

February 14, 2024

Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

As we embark on this season of Lent, it is common, you likely know, for Christians to fast

It is much less likely, these days, that folks will fast from food and drink as our Christian fore-relatives did in years past

Or, perhaps, I should clarify that it is less likely that you plan to fast from *all* food and drink during Lent – it's very common for people to fast from certain foods and drinks during these 40 days

If you wondered why so many traditions eat such big, sugary, fatty meals on Fat Tuesday it's because our elders were attempting to clean out their pantries of all temptations so that they could commit to their fasts with steadfastness

So, then, what's the point of fasting?

Is this the Christian offering to the exaggerated diet culture of our time – want to lose weight? Become a Christian during Lent!

Gosh, how awful to even joke about it.

Is it that we're trying to deprive ourselves in an effort to show some sort of super piety: see, we're so pious like Jesus, we don't eat candy for 40 days.

Gosh, how awful to even joke about it. What did candy ever do to you?

What is the hoped for result of fasting, or as Brene Brown says in her book, *Dare to Lead* - what does success look like?

I think the point of fasting and of this penitential season of Lent is something much more personal and a lot less obvious to the outside observer: it's about repentance and coming back into right relationship with God.

The prophet Joel in our first readings says: "Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing" (vs. 12-13)

It's that last bit that strikes me this year: "rend your hearts and not your clothing"

The place where we are to feel the effects of our fast is our hearts, not our clothing, not the showy outward symbols of faith or devotion or piety, it's not about *what* we fast from it's that our hearts need to be broken open to God

The point of fasting – the point of intentionally entering a time of prayerful reflection – is to turn our hearts from the temptations and comforts of the world to the loving presence and grace of God and that process is often not a simple swivel, but a wrenching away so that our very life force can reconnect to the great life force

Fasting is an attempt to remove the very things that shield us from this vulnerability – the things, people, substances, habits that have almost created these layers of buffer between us and God

But, the prophet Joel knows that we need to "rend our hearts"

And, can you imagine?

Can you imagine actually peeling off those layers, taking down our shields, removing our armor and turning our hearts to God?

God, who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.”

When we remember who God is – merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love – I can’t imagine why we wouldn’t feel comfortable turning our hearts to this great love

But, sin has a way of re-building those layers, sin being all those things that turn us in towards ourselves rather open us up to God

And, if we’re perfectly honest we don’t live in a society that particularly values or exalts vulnerability – although, Gen Z might change that, thanks be to God

But for the most part, the world requires us to put up shields against the slings and arrows of oppressive systems and unhealthy relationships

Some of us have to put on armor every day in order to protect the very essence of who we are from being attacked by people who think who we are is a threat

And there are some layers that many of use wear that buffer us from feeling the vulnerability and yes, pain, of recognizing the agony others have suffered by those very systems

So what does it mean to fast in a way that these layers might be shed?

What does it mean to rend our hearts from the temptations of the world and instead turn them to God, who “is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”

Why does it feel so hard to land on that soft pillow? But it is.

The prophet Joel seems to know how hard it is to do this on our own

Cameron B.R. Howard, Associate Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota notes that after calling people to repentance, “the next seven verbs, voiced by the prophet, all have to do with bringing the people together.”¹

“Blow the trumpet in Zion...call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged; gather the children, even infants”

It appears that the prophet Joel knew, that to have the strength to fast in such a way that our hearts might turn to God, we need a community of encouragement and support

We need companions in the journey who share our struggles and who celebrate our vulnerability

As Joel proclaimed then, I share with you now, in this season of Lent you are invited to fast, to let go, to strip away all that interferes and to turn your heart to God; and you are invited to the table to eat and drink and be nourished for the journey

You are given permission to pay attention to that inner voice that calls you back to your heart and calls you back to God.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ash-wednesday/commentary-on-joel-21-2-12-17-15>