

ASH WEDNESDAY 2017
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach VA 23452

I want to do something different this year and spend a few moments looking at the passage from Isaiah. The issue of fasting and how to make a proper fast predates Jesus by quite a long period of time. This is a similar passage to our gospel in regards to fasting but here the prophet gives us specific things not to do as well as what a proper fast should look like.

First of all I want to look at the issue of fasting as a Lenten discipline. People often talk about what they will give up for Lent. Chocolate, meat, and this year lots of people giving up Facebook, which I find very interesting is that all are things that one might choose to abstain from. The question is what will giving up a particular food or activity accomplish? Why fast, what is the purpose?

I read an article by Pope Francis on the subject of fasting about two weeks ago. He wrote, that a fast is not something you do to benefit yourself. Things like giving up chocolate, meat, and alcohol are all good things to do, but how do they change the world? Fasting only makes a difference if it changes you and then causes you to act differently.

In the ancient church fasting was a sign of penitence and repentance. Remember the words that open this service. This was a time of reconciliation of those who had sinned and one of preparation for those about to be baptized at the best service of the year, the Easter Vigil. This was to be a time of discipline and introspection hopefully to prepare us for the joy of Easter. That is why the ashes for tonight which from the time of the Old Testament are a sign of mourning and repentance. All of this was to help us grow and deepen our faith. So now what about this passage from Isaiah?

There are three authors presented in the book of Isaiah and this is from the author known as Third Isaiah. The time period marks the end of the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the second temple. Cyrus has freed the members of the nation of Israel who were taken off to Babylon and now it is time to rebuild the Solomon's temple and restore all of the worship practices. Third Isaiah has the challenge of getting his people excited about leaving Babylon, one of the most luxurious cities at the time and returning to Jerusalem which is still basically destroyed. Everything has to be rebuilt including worship and a significant part of worship in the temple is the practice of fasting.

At the heart of this is something we can all identify with, a debate about what is proper in worship. Obviously the prophet is addressing a problem in the community. The problem being people who are doing their religion strictly for their own good with no sense of community. When you start to pull this passage

apart you see that this is not much different than what is going on today so we see here a very old story.

Listen to the translation from the Message, which as usual helps put this in our language.

- 2 They're busy, busy, busy at worship,
and love studying all about me.
To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—
law-abiding, God-honoring.
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'
and love having me on their side.
- 3 But they also complain,
'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

So the people are doing what they think will earn them the favor and attention of God, but the prophet says not so fast. I found in particular the line about they love having me on their side of great interest. Does that sound like some people and groups today? The prophet counters these pleas with a list of the type of fast that he says God desires.

- Is. 58:6 "This is the kind of fast day I'm after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.
- 7 What I'm interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
being available to your own families.
- 8 Do this and the lights will turn on,
and your lives will turn around at once.
Your righteousness will pave your way.
The GOD of glory will secure your passage.
- 9 Then when you pray, GOD will answer.
You'll call out for help and I'll say, 'Here I am.'

This is a clarion call to action to be truly faithful and in every respect of the true meaning of the word righteous. In ancient Hebrew righteous means one who is right with God, not merely right. This is about a right relationship and that only happens when we acknowledge those things we do which destroy our relationship with God and with each other.

You see fasting, worship that doesn't transform us really is of little use. I found a cartoon that had a vestry sitting around a table and the prayer was, "We're hoping you'll lead us on a journey of transformation without requiring any real changes." Religion that is just a ritual and not transformative is dead. God desires that we allow God to make a difference in our lives.

The bottom line is whatever fast you decide on if there is nothing that really changes, if there is nothing that asks you to be transformed, to go about life differently, then it is a wasted effort. Here is a fast that also involves a feast and if we really live this we, and the whole world will all be better for it.

So here is a list of Pope Francis of fasts and their alternatives.

Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
Fast from anger and be filled with patience
Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope
Fast from worries and have trust in God
Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity
Fast from pressures and be prayerful
Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
Fast from Selfishness and be compassionate to others
Fast from grudges and be reconciled
Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.