

## Prayer: Feasting and Fasting

Desert

Ruth Burgess

*The desert waits  
ready for those who come,  
who come obedient to the Spirit's leading;  
or who are driven,  
because they weill not come any other way.*

*The desert always waits,  
ready to let us know who we are—  
the place of self-discovery.*

*And whilst we fear, and rightly,  
the loneliness and emptiness and harshness,  
we forget the angels,  
whom we cannot see for our blindness,  
but who come when God decides  
that we need their help;  
when we are ready  
for what they can give us.*

For those of you who were not here last Wednesday night, we partied and then we repented. Senari donned the white feather mask. We all had beads on, Mona and Jack dressed in their medieval finest. It did seem a little extreme-, but hey, like Ohio weather, we are sometimes given to extremities.

Then, as we decorated our foreheads with ashes as a sign of our mortality, “Dust to dust.”, you heard the words, “Repent and believe.” and “God longs for you to be whole”. We entered into the season of preparation for living the lives of Easter people.

Thursday I travelled to Solon, Ohio, to a tiny African-American Mennonite church moving after today from a Jewish synagogue to the Solon Rec

Center, quite a move. **My call to feasting on God's word and fasting for unity in the church was confirmed Thursday at that pastor peer meeting** with Larissa Moore's question: "Are the leaders of the Mennonite Church fasting or are they spiritually indecisive and luke-warm?" Her elderess told us how hard it was for her, a tiny woman, to take her pastor's plea- her clarion call-to fast. She then told about how both her parents, estranged from the church for literally 40-some years, had come back into the fellowship. We were deeply moved. It all started when the entire church fasted.

Pastor Larissa requires her people to fast, and especially anyone in a leadership position. Jesus said not "If you fast..." he said, "*When* you fast"...I am a baby, I will admit it. I have to journal , write poetry, drink hot water to get through skipping two meals. Yet when I read how Jesus carved out time- a "forty days LONG time- to retreat for fasting and reflection, I think, "How can I say I am his follower without using this pattern?" I cannot.

Jean Baptist Vienney said, "The devil only tempts those who wish to abandon their wrongdoing, those who are in a state of grace. The others belong to him; he has no need to tempt them."

The sermon title this morning started out to be "Tempting or Testing", talking about Jesus' time in the dessert, when his shadow self (or some prefer to call it God's Enemy, Satan-- tempts the Lord in three ways. But as I studied and prayed about you, this beloved group of people in front of me, it became clear that I needed to address **how Jesus feasted and how Jesus fasted**. I decided that it was much more important to talk about what we DO in order to position ourselves for the love and grace of God to be imparted to us. Sometimes it is more than just her (point to mind) or even here (point to heart). Sometimes we have to change what we do.

Fasting .....Jesus went into the desert with humility and with secrecy. He was alone. On purpose. He did not announce it.

1. It starts with humility and secrecy on an individual level.. In Matthew 6: 16-18 Jesus says, “Moreover **when** you fast (not if), be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they distort their faces and that all may know they are fasting. This is their only reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head (comb your hair, in other words, wash your face. So that you fast unto your Father God, who sees what you do in secret...”

Ezra 10:6 reads “...he ate no bread nor drank water: for he mourned because of the transgression.

2. Corporate fasting is powerful! Examples are the people of Nineveh fasting and changing God’s mind! In Esther 4: 16, she orders “To, gather together all the Jews and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day...” complete fasting as a body. There is room for both individual as well be called to a corporate fasting. Perhaps the Council will discern that Summit is called to a corporate fast for the future of the Ohio conference. In this troubled family of ours, this would be very appropriate!

Perhaps like Ezra, we need to proclaim a fast...that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our existence.” (Ezra 8:21-23.)

Jesus did not check his schedule and go out on the mountain, five minutes from his home. No, he sought out the desert. He decided to go there. Mark says that the Holy Spirit DROVE him into the desert. But Jesus was coming down from the high he had experienced at his baptism. He heard voices! “This is my beloved Son!” He was a new person and before he could be the person God had called him to be, he had to experience the desert!

“Forty days” in scriptures is a phrase used for “a long time”. It was used in the Old Testament to describe the horribly long and awful time of Noah, with his family and all those dirty animals on a ship that floated for what

seemed forever. They were sole survivors in a world catastrophe. The first thing Noah does after this experience is to go out and get drunk. One could hardly blame him.

