

“A Fast Life”

Isaiah 58:3-9

(A prophetic discussion on fasting.)

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“Fast” means at least two things.

One meaning applies to the length of time it takes for something to occur. For example, molasses pours at 0.0001 mph,¹ lightning strikes at 100,000 mph, Apolo Ohno skates at 25 mph, Lindsey Vonn skies at 80 mph.

Would you *prefer* that molasses pour at the rate of lightning? Think about the mess that could create. I do think it would be good for speeding bullets, which go at 1,100 mph, to travel at the rate of a snail, 0.03 mph. That would save many lives!

If you don't like to eat jell-o as a snack, because it goes down too fast, try beef jerky.

If golf is just too slow for you, try NASCAR racing!

Things have a speed, a rate of movement *all their own*. Their “right” speed, their optimal range is unique; it is absurd, isn't it, to consider things going at *rates not their own*.

The prophet Isaiah talked about a “fast,” referring to a second meaning of the term, a meaning of “fast” which is most relevant for us on this first Sunday of Lent. Isaiah points out what Jesus said centuries later: “fasting” should not be done to show off.

The Message is a “translation” of the Bible that tries to communicate in contemporary language. *The Message*'s translation of this passage is really quite nice. God says, “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. What I'm [it's still God speaking] 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. Do this and the lights will turn on, and your lives will turn around at once.”

Most of us know that our Judeo-Christian tradition includes recommendations to “fast” occasionally. In addition, most of us know that prophets in the Hebrew Bible as well as Jesus said that the most important thing to do is to work for justice, to help people. What surprised me as I dwelled with this passage is that the prophet Isaiah actually calls doing justice and helping people the best kind of “fast”!

When we bring items for hygiene kits or bags of food to give away, does it seem to us that we are “fasting”? When we give to those in Haiti or Mexico who were traumatized by recent natural catastrophes, do we think of ourselves as “fasting”? If we join with Karen Flippin's hospital ministry to visit people regularly at Redlands Community Hospital, do we consider that a “fast”? When we go to our children's or grandchildren's or our parents' performances or games, do we think of that family-supportiveness as “fasting”? Prior to meditating on this passage, I would not have considered these behaviors “fasts.”

According to Prophet Isaiah's understanding of “fasting,” a good deal of what we call “politics” is fasting—because for Isaiah religious fasting relates to what people do in

workplaces to bring justice even to the realm of economics. We may have various opinions about *how* to implement justice; therefore we may hold different political views—but the concerns are deeply religious, spiritual.

The Message translation finishes this biblical passage this way, with God speaking: If we “get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people’s sins. . .” God promises us “**A full life in the Emptiest of Places.**” Isn’t that great way of saying it? God visualizes for us, having “a full life in our emptiest places.”

Surprising events may occur during Lent. I vividly recall the first week of Lent, just two years ago. I met with a 23-year-old young woman who had telephoned me at church to ask whether we might visit over coffee. She didn’t attend church there, for she lived in LA; however, her grandparents had been active in our church for years. We met at a nearby coffee shop, but when I asked about buying her a cup of coffee, she said, “No thanks, I’m fasting.”

I inquired, “How long, for today?”

No, she said, “for a week.” She was not eating food for an entire week; she was simply drinking juice.

She explained that she was fasting as part of a Christian community of young adults called the Faith/Activism Collective. They were fasting during Lent with several purposes. Primarily, she said, they were fasting two years ago to honor immigrant families in L.A., struggling to understand their situations, hoping to become more connected with all immigrants, and the whole broader humanity of this world.²

When I drank my coffee while she drank her juice, she was on the first day of her fast. She spoke of how the fast would be both a spiritual and a physical cleansing. She wanted to rejuvenate her soul, to get toxins out of her body, and even to lose weight.

I talked with this young woman again four days later, and I noted that she had a somewhat different mood by the fourth day of her fast. She said that she would have ended the fast by then if she had been doing it for her own good, or doing it alone. She had terrible pain—hunger pain and a massive headache. She had asked herself, “Why am I doing this to myself?” “‘Starving’ myself is not a way to get thin or to cleanse my bloodstream of toxins . . .” Then it hit her...She realized that if she were sacrificing something as important as food in order to better *herself* in some way, she had tremendous trouble doing it. However, because she was sacrificing for *something bigger than herself*, to understand and connect with a people she cared about, it became possible.

