



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Third Sunday of Lent
Fasting and Fruit

Luke 13.1–9

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Message from March 24, 2019

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We are now in the time of Lent. Lent is the traditional time for Christians to prepare for Easter. One of the most common ways to prepare for the Easter, for centuries, has been to fast, that is, to deny yourself something that you normally have.

I must admit that fasting has never come easily to me. Too often, I've not gotten more centered on God, but instead got centered on how hungry I was, or how much I missed the routines that I typically enjoyed. I'll admit that some Christians have come up with novel ways to "fast." I asked my daughter a number of years back what she was giving up for Lent. She replied "Facebook." Giving it up for 40 days—now, there's hardship for some of us, right? And no cheating by just switching to Instagram or WhatsApp. She said giving it up made her realize the good things about Facebook, and also to realize that she didn't need it as much as she thought, and could more easily avoid the obsession with it that sometimes happen.

Instead of fasting as simply an experience where we give up something for the sake of giving it up, I like to think of Lent as a time when we identify more closely with those who suffer and strive ourselves to produce something in response. In other words, what we are preparing ourselves for and why is that preparation more important than anything that we give up or deny ourselves?

How many days is Lent, anyone?

Why 40? Why would Christians adopt 40 as the number of days between beginning your preparation for Christ's triumph and then leading to his triumph at Easter? Where else have we encountered 40? Anyone?

- Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness and then was tempted by the Satan.
- Moses spends 40 days on Mt. Sinai with God.
- Israelites wandered 40 years in the desert.

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- God sent rain and floods for 40 days in the story of Noah's ark.
- Jonah gives Ninevah 40 days to repent.

All of these are times of testing, even suffering. Moses, the people of Israel, Jonah—they all have to become more centered on God because they realize that they need him. They have to focus on listening to what God wants, to repent, to hear what God is telling them to do or work harder on doing God's will and God's work.

That's often the way that I think about fasting. Not as a choice that we can make, and then discard. Sometimes suffering is forced on us. I'm reminded of the story one pastor told of a woman in his congregation whom he knew had suffered a lot in recent months. He gently asked how her preparations for Easter were going. She replied, "Well, I certainly don't have to worry about fasting." "Oh, why's that?" asked the pastor. "God took care of helping me fast this Lent without my needing to do anything on my part."

I can identify with her feeling. On Friday, we had a small ceremony at the College where I gave a diploma to the father of one of our senior students who died last fall, very unexpectedly. Even though the young woman had died before graduating, we were able to count her credits so that we could award her degree posthumously. Many of the young woman's friends came to share their memories of her and to offer comfort once again to her family. Those seniors and I have had a fasting experience this year. Those seniors have lost three of their classmates, all very unexpectedly, between August and January this year. The first one was a former student of mine whom I had taught in class the year before. I spoke for the College at his funeral.

We all ask why, in times like those, and we ask what we can do in response. Jesus was asked the same thing in the passage of Luke that I read a few moments ago. Why, he was asked, were those Galileans massacred by the Roman governor, Pilate? It was senseless, horrible. Had they done something

wrong to deserve their fate? No, Jesus replies, and, he adds, the 18 people who were killed recently when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, they, too, didn't deserve their fate. And, Jesus adds, in effect, I also don't have an easy answer as to why terrible things happen. We, too, don't have an answer to why bad things happen to good people.

But what Jesus did know, is what God wants us to do, in the face of evil, of suffering, of Lenten journeys that we have been forced to bear, often beyond what we believe we can shoulder. "Then he told this parable...." A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and for three years, he'd been coming to look for fruit, and, what, no figs. So he told the vinekeeper, "cut it down,' three years, no figs, what kind of return on investment is that?" But the vinekeeper says, 'leave it alone.' "Give it one more year.' Give it one more year to bear fruit."

God always gives us another chance, to respond to evil, with good. If you have been forced, as I sometimes have, like the seniors at the College, perhaps, to bear with those who suffer, to face tragedy, this is how you should respond: bear fruit. We can't often understand evil, but we can do good.

The parable of the fig tree may even be more instructive than we might believe. What is a fig tree doing planted in a vineyard? I had some experience with fig trees when we lived in southern California. They have deep roots and large branches. Hmm, not ideal for a vineyard unless you want the fig tree to suck the water and block the sun that the vines need. It's out of place, it doesn't belong there, but Jesus says, through the vineyard keeper, let it stay.

And Jesus' hearers may have understood the meaning clearly. Leviticus forbade eating from a fruit tree for its first three years. So the Jewish vinedresser may have been disposing of the fruit, perhaps even using it as fertilizer. The owner, perhaps not Jewish, and ignorant of Jewish law, wants fruit right away, is impatient, and wants to cut down the tree. The wise vinedresser convinces the owner to be patient. And, according

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to Leviticus, in the fourth year, the fruit is offered to the Lord.

And why a fig tree? What makes the fig tree so special? Do any of you remember the images of fig trees from the Jewish Testament? The Promised Land is described as being full of fig trees. Peace in ancient Israel is described as “each person under their own vine and fig tree.” Peace, sitting under a fig tree, near a vineyard. Suffering, and then peace.

And that’s the fuller meaning of Lent for me. In Dutch, not Pennsylvania Dutch which is really a kind of German, but in Dutch, the language I grew up hearing around me sometimes in Michigan, the word for “spring” is *lente*. Lent may mean denial, suffering, but like a cold winter into early spring, it also leads to a flowering, to fruit in its season.

Perhaps that’s why, too, when some of my high church Catholic and Lutheran brothers and sisters would kid me about my inability to fast, I’d gently, I assure you, gently, rebuke them with one of my favorite passages in Isaiah, Isaiah 58:

“Is this the kind of fast that I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself?

Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and lying on sackcloth and ashes?

Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

Is not this the fast that I have chosen:

To loose the chains of injustice and untie the chords of the yoke,

To set the oppressed free and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

And to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—

When you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

And your healing will quickly appear;

Then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

You will cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.'"

Lent, it's been said, is directed at three forms of justice: prayer (justice towards God, what does God truly want me to do and to be), fasting (justice towards one's self, what do I truly need, and what do I not need), and alms (justice to others, what must I do to serve them).

Fasting can, ideally, help you appreciate the blessings that you enjoy. More deeply, it reminds us of Christ's testing and hardship on our behalf. And, it can make us appreciate the joy that comes from knowing how the Easter story ends. It ends with Christ triumphant and resurrected, a symbol that death, suffering, and loss are not the end of the human story.

One of the joys of the last eight years for my wife and I is to have been taught by you, by this congregation, about the fruits of the Spirit and to have walked with you during the difficult times in your lives, and to have had you walk with us through the times of sadness. Both of my wife's parents passed away while we have lived here. Especially in my position, with so many cherished members of the College community passing. I have gone to more funerals these last eight years, and certainly spoken at more funerals, than during any other time of my life. You have been a community of grace and works. Grace in sharing forgiveness and acceptance, works in bearing fruit, of facing evil, witnessing against warfare, hate and division. Gail and I are deeply grateful for everything that you have been to us and for your example in touching so many lives for good. We will remember you always.

This Lent, we can all cherish the time to fast, to center on God's bearing of suffering with us and for us, even, as so often, we do not understand the suffering we see. And, we can rejoice

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that we are blessed, all of us, in some way, to bear fruit. We never, none of us, have to wait to do good.

May you all have a blessed Lent and a joyous Easter.

