

## Pastor Jon's Ash Wednesday Sermon 2021

In a colleague group I joined recently, the facilitator asked, "How can Lent be meaningful to you this year?" This was a great question. I feel like we have lost touch with the season of Lent in the church.

So instead of giving up chocolate or having fish on Fridays, which in Wisconsin isn't a problem with all the great fish fries, what can we commit to this Lent that draws you closer to God and others?

For example, you could share your bread with the hungry during Lent. This is one of the acceptable fasts that God chooses in Isaiah:58. How could you focus these 40 days on informing yourself about hunger issues in our community or globally and doing something about it? Download the ELCA World Hunger resource: 40 Days of Giving. On ELCA.org

In our First Reading, the prophet Isaiah proclaims acceptable results of fasting from God:

To loose the bonds of injustice

To undo the thongs of the yoke

To let the oppressed go free

To break every yoke

To share your bread with the hungry

To bring the homeless poor into your house

To clothe the naked

To refrain from pointing the finger at others

To stop speaking evil about others

To welcome those turned away by their relatives

To satisfy the needs of the afflicted

How many of you have thought of being intentional about adopting one of these practices during Lent? My guess is you

probably haven't thought that far ahead as you are just hearing them now.

The prophet Isaiah isn't telling the religious people not to fast, but to fast with the purpose of reflecting on the injustices happening around you. If something is hurting your heart about a group of people, think on that, pray on it, fast for it. In fact, the Israelites, who just returned from exile in Babylon, knew slavery, knew hunger, knew grief and were troubled by the ineffectiveness of their fasts since coming home. They were hyper correct in how they did their religious observances. But God reminds them through the prophet that outward religious observances are no substitute for genuine fasting that results in acts of kindness and justice. They were missing the essential point of fasting... God's compassionate kindness and justice. So during Lent, maybe you could practice kindness for 40 Days.

Isaiah, as a prophet, was fed up with people just going through the motions on their fast day... a day where they would sound a trumpet, dress in sackcloth and ashes, and disfigure themselves. They would look the part religiously, but then to turn around and look to their own interests the rest of the week. Isaiah gives the example of a business owner who fasted one day, but would oppress their workers for financial gain the next. Or to quarrel and fight or hit people with a wicked fist after your fast day.

Lent is a time to reflect on our own sinfulness, mortality, and vulnerability. We say, remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. We are reminded that we don't have unlimited time to repent, or forgive, or say I love you, or to give thanks. Now is the time.

But keep in mind during Lent that we are heading to the cross of Jesus and Easter. We are not going to get it just right during now or never. We will mess up every day, like we confessed in our confession today. But God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love gets it right for us in Jesus Christ. As baptized children of God, we are forgiven daily, and called to try again.

Church isn't something that happens in a vacuum, but a community that moves us toward God's kindness and justice. We aren't just practicing our spirituality so we can go to heaven. Although that is one part of it, but it is to have deep concern about our neighbors... especially those in need or who are hurting.

The book of James says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." James 1:27

May your Lenten Journey take on new meaning this year. How will you be intentional about Lent?

Amen