

The 1st Sunday in Lent
February 21, 2010
Matthew 4:1-11

Peter K. Lange
St. John's Lutheran Church
Topeka, Kansas

“Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

Those of you who were here on Ash Wednesday heard something, that day, about fasting. And this was “meet, right, and salutary,” since both of the appointed readings we heard on Ash Wednesday spoke of fasting. From the Old Testament prophecy of Jonah we heard the king of Ninevah decree a fast in repentant response to Jonah’s preaching. And in the traditional Ash Wednesday Gospel, from Matthew chapter six, we heard Jesus himself speak of fasting as a given, when He said:

“When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

But in case you missed it a few days ago, today (on this 1st Sunday in Lent) we get another chance to hear fasting extolled in a positive light—as a good thing—this time as we see it being practiced by Jesus himself. St. Matthew records in today’s Gospel from Matthew chapter four:

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.”

Now this sermon won’t be a primer on fasting, except to say that there are about as many variations on fasting as there are people who fast!

- Should I fast just one whole day occasionally (like Ash Wednesday or Good Friday)?... Or should I fast throughout all of Lent?
- And if the 40 days of Lent don’t technically include Sundays, should I break my fast on those days, or keep it going on those days too?
- And what kind of a fast are we talking about anyway? Jesus fasted “*forty days and forty night*” and Matthew says “*he was hungry*” afterwards. In the Ash Wednesday Old Testament from Jonah, we heard the King of Ninevah say, “*Let neither man nor beast... taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water.*” But surely no one today does or is suggesting a 40 day Lenten fast without any food or water (even if it is six days on, and one day off)! Rather, it has been customary, in our era, to fast from meat, or chocolate, or sweets, or alcohol, or junk food. So what kind of fast are we talking about?

There are about as many variation and versions of fasting as there are people who do so! And there are plenty of books, magazine articles, websites, and blogs to help you decide the specifics of your own fast.

But let’s cut through all that and reflect more seriously for a moment on the benefits of the spiritual discipline of fasting which has been practiced by the people of God in every century

since at least the time of the Old Testament Judges.¹ ...By Lutherans too, I might add. After all, Luther's own Small Catechism teaches us to confess that "Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training..."

But here's the thing. Fasting is not easy. It is no fun. Like a new diet or exercise program, it might be invigorating for a little while. But after a short time, the novelty wears off, and you are left to wrestle with the cravings of the human nature.

Fasting, you see, disciplines our sinful human natures which are selfish to the core. We want whatever we want (be it meat or chocolate or junk food, or a fine cabernet. And we are used to getting what we want in so many areas of life. Oh sure, there are always things we want but can't have (like more money, or better health, or the like). But we get used to not getting these desires.

Fasting, on the other hand, disciplines us to say "No" to things we are used to getting and having every day—a trip to the fridge, a second helping, certain behavior in certain social situations. Fasting denies the deep-seated desires of our fallen natures that are turned in on ourselves for pleasure. And our Old Adam, our sinful, selfish, corrupt-to-the core human natures do not like it one bit! This is the very thing St. Paul was talking about in Romans 7 when he said:

*"I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."*²

But this temporary conflict that fasting highlights is just the tip of the ice berg. Fasting drives home to us just how captive we are to sin! If we can't even say no to Rocky Road or a fine Pale Ale for a few days or weeks each year, what does that say about our sin? We are slaves to it! We are held captive by Satan, the great Tempter! We are weak! Worse than that, we are powerless to resist Him as we should. No matter what fronts we hide behind, or what faces we put on, we are weak, helpless, pitiable creatures when it comes to the overwhelmingly seductive and destructive forces of the devil, the world, and our flesh! Admit it! Confess it! And plead for God's mercy! Because this is about far more than denying or satisfying our bodily appetites. This is finally about our eternal standing before our Creator... a relationship that has been totally severed by sin... an issue that will not simply go away, even when we die, but will be dealt with, for better or for worse, when every human being is raised from the dead to face God the Judge on Judgment Day.

Fasting opens our eyes. It slaps us awake from the delusion of self-reliance... and leads us to see that, like Adam and Eve, we are naked before God, by nature. And, like Adam and Eve, apart from God's mercy, we had better well hide ourselves from His presence, for our God is a consuming fire.³

But that's why God our Creator has sent into our human flesh His own eternal Son, Jesus Christ. While fasting drives home our utter enslavement to sin, and thus our damning enmity with God,

¹ Fasting is mentioned in the following books of the Old Testament: Judges, 1 & II Samuel, I & II Kings, I & II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel, Jonah, Zechariah

² Romans 7:23

³ Hebrews 12:29

fasting does nothing to solve our problem. We can't fast our way back into God's favor. Just like we can't do anything to earn ourselves back into God's graces.

Rather, the Triune God Himself has done it all for you out of His own pure grace and mercy!

Remember what Lent is leading toward! It is leading toward the crucifix of Good Friday where God Himself, who took on our flesh and nature in Mary's womb (in the person of Jesus Christ), ultimately laid down His life, in place of ours, to pay the required price of death for our sins. But Jesus didn't stay defeated by that death. Rather He rose from the grave with our human nature which He had redeemed. And ascended into heaven, with our human nature that He has redeemed. And now He meets us in the Communion of His Church, with our human nature that He redeemed. He meets us in that meal He instituted on Maundy Thursday for the ongoing distribution of the forgiveness of sins that He won for us on the cross, and to strengthen us in our own journey through the wilderness!

Lent is a season of preparation... preparation to celebrate a solution to our problem!... God's victory over sin, death, and the devil, by the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. And that is our salvation!

Listen to what today's Epistle says about Jesus Christ's own fasting... and more than that—about His own perfect keeping of God's entire will and Law in our place:

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

You don't have to fast to be brought to your knees over your utter helplessness to handle the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh. But fasting does help to drive that point home.

Whenever and however you arrive there look to Christ who successfully resisted Satan's temptations in the wilderness and throughout His life on earth. Look to Christ, who was tempted in every way, as we are... yet never sinned! Look to Christ who gives you His victory over sin, by faith. So that each day of your life, including on your deathbed, you can draw near to God's throne of grace with confidence... and received mercy and grace in every time of need!

Amen.