

Year C\*Lent 2\*2010\*Fasting With Unceasing Prayer  
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Our fast has begun. In our minds and in our hearts we have gone into the desert with Jesus and joined him. As we sing in one of our lenten hymns:

Forty days and forty nights  
thou wast fasting in the wild;  
forty days and forty nights  
tempted and yet undefiled.

Should we not thy sorrows share  
and from worldly joys abstain,  
fasting with unceasing prayer,  
strong with thee to suffer pain?

But being Episcopalians we sense a need for balance and humor and common sense when it comes to our solemn duties so we make jokes about lent and our fasting every year and it is good.

We say, "I'm fasting from speaking Erdu", or "I'm giving up giving up things for lent", or we tell stories like this old saw; the very devout Episcopal family which gave up all meat for lent. . . But their Baptist neighbor cooked out steaks every Friday evening which drove them crazy. So they convinced him to convert, took him to the priest who explained all about lent, sprinkled him with water and said, "You were born a Baptist, raised a Baptist, but now you are an Episcopalian. Thinking they had solved their problem they were horrified the next Friday when they smelled sizzling steaks as they ate their cold tuna sandwiches. Stomping over to their neighbor's house to set him straight they saw him sprinkle the grill with water and say, "You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now you are a fish."

We have a laugh at our own expense. But we also must return to our disciplines. We must honor them. We must remember what they were made for. We fast from sweets, or snacks, or meat, so that we have some physical, sensory, and communal, experience of emptiness. This shared emptiness joins us with Jesus and the saints, and our brothers and sisters in the faith. Then it turns us to God the source of life and love, forgiveness and mercy.

I've given up desserts for Lent and Beth made brownies for the College folks who gathered here Tuesday night for dinner. When I walked into the kitchen my body went into automatic. My mouth started watering. I took a step toward the brownies. And a thought stopped me saying, "It's lent, we've given up deserts."

That's the first task of fasting. It interrupts us. It catches us up short. It says, "This is a special time." Nothing does that better than giving up some habitually pleasant, regularly indulged, relatively innocent, eating habit. Because we have an automatic response to brownies, or beer, or red meat, we are often caught when our bodies want these things. It is so good to be interrupted by God.

The moment of interruption is the moment fasting has been wanting to get us to; the moment an habitual action has been interrupted.

The next step is critical.

Turn to God.

This turn to God is what fasting and lent is all for.

Praise God.

Ask God to be with you.

Rejoice in the playfulness of having tricked yourself into prayer.

But be sure to pray.

"God help me keep my fast."

"God make me one with Jesus."

"God be praised in the Holy Life of the Church."

Then it's on with the day.

There are so many good things about this.

It makes my kitchen a place of mindfulness, prayer, and conversion.

It makes my body a place of awareness and turning to God.

It makes a simple, really silly, thing, like giving up deserts an experience of communion with my God at a time I didn't choose, at a moment I wasn't ready or expecting to meet God.

This playful Lenten fast also reminds us and prepares us for larger more consequential moments of loss, death, and resurrection. Many of us don't have time or spiritual energy to fast from food this lent because we have been thrown into some big involuntary fast. We have been in the desert with Jesus for a long time experiencing some loss which must be born not 40 days but 40 months or 40 years. Maybe we are being forced by life to sacrifice some long standing behavior which was destructive and had become ingrained. This is the real fast.

I was reminded of the time in Luke's gospel when the disciples are unable to cast a demon out of a little boy. Jesus heals the boy and when asked by the disciples why they could not cast out the demon he says, "This kind can come out only

through prayer and fasting.”<sup>1</sup> There are things which we must fast from forever if we are to grow in our love, service, and eventually, knowledge of the Lord.

There are spiritual and physical diseases that require great fasting from us, more than forty days and forty nights. Our Lenten fasts prepare us for these greater fasts. I have many friends who must fast from alcohol for the rest of their lives.

That fast which turns into sobriety and serenity becomes;

the greatest instrument of union with God

and service of others

and source of joy for them.

People who are trying to recover from addictions have a great deal to teach us about what a true fast is.

I found the coolest thing. It's called a Lenten Cube. It's a six-sided die which you toss and it tells you what to fast from for that day in Lent. I've been tossing it every morning. Sometimes whoever is in the office gets together and we all toss the Lenten Cube to see what we need to fast from today.

Here are the possibilities;

Fast from Discouragement; Remember Jesus' promise that he has a perfect plan for you.

Fast from Resentment and Bitterness; Work on forgiving the people who have hurt you.

Fast from Overspending; Try reducing spending by 10% and give those saving to people in need.

Fast from Judging Others. Before judging, recall how Jesus overlooks our faults.

Fast from Anger. Give your family an extra dose of love every day.

This morning I tossed, “Fast from Complaining; Instead of complaining, recall moments of joy in your life.” Then I wondered if I was complaining in this sermon.

Complaining, discouragement, resentment, bitterness, overspending, judging, anger, hatred. . . a pretty interesting list.

What we need to fast from is best determined through prayer, discernment, and conversation with someone you trust with your spiritual life.

But I love the child-likeness and playfulness of my Fasting Cube.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Mk 9:23-29). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Whatever gets us back into the Church's deep wisdom of the desert.

I found a poem on fasting by the Middle Eastern poet Rumi. It is filled with joy, sly smiles, and wisdom. That's the combination I want for us.

This is *Fasting* by Jelaluddin Rumi.

There's hidden sweetness in the stomach's emptiness.  
If the brain and belly are burning clean  
with fasting, every moment a new song comes out of the fire.  
The fog clears, and new energy makes you  
run up the steps in front of you.

When you're full of food and drink, Satan sits  
where your spirit should, an ugly metal statue  
in place of the Kaaba.  
When you fast,  
good habits gather like friends who want to help.

Fasting is Solomon's ring. Don't give it  
to some illusion and lose your power,  
but even if you have, if you've lost all will and control,  
they come back when you fast, like soldiers appearing  
out of the ground, pennants flying above them.  
A table descends to your tents,  
Jesus' table.  
Expect to see it, when you fast, this table  
spread with other food, better than the broth of cabbages.

It's interesting when I went online to search for resources and reflections on fasting it was more often Islamic sites that proved most helpful. With their month long fast of Ramadan our Muslim brothers and sister seem to still have a vital connection with this ancient discipline. And yet Rumi sees the Holy Table we are brought to through fasting as Jesus' table.

And that's of course where we want to come to.  
That's where we are right now.  
At Jesus' table.  
The table of mercy and joy.  
The table of the Mother Hen.

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!<sup>2</sup>

Let us be willing to be gathered together by Jesus.

Let our fast be joyful, playful, but also real.

Let us join in fasting with Jesus and his saints, men and women of long ago and today.

Let us reclaim the forty day fast with humor but also with new vigor and joy.

There is something waiting for us on the other side of our empty stomachs.

Something Jesus wants to give us.

Someone Jesus wants us to become.

Somewhere Jesus wants to lead us.

Let's go there together.

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<sup>2</sup>*The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 13:34-35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.