

NOT BY BREAD ALONE
Deuteronomy 9:9-12, 15-19; Matthew 4:1-11
First Mennonite Church
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Today we are back in the desert wilderness. We encountered the Hebrew people there several Sundays ago when we examined the manna story in Exodus 16. The people had only recently come out of slavery in Egypt and were adjusting to the challenges of the desert. You may remember that the word “manna” comes from the Hebrew phrase *mān hû*, “what is it”? Manna was strange food, not only because it was unfamiliar but also because it signaled a new economy, one based on sharing God’s gift of bread for today and trusting in God provision of bread for tomorrow. The bread of heaven served as an object lesson, one of multiple instances of wilderness teaching and testing designed to prepare the Israelites for life in the Promised Land.

Decades pass in nomadic wandering. Finally, the Israelites camp east of the Jordan River. Soon they will cross the Jordan into the land of milk and honey. Moses, who has been their leader through liberation and peoplehood formation, will not be crossing the river with them. Knowing that his death is imminent, Moses delivers a very l-o-n-g sermon (don’t worry, I’m not taking my cue from him!). He addresses the people with the imperative to *remember and never forget*.

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ sermon on remembering God’s faithfulness and keeping God’s covenant commandments. In the Hebrew Bible, it is referred to as the book of “the words,” a fitting title given that the commandments are understood as words from God. In chapter 9, as we heard read, the focus is on the formal conveyance of the Ten Commandments. The writing on the stone tablets formalizes the covenant relationship that God has already initiated with the people. God calls Moses up the mountain and for forty days and forty nights, Moses waits upon the LORD while the stone tablets are prepared and he receives further instruction. In the holy Presence, Moses abstains from food and drink. Emptying himself, Moses creates a space for God’s Word so that when he carries the stone tablets back down the mountain, he does so relying on spiritual rather than physical strength.

In re-telling the manna story just a few paragraphs earlier, Moses has stressed the humbling recognition that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3b). At Mt. Sinai, he reinforces this lesson with his own extended fast. While Moses is fasting on the mountain, the Israelites reveal the shallowness of their loyalty to God. The people are so insecure that they cannot tolerate the absence of Moses and the uncertainty of their wilderness existence. They seek a concrete image of security and create a golden calf to which they sacrifice and in whose presence they “sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel” (Exodus 32:6b). Thus, the people stubbornly rebel against the words God has spoken, foremost among them the commandment to worship and serve no other gods. While Moses fasts and orients himself totally to God, the people feast and put their trust in the material world. They break the covenant, even as it is being inscribed on the tablets. In contemporary lingo, the ink isn’t yet dry on the contract, when it is breached.

The brokenness is dramatized by Moses smashing the tablets when he observes their sinful behavior. Back up the mountain Moses then trudges, to prostrate himself before God, fasting for another forty days and forty nights, in intercessory prayer on behalf of the people. The LORD heeds Moses' petition, the tablets are recreated, and the wilderness journey continues.

Not by bread alone. Do not put God to the test. Serve no other gods. These are the same challenges placed before Jesus during his time of testing in the wilderness. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River and has heard himself named by God as "my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Before he takes up his ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness to fast and pray. Ched Myers describes this as Jesus' vision quest, a pattern recognizable from the cultures of indigenous peoples as a "ritual passage into selfhood:" "This is both a very real *exterior* adventure beyond the margins of society and an *interior* passage of cleansing." It is also a "sojourn through mythic time, in order to encounter the story and destiny of one's self and one's people."¹

Jesus retreats from the rhythms of everyday life to wrestle with his demons—or as the Gospels frame it, with Satan. He is preparing for the rigors and choices that lie ahead. While on this strenuous, solitary retreat, Jesus re-visits the wilderness testing of the Israelites. He enters into the collective memory of God's saving work and economy of grace by *embodying* the desert experience. I've been to the mountain where tradition says Jesus was tempted. From it, you can look to the east and see the Jordan River and beyond it Mt. Nebo where God showed Moses the Promised Land before he died. On site, the connections with the Moses story really come alive.

Like Moses, Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. Like Moses, he draws spiritual strength from physical vulnerability. Like the refugees from Egypt, Jesus experiences hunger in the extreme and like them, he is fed by bread from heaven (food provided by the angels, v. 11). Most importantly, like Moses and in contrast to the people, Jesus remembers and holds fast to the Word of God. He quotes Deuteronomy three times in response to the Tempter. He remembers the lesson of manna. He remembers the commandments. He does not forget the warning to remain humble and give God the glory. He does not succumb to the seductions of wealth and power.

Jesus passes the test in the wilderness, having squarely faced his temptations and demonstrated his trust in God with unwavering loyalty. Jesus precedes to model, in his ministry and in his death, a thoroughgoing obedience to God. Along the way, he continues to nurture an intimate relationship with his Father in heaven through solitary prayer and fasting.

