

Genesis 2;15-17;3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
MATTHEW 4:1-11

Fasting as Spiritual "Meat"

"Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us didst fast and pray,
teach us with thee to mourn our sins,
and close by thee to stay.

"As those with Satan didst contend
and didst the victory win,
O give us strength in thee to fight,
in thee to conquer sin.

"As thou didst hunger bear and thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and chiefly live
by thy most holy word." Amen.

That is a hymn which is, perhaps, more often sung than imitated. Fasting is an ancient and honorable spiritual discipline with deep roots in Christian and Jewish tradition. Moses fasted while he was on Mt. Sinai spending 40 days and 40 nights with God and receiving the 10 Commandments (See Exodus 33:28). The great prophet Elijah – the other "Biblical Hall of Famer" who appeared with Jesus and Moses when Jesus was transfigured, as we heard in last Sunday's Gospel – was fed miraculously by God and then "went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights" until he reached Mt. Sinai for his special time alone with God. (See 1 Kings 19:8).

They, like Jesus, observed very strict fasts – although "40" needs to be understood as biblical language meaning "a long time." Fasting is a spiritual discipline with impeccable credentials. The point is to devote oneself more wholly to prayer – which in all three of these cases was primarily *listening* to God.

The idea is that we can clear our minds and open our spirits more if we are listening to God rather than listening to our stomachs.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus *assumed* that his listeners not only were familiar with fasting as a spiritual discipline but also *practiced* it: hence he said, "Whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as 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 (Matthew 6:16-18).”

Fasting began to enter the discipline of the Christian church as part of the preparation for Easter – the greatest *feast* of the year for Christians – with a fast on Good Friday. The season of Lent, which began first as a season in which to prepare adults for baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter, slowly changed into a season of reflection and penitence – being sorry for our sins – by everyone in preparation for Easter.

Recalling the forty days spent fasting by Jesus, Elijah and Moses, the season for special spiritual discipline was eventually set by the church as 40 days, beginning with Ash Wednesday (which was last Wednesday).

Now, if you do the math, you will notice that Ash Wednesday is actually 46 days before Easter. And now I call your attention to a liturgical subtlety in our calendar and in our service leaflets: today is the first Sunday *in* Lent, *not* the first Sunday *of* Lent. *Sunday is always a feast day*, always a “little Easter.”

I was quizzed about this at the Pancake Supper by two members of the Youth Group, who were delighted to learn that they could break their Lenten discipline each Sunday. And, in fact, the Youth Group will have ice cream sundaes today – yes, in Lent – because Sunday is always a feast day for Christians.

Which leaves the rest of the season of which we have 36 days left. O.K. , so what exactly am I getting at? Jews are pretty precise about fasting: on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Muslims fast from dawn to dusk for the month of Ramadan, which moves around the year, meaning that a Ramadan fast is a lot more challenging in June than in December.

Christians are not so specific. Okay, the Episcopal Church says that Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are “fast days,” but what exactly is a fast day? And for who – clearly the youngest and oldest people and the sick need special consideration, which is true.

So let us focus on what I think is the heart of the matter: the words of Jesus – quoting Moses from Deuteronomy 8:3 – in today’s Gospel: **“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**

There it is. Typically, people – *including me* – spend a lot more time shopping for food, preparing food, eating food, *cleaning* up after eating food, and having in-between-meal snacks in the course of a given month than we do reading the bible, praying and listening for God’s guidance *combined*. So these words strike right to the heart of the matter. If we aren’t spending enough time with God, maybe it’s because we think we *can* live by bread alone – either literal bread or “bread” in the slang sense meaning “money.”

If so, we’re wrong.

Sooner or later, we will not need bread. Ever again. Because, as we are reminded each Ash Wednesday – one reason Ash Wednesday is *not* a popular service – “You are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Always, however, we need God. We needed God for us to be conceived, we need God when we live, we will need God when we die. In fact, without God we will not live again after we die. All our striving after bread (in either sense) will then be over, and we will either live purely by the grace of God, or we will not live at all. The hope for the former result, after all, is a large part of our joy each Easter, each Sunday, indeed each day.

“One does not live by bread alone.”

