

the DISCIPLINE *of*
DISCIPLESHIP
LENT SERMON SERIES
+ FEBRUARY 18
9AM | 11AM
FASTING

Sunday, February 18, 2024
“*The Discipline of Discipleship*”
FASTING | Joel 2:12-13 | Charlie Berthoud

“Fasting is cleansing. It cleans out our bodies. It lays bare our souls. It leads us into the arms of that One for whom we hunger. In the Divine Arms we become less demanding and more like the one who holds us. Then we experience new hungers. We hunger and thirst for justice, for goodness and holiness. We hunger for what is right. We hunger to be saints. Most of us are not nearly hungry enough for the things that really matter.”

Macrina Wiederkehr

Easter Sunday is March 31—six weeks from today! Between then and now I have **high hopes** for our community of faith.

Not only do I hope that we’ll get lots of Easter candy and enjoy beautiful spring flowers, but I also have hopes for us as Christians.

Overall, my hope is that between now and Easter Sunday, we all can deepen our Christian identity, our calling as disciples, as followers of Jesus.

More specifically, my hope is that we all be more awake, more alert, more alive—recognizing the gift of life and hearing God’s call in Jesus to love our neighbors and to seek first God’s Kingdom, to make this world a better place.

So how do we get there? How do we grow stronger and more faithful and more awake in these six weeks before Easter Sunday?

We do that by taking the season of **Lent** seriously. Lent began four days ago, on Ash Wednesday and continues until Easter.



Lent is a time when we remember that Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness, fasting and praying, a time of renewal and reconnecting with God, preparing for his ministry. Historically, Lent has been a time for the church to prepare people for baptism and membership.

More generally Lent has become a time of renewal and refocus and spiritual growth for us Christians.

We have **five opportunities** for you toward the goal of renewal, refocus, and spiritual growth.

Starting today, leading up to Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we are focusing on five different Christian spiritual practices, one each week: FASTING, PRAYING, LISTENING, SIMPLIFYING, and UNPLUGGING.



We'll focus on these not only in worship, but also in Adult Education on Sundays at 10, and in our Wednesday evening informal worship service at 6:15.

These five “things” are sometimes considered practices and sometimes considered disciplines. We may be more comfortable with the word practice, as discipline can have negative connotations, but **discipline** is a good word too.

We are disciples, followers of Jesus. Disciples are followers, students, learners—and we are trying to learn God's love and live God's love.

Think of the discipline of athletes and musicians. They dedicate time, energy, and focus toward a goal.

We have a goal—actually following Jesus, serving God's kingdom, loving our neighbors.

Think of the satisfaction and impact that a well-disciplined musician or athlete can bring to other people by their performance. Think of the satisfaction and impact that a well-disciplined Christian can bring to their family, their community, the world.

The discipline, or spiritual practice, for this week is FASTING.

While narratives about fasting abound in the Bible, fasting is not explicitly mandated in the New Testament.

We learn in Matthew 4, that after his baptism, Jesus went to the wilderness, for a forty-day period of fasting and prayer. (This is part of the reason why Lent is 40 days.)

In Matthew 6, a reading we often hear on Ash Wednesday, Jesus is teaching about praying, charity, and fasting, encouraging his followers to do these things with humility and integrity, not to make a big show of it.

“And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces 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.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say "You must fast" but instead he says "When you fast..." as if he is assuming that they would. And clearly if his disciples are going to fast, or pray, or be generous, he wants them to do it well.

Lent is a traditional time for fasting, for "giving up" something for the season.

I know a pastor who used to joke pretty much every year that he was giving up Brussels sprouts for Lent.

Fasting isn't very popular in our culture of abundance, but it can help us get back on track and reconnect with God and God's will.

I hope to inspire you to consider fasting in one way or another.

There are many reasons to fast, according to the Bible. One type of fast is in the little book of **Joel**.

Joel is a little book in Old Testament, one of the 12 so-called minor prophets.

In Joel, fasting is encouraged as a sign of repentance, of turning around and coming back to God. Tearing or rending one's clothing was often an outward sign of repentance. Here the people are encouraged to tear, or rend, or open their hearts, to really be transformed from the inside out.

One more note: those of you who read Exodus might recognize some language in here from Exodus 34, when God's steadfast love, God's *hesed* is affirmed.

"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. Return to the Lord, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing."