I admit I had been self-absorbed--“hubris” is the theological term. I had thought that this woman wanted to “have coffee with me” to ask something *of me*, something that I in my wisdom or with my position could offer her (advice on some matter, or at least permission to use one of the rooms of the church for a meeting place). How wrong I was. This 23 year old woman wanted to visit with me *to evoke a change in me; she wanted to give me something, and she definitely did.*

Personally, I am very bad at fasting from food. I tried fasting, especially when I was in my twenties, but I am simply not willing to suffer hunger on purpose. I prefer a spiritual discipline I learned when one of my seminary classes took a field trip to a Zen monastery. We were told that the monks ate until they were 7/8th full at every meal. I’d much rather eat every meal almost full than to have some mealtimes with zero food.

There are different kinds of fasts: A weeklong fast by young adult Christians in solidarity with L.A. immigrant families; Zen monks eating until they are 7/8 full to gain personal discipline and focus; the Islamic month-long fast called Ramadan, during which Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours. These different types of fasts all seek to make us more focused on what is important.

You and I go at our own speeds, when we walk, or talk, or eat. Some of us eat faster, talk slower. Sometimes, we realize that *the speed that we have gotten into a habit of is not the very best for others or us*. **We search for our own best pace.** Some of us look and act like bunnies—running all around with great speed; we would be better to give more pensive thought to what we are doing, and that may mean moving more slowly. On the other hand, some of us procrastinate, we move so slowly towards something we feel called to do, that our progress looks a lot like what my mother-in-law used to call molasses in January.

When I was about the age of the woman who invited me for coffee only to drink juice, I was impatient to become a minister or a math teacher; I was in a hurry to “help people.” To keep perspective, I carried a piece of paper with a quote around with me that finally wore out from my frequent reading. The quote advised walking between these two extremes: “Frustrated Sentimentality” and “Educated Irresponsibility.” That is, we can be sentimental about something, we can want to help, but if we are not prepared, we might make wrong assumptions, we might be naïve, so that what we think are helping actions may even be counter productive. If we have sentimental passion for others, we must take time to get training. However, once we are trained, educated, we need to beware of “educated irresponsibility.” That is, we may know a lot, but lose touch with our passion to act! We need the sentimentality, the passion to act AND to be educated, trained.

The reason the young woman wanted to have “coffee” with me the first week of Lent was to ask me what societal issues mattered a great deal *to me*. Two years ago my immediate answer to her was, “gun control, capital punishment, prison reform, and immigration . . .” All those involve violence that is skewed toward the poor and unevenly across ethnic groups. As I named these issues to this young woman, I realized that I was not working very “fast” on any of those concerns. Today I still am doing very little in these social justice areas. I tend to promise myself that I will deal with these justice issues when I slow down in the life cycle we call “retirement.” However, if I am not putting my action where my heart is now, how do I know I will later? And, I don’t want to idealize some time in the future when I imagine I will have time that I can’t seem to find today. Can or should I act faster, or am I being realistic about the present? Should I accept limitations now and hang on to commitment?

Remember that *The Message* translation of Isaiah’s passage includes, along with sharing food with the hungry, “being available to your own families.” A spiritual life, a religious commitment to justice and joy for all is not just a call to care for those whom we barely know; it is a permission-giving and even a *call* to be with those nearby, and even to care for ourselves.

Both meanings of the word “FAST” come together with these 2 questions:

“What do I need to ‘fast’ from in order to get going ‘faster’ with what I am called to do?”

“What do I need to ‘slow down’ on in order to be able to ‘fast,’ that is, to focus upon people’s needs, including family and even self?”

All rolled into one question, we might ask ourselves: **“What do I need to stop doing or start doing so that I slow down or go faster in order to find my own wise pace?”**

At particular moments in their lives, there is a best speed for turtles, skiers, skaters, and ourselves.

I have found it very helpful to answer all these questions not just for today, or for this Lenten period, but also within a time frame of *decades*.

All of us can “fast” as the prophet Isaiah names so boldly. While young adults may join in community fasts in solidarity with others to change the world, as our youth are doing soon on their 30 hr fast to support World Vision, parents of young children may decide that their ‘fasting’ is just getting through the day (sane), and those in mid-years look at their employment, asking whether their work is a kind of “fast,” whether it is helping the world or not, and those who are post-employment invest their “fasting” toward avenues that they feel called to pursue, whether or not those have any semblance to their actions of earlier decades. In a sense, we are all called to discernment and wisdom, to decide how to be patient, with ourselves and others, *and also* called to action, too. In *any* year of our life, on any day of our life, we need discernment to find the pace, even for fasting, that is right for us.

¹ These “speed” statistics are from “How Fast?” AARP Magazine, September & October 2006, 121.

² Progressive Christians Uniting OC Newsletter, Thursday, February 28, 2008 by Erin Weller