grudges, feast on gratitude

Fast from gossip, feast on kind words

Fast from complaining, feast on beauty

Fast from explaining yourself, feast on listening

Fast from fear, feast on hope

So in pandemic 3.0, we are full to the brim with God's deepest blessings, even in the desert of lent. Even here, God is with you, you can go nowhere where God's love is not. The sacrifices you have already made have been forming a new thing in your life, bend these sacrifices towards blessing.

*Questions for reflection and conversation:*

- What have you fasted from during the pandemic?
- What areas of your life have been allowed to flourish in this season?

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