The fast in Joel and several other places in the Bible is sign of human desire to say that we're sorry for straying from God's paths, and to reflect our come back to God, People also fast to grow closer to God and to **prepare** for a challenging time. We see this with Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and others. Check out hymn 166, which we're singing at 11:00; it celebrates these people and their fasting.

In Acts 13 and 14, we read about the early church people fasting, to discern God's will and to empower their ministry.

People also fast out of concern for **justice** in the world, especially in terms of hunger. In the time of Isaiah, apparently too many people were going through religious rituals without any concern for human suffering in the world. Isaiah spoke the word of God:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

My first fast was in college, on the Thursday before Thanksgiving. Students were invited to give up one, two, or three meals, with the cost of those meals going to Oxfam America, a group that works to combat hunger and poverty, kind of like Heifer International. Most of us had learned about hunger and knew it existed, but we experienced hunger that day, just for one day, and that changed us.

In the last few decades, **technology fasting** has become popular.

In my early days in ministry, last century, last millennium (!), I encouraged congregations to participate in TV Turnoff Week, which then became Screen Free Week. Back in the day, turning off the TV for a few days wasn't so hard, but today, the idea of going screen-free seems quaint, naïve, and even out of touch.

We use screens for calendars, communication, banking, and more. We use screens to keep in touch with loved ones. There are many good purposes for our screens.

But we also use screens in unhelpful and hurtful ways. And too many of us are close to being addicted to our screens.

Every day I find myself sucked into the vortex of my screens. I pick up my phone to check an email or the weather or whatever and 5, 10, 20 minutes later there I am scrolling around. I'm guessing I'm not the only one.

Fasting from technology obviously isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bible, but idolatry is. God calls God's people to get their priorities straight and to not worship false gods.

So, during Lent, while going entirely screen free would be logistically challenging, many people fast from certain forms of technology.

I invite you to consider how you could fast this season of Lent. And before we get to specifics, start with prayer, perhaps using the refrain from Psalm 51: “Create in my a clean heart O God.” Then ask yourself:

- What is taking too much of your time and energy?
- What is distracting you?
- What is pulling you away from being your authentic and best self?
- What is getting in the way of you connecting with God—God’s word, God’s Spirit, God’s love—more deeply?

I want to share a few possibilities for you to consider about fasting:

Fast from food.

Skip a meal or two or three or take a break from desserts or a favorite food, so that you experience at least a little bit of challenge or discomfort. Read a little bit about hunger in Madison and hunger around the world. Pray, asking God to make you hungry for justice and more compassionate toward hungry people. You might notice that you’re a bit grumpy or tired, and you can try to channel those experiences into focus and kindness. Note: pregnant people, people in frail health, or people with eating disorders should avoid food fasting.

Fast from social media, or some form of technology.

Social media can be good when we stay in touch with friends, share photos and birthday greetings, but it’s easy to become mindless scrolling and to get stuck in an unreal world.

Have you ever looked at your settings to see how much you’re using your phone for social media? You might be surprised—and disturbed.

I know some young adults who at busy and stressful times of life simply remove social media apps from their phones.

You can also set time limits on how much you can use those apps. Or you could do what I did this past week and turn off notifications for Facebook and Instagram and

put the apps in a folder, so they are less visible and need some intentional effort to find and open.

Fast from anything that seems out of balance for you.

Maybe it's TV, maybe it's shopping, maybe it's watching sports. Maybe it's alcohol. Most things in life are good, but if they dominate our lives, they become problematic, and they crowd out room for God.

In his classic book *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard Foster writes:

“Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow non-essentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them.” (p. 56)

Friendly reminder: fasting is something you decide for yourself. You don't point fingers at other people and tell them what they should do.

To review, I encourage you to think about giving up something for Lent: food, technology, anything that gets in your way. Maybe for a day or day, or maybe longer. Whatever you do with fasting, remember that the purpose for us is about connecting with God, to welcome the abundant life that God offers in Jesus, and to discover new meaning and purpose as a Christian.

One final thought. Gerald May is a psychiatrist and theologian who has done a lot of work with addiction. He writes:

“St Augustine once said that God is always trying to give good things to us but our hands are too full to receive them.”

Fasting can help free up the clutter in our lives, open us to the things that matter, and make us hungry for new purpose and new life.

Let us pray....