Now, I do *not* propose that anyone go without food for forty days. The spiritual giants who practiced sustained fasting were, well, spiritual giants. No one can, so to speak, “go from zero to Gandhi in 60 seconds.”

In fact, I don’t propose that anyone go completely without food even on the two fast days, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It is possible, for the deeply committed, to subsist on water and/or juice for a day. But I think that may be unnecessarily radical – and also too little, especially since one of those days is past, and the other is 40 days away.

So, what I propose it this: that anyone who wants to embrace the ancient and honored discipline of fasting join me in eating less food, simpler food, less expensive food and meatless food for *one or two days a week* from now until Easter. That is a discipline which is different, frequent, and can have important side benefits, as I will mention. But the main thing is: budget less time focused on food, more time on prayer and bible reading.

For some people, that might mean deliberately skipping lunch (and not compensating with unhealthy snacks) once a week and spending “lunch hour” reading the bible and/or practicing one or more of the seven kinds of prayer (intercession, petition, confession, oblation, praise, adoration, thanksgiving).

For some people, it might mean having a large bowl of rice as a meal once a week and donating the difference between the cost of that and what you’d normally spend to help feed people who are *really hungry all the time*. You could help someone in this area through the Food Banks we contribute to as a church; you could help someone anywhere in the world. Personally, I’m contributing to the feeding program of Holy Trinity Anglican church in Kibera, the poorest section of Nairobi, Kenya. If you’d like to do that, too, just ask me.

For some people, it might mean discovering vegetarian cooking for the first time – because when I say a “meatless day” I’m not suggesting people have lobster once a week and call that a “Lenten discipline.” Uh, no.

Now if you’re a person whose vision of “vegetarian cooking” only conjures up spaghetti without the meatballs, take heart – there’s a *lot* of good and good-tasting options. On the table in the welcoming area are hand-outs with vegetarian recipes and websites for more, all offered to us by our vegetarian Office Manager, Kitty Solomita. Personally, I used to be about as familiar with the vegetarian aisle in the supermarket as I was with the Goya aisle, but funny thing, I’ve gotten more familiar with both in the last few years. There’s a remarkable amount of good tasting, healthy stuff out there – hey, have you ever heard that fruits and vegetables are bad for you?

So in fact, *this* spiritual discipline might help you discover ways to eat which help your *physical* health as well as your spiritual health. I first got into this a few years ago for health reasons – ever get a blood test back on which your doctor circled the cholesterol number in red? – but now I eat differently because I *like* it. Which is the way to make a change stick.

Sure, I still eat beef. Occasionally.

Which brings up another point: this spiritual discipline might be good for our *financial* health as well. Some people are going through hard times these days and find the price of meat hard to swallow; so, don't. *Make a spiritual virtue out of a financial necessity.*

And eating less meat – I said less, not none – is good for the planet, too. The New York Times “Week in Review” section had a very sobering article on this two weeks ago. Americans are 5% of the world's population and we eat 15% of the world's consumption of meat every year – nearly 10 billion animals are grown and killed just for us. All those animals had to be fed, but it takes “about two to five times more grain to produce the same calories through livestock as through direct grain consumption...it is as much as 10 times more in the case of grain-fed beef in the United States.”

In other words, if I ate six ounces of beef, 10 other people could have gotten the same amount of calories *each* as I did from the beef if they had eaten the amount of grain the cow ate per six ounces of beef produced. And, as you might have heard, 800 million people in the world suffer from hunger or malnutrition.

Concerned about pollution? “U.S. livestock produces perhaps 900 million **tons** of waste **annually**, about three tons of manure for each American.” [Emphasis added]. All that manure has to go somewhere.

The average American consumes about 110 grams of protein a day “about twice the federal government's recommended allowance.” Think you have to have meat three times a day to be strong? You want strong? Gorillas are vegetarians. Rhinos are vegetarians. Elephants are vegetarians. Next question.

So maybe, we can do the hungry of the world a favor, do the animals of the world a favor, do the environment of the world a favor, do our own budgets a favor, do our own bodies a favor *and* strengthen our relationships with God – all by going back to a spiritual discipline which is 3,000 years old. Even once or twice a week. Cool.

Tasty, healthy, economical, animal-friendly, ecologically sound, ancient, traditional Christian spiritual discipline: it's what's for dinner.

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