Forty days was also used to describe Jesus' time of temptation, his engagement with his "shadow self", in language of today.

If you, fast, either partially or fully, either individually or corporately, you will meet your Shadow self. Later in Lent, we will explore darkness in the best sense of that word, but for today, let us open ourselves to the possibility of doing battle with our dark side, the Darth Vader within all of us, if you will. And Jesus met this darkness in the desert of fasting. And so will you.

Jesus' ministry started out with a mountain-top experience. The only two times we read of the actual sound of the voice of the Divine is 1) at Jesus' Baptism (This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased) and at the transfiguration (This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.)

We, too, many of us, have experienced our own baptisms as glorious, our own beginnings in faith as awesome, marked well in our memories. But then our shadow selves- some speak of this false self as Satan-God's enemy, our sinful self. I like to think of it as the dark shadow.

I introduced a metaphor last Wednesday night. Life is like a shadow. Psychologists like to say that we have two selves- our true selves and our false selves. Paul likened the false self to the things of the flesh, and our true and eternal soul-self as our spiritual or true self. In I Cor. 9:27, Paul tells us that it may be profitable for a season for us to exercise severe discipline, to "keep under my body, and bring it into subjection". Denying the flesh of its natural desires may cause us to be more "in tune" to hear the voice of the Lord (Deut. 9:18, 25), but it also places us in a realm more easily prone to the attack of the enemy. Make sure your fasting is not just for your own "good", but for the glory of God. Make sure you are listening when you fast.

If you want to do battle with your false self- with the flesh, what I call my “spoiled toddler self”, fast. From food. If I skip even one meal, my stomach- the toddler- will scream and cry- and if I deprive myself of two meals, my spoiled flesh will throw a tantrum. It is precisely here- when we confront our fleshly desires- our idols of American comfort, instant everything and security—that others of all ages who are deprived of food because of political and economic struggle around the world--- these will come to mind and then we will pray like we have never prayed before. It is growing in our solidarity with “the other”—people inside and outside the Christian faith—that we have the opportunity to see with the eyes of Christ.

Perhaps you are in circumstances that are painful and hard, perhaps you are the victim of poverty or find it hard to do anything else but stay in the rut you find yourself. Fast and pray. Make time for God. He is faithful. Remember, however, that fasting is not an infallible means fo getting what we want from God.

I am calling Summit Mennonite to be a church of fasting and prayer for this next month. Make March 2015 the month that marks a new time of discipline so that God is freed to act in your life, and in the lives of those for whom you fast and pray. Take this step. Choose your fast and then stick to it. But please, don't put it on Facebook or Twitter or Pinterest. Let it be before you and the Lord.

This Lent let time be your gift with the One you say you follow. And learn to listen as you spend time feasting on the Word and fasting from activity. Learn patience. Take tim

Shane Claiborne writes: In a world filled with clutter, noise, and hustle, Lent is a good excuse to step back and rethink how we think and live. In a world of instant gratification, it's a chance to practice delayed gratification – to fast -- so that we can truly appreciate the blessings we have. In a world where

virtual friends are replacing real ones, it is an invitation to turn off TV and computer screens so we can spend time with real people again.

So consider taking the invitation this Lent to “repent” – to rethink how we think and live. One friend told me his Lenten commitment was not to spend a single dollar these 40 days. Another woman said she was giving up gasoline, only driving one day a week. Others of us may take up smaller commitments – giving up sweets, alcohol, caffeine or meat.

One of my friends who talks a lot decided to spend time in disciplined silence. Another friend of mine, who is a hermit, committed to get out a little more and be social. So there isn't an anecdote, but there is an invitation -- an excuse – to try something new. Some folks may choose to not only give up something, but to take on something new – to exercise, read, learn a new craft, or pray. So whether it is giving up an old bad habit or taking on a new holy habit... May we each use this Lenten season as an excuse to do something that empties us of ourselves so that our lives make better music.

This is the first Sunday of Lent. We associate these 40 days with self-examination and change in our readying ourselves for glorious Easter Sunday, which happens this year on April 5<sup>th</sup>. On Wednesday we feasted, but now I challenge you to think of what you will fast from in the next weeks: meat, sweets, TV, busyness. Whatever it is, I don't want you to post about it on Facebook. I ask that what you choose to bring you closer to the Spirit of God in your life be between you and God. Only. Choose something that is sucking the life out of us so that we can be filled with God, with life, with love again.