

Sermon on fasting

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Sunday 4 March 2018, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Christchurch

Daniel 9:1-6, 17-23

Matthew 5:1-12

In our series on spiritual disciplines we come today to the practice of fasting. I am quoting frequently this morning from Lynne Baab, who was until recently part of the teaching team at Knox College and Otago University, and who writes beautifully about deepening our faith. She was also Anne's PhD supervisor. She writes

Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time for a spiritual purpose, the primary purpose of Christian fasting is not to change habits, confront addictions, or even to lose weight. A Christian fast comes from the desire to draw near to God, pure and simple. Fasting can give insights into how we can live a life more centered in a relationship with Jesus. Nurturing that central relationship is the main point of Christian fasting.

Fasting has a long and rich tradition, frequently mentioned in the Bible, and is practiced in most Christian churches, and several other faiths, around the world.

Our bible story this morning from Daniel is a wonderful example. Let's look at the story from Daniel 9. You might like to find it in your pew Bible.

Daniel is a fabulous little book. We know it most famously for the incident with the lions, of course. Nearly 6 centuries before Jesus Israel was invaded by the Babylonian army. Much was destroyed, and many Israelite people were taken into captivity in Babylon. Some of these Israelite people, including a bright young man called Daniel, were taken into the royal court. The king of Babylon collected treasures, knowledge and people from all his conquered nations. What a library he had, and a vast treasure store. Daniel wasn't just a palace waiter or a cleaner. The king realised that Daniel's administrative talents could be put to good use, and then that Daniel had spiritual gifts of insight and prophecy. So Daniel had a high appointment, close to the king, in fact a series of Kings as Daniel managed to outlive first the dreaded Nebuchanezzar, then his somewhat less competent son Beshazzar, then the Median Darius who assassinated Beshazzar and grabbed the throne, who then managed to lose the entire empire to the Persian king Cyrus, who assisted the Israelite people to return to their homeland. In the midst of this swirl of empires, power, violence and astonishing wealth, Daniel somehow kept his position and played a significant role in enabling the rebuilding of Israel.

A very important person then, Daniel, not just a lion tamer. What astonishes me is how Daniel kept alive both his faith in the Lord God and his passion for his homeland, despite being surrounded by all the trinkets, priviledges, delights and delicacies of the Babylonian palace. He could not have done it without prayer and fasting.

Even with all the feasts and abundance of Babylon, Daniel went hungry. He chose to, no one made him. Why? Why go hungry, even for a few hours, when you don't have to?

9:3: ³ Then I turned to the Lord God, to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. ⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, ,

Lynne Baab claims:

Fasting clears our minds, opens our hearts, and enables us to see Jesus more vividly. God's voice and God's call are more understandable and unhindered. We pray in new ways and with renewed power.

Fasting takes us back to solid ground

My own experience of fasting is that it clears away the clutter. There's something about letting yourself get really hungry that takes you back to basics:

For Daniel this took him back to the realisation that

Daniel 9:18 – not because we are righteous but because you are a God of great mercy

Remember, Daniel is in a highly esteemed position in what is at that time the greatest empire on earth. This insight, that we don't actually have anything of value in our own right, would not have been immediately obvious in Daniel's world. Only by pushing through all the trappings could he touch base with what is really true.

Lynne Baab: As the encouragement to consumerism and consumption continues to ramp up, Jesus is calling his followers to find ways to step aside from the values of our culture and draw near to him. Fasting, both alone and in community, offers a way to make that step.

Fasting is uncomfortable

It confronts our need for comfort and makes blatantly obvious all the things we reach for to fill us up. Let yourself be hungry. Let yourself be uncomfortable

let yourself face directly the unpleasant things in your life and in our world

5 – we have rebelled, we are covered in shame

Daniel grieves for what is broken and in ruins

he himself is living in comfort and wealth in Babylon, in the fabulous royal court and yet he prays in discomfort for his homeland

My practice is to sometimes, not always, fast for part of my days off. I often get to a Monday knowing my need to deeply rest. I often find that resting is not as pleasant an experience as you expect it to be.

Lynne Baab writes: "The goal of life isn't to eliminate pain in our lives or to find ever new ways of distracting ourselves from it. It is to be able to endure it with wisdom and gentleness, to realize all of us are vulnerable to loss and grief, and to help one another bear these burdens."

Fasting is surprising

Daniel had an angel come, and the message was kind of cryptic. If you keep reading to the end of the chapter it's hard to understand, but it's certainly dramatic. Fasting often is not dramatic. It can be just slightly unpleasant, but often it is helpful.

Fasting is space outside of normal routine, which gives God room to speak in unpredictable ways.

Lynne Baab: "Eliminating an aspect of everyday life for a period of time usually results in something unexpected. Choosing freedom from habitual actions makes space for God to act in unforeseen, profound and sometimes amusing ways."

For me fasting makes me more aware of little surendipidies, someone I might meet in the street. It enhances my perception of ordinary things, like the taste of coffee or the feel of a leaf.

Fasting enhances prayer

not because it's a magic formula, but because it makes us more intentional about prayer.

Prayer is not more effective when we pray when we are hungry, but the decision to step outside of normal routines helps us focus on God and hear what God may be saying.

Many people do experience a new kind of confidence in their prayer, especially when there are hard things to pray about. Daniel heard this wonderful message from the angel:

As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, for you are highly esteemed. (9:23)

God does answer us as soon as we begin to pray, and God does give answers, for you are highly treasured in God's sight

Fasting is easier than you think, and it is good for you

Start small. Pick one meal to go without, or one kind of food to choose not to eat. See how your body reacts.

Lynne Baab: Questions to get you started:

- Would you like to have more time and focus for prayer and reading the Bible? Choose one meal to give up and spend the time that you'd normally spend preparing, eating and cleaning up, just resting with God.
- Do you have something in your life that feels like an addiction? If so, consider giving it up for a period of time and pray about the place of that activity in your life.
- Would you like to be able to give money to someone in need? If so, consider fasting from expensive food treats, coffee drinks, shopping or paid entertainment for a period of time. Give away the money saved and spend time praying for the person in need.
- Are you diabetic, had an eating disorder, or need to eat with medications? Then fast from one food item, such as coffee, meat or sugar, or fast from something other than food such as media, shopping, electronic devices, etc.

Our worship today is focusing especially on the beatitudes, and my sermon has focused especially on one word – hunger. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Hunger is not just a metaphor, it is a very real experience and not a pleasant one.

Many are hungry and have no choice in the matter. We stand with the poor as we fast.

And so we come to our communion, this symbolic meal in which Jesus Christ himself promises to feed us with his own body and blood. We all come to this table hungry, whether or not we ate breakfast this morning. We all come, hungry and thirsty for righteousness. We all come knowing only our need for God.

We come praying with Daniel:

Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, ⁵ we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances.

We are praying to you because you are merciful, not because we have done right.

As we come to this sacred feast, we come with open hearts to hear God say to us:

As you began to pray an answer was given, a word went out to you, for you are greatly beloved, highly esteemed.