Even as bread is essential to life, even as we celebrate God's provision of bread and acknowledge the central place of table fellowship in Jesus' ministry, we recognize that bread alone does not suffice. In fact, too much bread, in the sense of an always satiated appetite or excessive material possessions, can dull our spiritual appetites, causing us to forget where our ultimate loyalties lie. This is one reason people of faith through the ages have found fasting to be a useful discipline.

¹ Ched Myers, "'Led by the Spirit into the Wilderness...' Reflections on Lent, Jesus' Temptations and Indigeneity," 2003, accessible on http://miketodd.typepad.com/waving_or_drowning/files/LedbytheSpirit.pdf, p. 5.

In Jesus' day, fasting was regularly practiced in conjunction with Jewish holy days and also as a complement to prayer. Jesus instructs his followers how to fast in Matthew 6, immediately after he teaches them the Lord's Prayer. First he critiques the hypocrites who cover their faces with ashes while they fast; then Jesus says, "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 6:17-18). In other words, fasting ought not to be done for show or social reasons, but rather to strengthen our relationship with God. How fitting that Jesus next urges us not to store up treasures on earth but rather treasures in heaven: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). In this regard, devotional writer Andrew Murray helpfully notes, "Prayer grasps the power of heaven, and fasting loosens the hold on earthly pleasure."²

A recent book about fasting and the Christian life offers this definition: "Christian fasting is the voluntary denial of something for a specific time, for a spiritual purpose, by an individual, family, community or nation."³ Note that the definition leaves open the possibility of many types of fasts. Author Lynne Baar points out, "Today Christians fast from TV and news media, email and other kinds of technology, shopping, novels, music and using the car, in addition to various kinds of food fasts."⁴ I know several people who have committed to regular technology fasts—for example, designating one weekend a month as computer-free.

My own experience with fasting goes back only a few years. While at seminary, I began practicing a weekly fast from solid food. I had previously been nervous about fasting, partly because of a schedule filled with travel and stress and partly because of my metabolism which has required regular food in order to ward off light-headedness. But the experience of participating in a centering prayer group on a fasting stomach suggested to me that an intentional awareness of hunger enhanced my spiritual longing and openness. So I decided to experiment further and found a compatible format in the 24-hour juice fast. In November 2005, I wrote in one of my class journals: "I held the consciousness of the fasting on two levels: as a physical reminder of the frequency with which I typically drink coffee, nibble snacks, and otherwise enjoy food and as a spiritual discipline that helped me focus on the plight of the poor and hungry and on the true Bread of Life." I began fasting each Friday and found that my attentiveness to God and God's shalom justice was clearly enhanced by the experience.

I hasten to state that not everyone can or should attempt to fast from food. Various physical and emotional conditions make it dangerous to one's health to forego regular quantities and types of nutrition. And fasting must absolutely *not* be confused with weight-loss strategies or body image concerns. For those for whom some form of food fasting might be feasible, remember that there are a wide range of options, including foregoing a favorite item and the vegetable-only diet known as the Daniel fast (see Daniel 1).

Since I arrived at FMC in May, my fasting discipline has been erratic at best. I'm preaching this sermon today in good measure for myself, as a call to return to a fasting routine. In the midst of

² Andrew Murray, *God's Best Secrets* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 1998), p. 33.

³ Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom Beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

busy lives, encumbered by things and things-to-do, fasting creates a bit of empty space for remembering God and allowing God to work in and through us.

The Book of Deuteronomy is all about remembering the lessons of the desert. Jesus' time in the wilderness is likewise about remembering those same lessons of allegiance. We might think of a fasting routine as an internal spiritual retreat to the desert. Each unreflective reach for the computer mouse or television remote or cookie jar is instead met with the thought, "not by bread alone." Each minute not spent online or fixing lunch is a minute that can be spent in prayer.

Fasting frees us up and slows us down. Fasting helps us have a mellow, grateful heart.⁵ I like the way Norman Shawchuck frames this petition: "Reach down inside me now, O God, and change the gears that race and roar. In place of turmoil give me peace; in place of frenzy give me patience. Then shall I be more like Jesus, who taught us to make room for you in our hectic days."⁶

Finally, "fasting gives us the freedom to feast."⁷ We do not want to be so stuffed with Wonder Bread that we turn down the invitation to Christ's banquet table.

Remembering that we do not live by bread alone, we are ready to feast on the true bread, the Bread of Life.

⁵ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) , p. 67.

⁶Norman Shawchuck & Rueben P. Job, eds., *A Guide to Prayer for All who Seek God* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), p. 342.

⁷ Baab, p. 141.