

Psalm 91

91 Living in the Most High's shelter,
camping in the Almighty's^[a] shade,
2 I say to the LORD, "You are my refuge, my stronghold!
You are my God—the one I trust!"
9 Because you've made the LORD my refuge,
the Most High, your place of residence—
10 no evil will happen to you;
no disease will come close to your tent.
11 Because he will order his messengers to help you,
to protect you wherever you go.
12 They will carry you with their own hands
so you don't bruise your foot on a stone.
13 You'll march on top of lions and vipers;
you'll trample young lions and serpents underfoot.
14 God says,^[a] "Because you are devoted to me,
I'll rescue you.
I'll protect you because you know my name.
15 Whenever you cry out to me, I'll answer.
I'll be with you in troubling times.
I'll save you and glorify you.
16 I'll fill you full with old age.
I'll show you my salvation."

Romans 10:8-13

⁸ But what does it say? *The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*^[a] (that is, the message of faith that we preach). ⁹ Because if you confess with your mouth "Jesus is Lord" and in your heart you have faith that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ Trusting with the heart leads to righteousness, and confessing with the mouth leads to salvation. ¹¹ The scripture says, *All who have faith in him won't be put to shame.*^[b] ¹² There is no distinction between Jew and Greek, because the same Lord is Lord of all, who gives richly to all who call on him. ¹³ *All who call on the Lord's name will be saved.*^[c]

Luke 4

Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. ² There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. ³ The devil said to him, "Since you are God's Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

⁴ Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread.*"^[a]

⁵ Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ The devil said, "I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It's been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. ⁷ Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸ Jesus answered, "It's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*"^[b]

⁹The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰for it's written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you* ¹¹and *they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.* [\[c\]](#)"

¹²Jesus answered, "It's been said, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" [\[d\]](#) ¹³After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

As we gathered for Ash Wednesday this week, we heard the following words as a part of the invitation to Lent: *We are created to experience joy in communion with God, to love one another, and to live in harmony with creation. **But** our sinful rebellion separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, so that we do not enjoy the life our creator intended. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to a discipline that contends against evil and resists whatever leads us away from love of God and neighbor. I invite you, therefore, to the discipline of Lent—self-examination and repentance, prayer and fasting, sacrificial giving and works of love—strengthened by the gifts of word and sacrament. Let us continue our journey through these forty days to the great Three Days of Jesus' death and resurrection.* Those words that call to self examination and repentance, to prayer, to sacrificial giving and works of love beckon to us today as we explore Jesus' fast in the wilderness, and beckon us to consider this: That such disciplines, including fasting, are a part of God's toolkit to turn us away from sin and toward compassion, toward justice, toward mercy, toward love.

Almost immediately, today's Gospel lesson reveals a key aspect of fasting that we often forget, which is this: Fasting is **always** Spirit-led. In other words, if you're fasting for attention or to punish yourself, you're doing it wrong. Neither selfish gain nor self-loathing are a part of true fasting, for the spirit of God guides us into these disciplines of shaping our life around our need of Jesus. It's no accident that our

Lenten readings begin with the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness, on a forty day fast of his own. It's no accident that, at every turn, Jesus refuses to glorify himself in Satan's presence or to loathe his lot in life, to complain as he fasts.

All too often, fasting gets a bad rep, though I can understand why some people don't have much respect for the practice. Fasting in Lent can, at times, seem like someone's just found a good excuse to try out a diet. Jesus and Atkins or Jesus and Beach Body for Lent? Now, don't get me wrong. Giving up chocolate or soda or caffeine or fats or desserts is a good start, but why do we give them up? What's the purpose, what's the intention, that supports the practice? Remember that it wasn't a diet craze, but the Spirit of the Lord, that sent Jesus into the wilderness.

Other people don't like fasting because it becomes so inwardly focused. Have you ever talked to someone who's fasting and couldn't be more proud? Sometimes they just can't wait to tell you that they've given up social media or swearing or shopping sprees. And again, don't get me wrong. Wasting less time on social media, controlling our tongues, and spending less money are all helpful practices, but Jesus didn't head into the wilderness to get credit for his faithfulness, nor to access his rightful place as Lord of the universe. Fasting isn't about earning cool points, or even getting what we deserve, but instead about learning to rely upon God in the midst of temptation, to humbly submit to God's sustenance in the face of the sin's persuasive lure.

I've even seen some Christian writers suggest that we shouldn't fast because the church has a reputation of saying no too often in our culture. We Christians are

often seen as the fun police rather than a community of celebration, dour party poopers rather than joyful people. I agree with these authors that say we Christians say no too often, and too quickly, but the answer here isn't to ignore the Lenten fast. Why?

Because fasting, at its core, provides a poignant practice of faith that connects us more deeply with God. We say no to somethings, often good things, so that we can say yes to something else. Hear that again. In Lent, and at other times in the Christian life, we fast from something – **we learn to say no** – so that there's space for newness in our lives – **we learn to say yes to God in new ways**. We're taking away certain practices in order to make more room for God.

When we connect with God in this way – when we create space for God to graciously invade our lives – fasting provides opportunities for us to connect with our God-given identity, with who God made us to be. When Jesus enters the wilderness and fasts for forty days, he's in a vulnerable state. Making sacrifices in this way not only reveals the vulnerabilities already at work within us, but creates new states of exposure.

For Jesus, the first seems simple enough. Starved after such a long fast, Satan tempts Jesus with the food he doesn't have and with power he does have. Turn this stone to bread. Think about that. In the wilderness, with a forty-day hunger pang in his stomach, food seems unspeakable delightful. As the Son of God, he has the power to change that, to miraculously make bread appear. Yet, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for a purpose, and in this space where Satan temps him, instead God offers comfort that we live on not only bread, but on every word that comes

from the mouth of God. In the fast, Jesus realizes the strength that comes from feasting upon God's word.

Next, Satan seeks Jesus' worship, asks for Jesus' allegiance, and in return promises to give Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the earth. Of course, this authority already belongs to Jesus as God's Son, and yet the temptation is quite real. Accept Satan's offer and Jesus might avoid the pain of the cross even as he becomes ruler of the earth. Yet, in the fast, Jesus sees his rightful place in the midst of God's plan, to worship only God and follow our Creator's will rather than our own.

Finally, Satan tells Jesus to jump without a parachute off of the temple, to test God's promise of protection and purpose for Jesus' life. Perhaps this, above all the others, was the greatest temptation. This isn't a test of Jesus' power, or hunger, or authority, or even his role in life. This is challenge to Jesus' trust. On one level, Satan's asking Jesus to trust God, to see whether God's faithful to the promise of protection. Yet, at a more fundamental level, the challenge to Jesus is whether his trust is strong enough not to test God in the first place. Does that trust need tested, or is God's faithfulness in the past sufficient assurance for God's faithfulness in the future?

This is what Jesus encounters in his fast. These are the spaces of bodily need, of power, of authority, of trust, of knowing his role in relationship to God. Those each become holy spaces because the Spirit of the Lord led him there. For us, the question becomes: Into what fast is the Spirit leading us? Leading you? Me? And for what purpose?

Like Jesus, our fasting this Lent will help us to say yes to God in ways that we might never have imagined if we hadn't followed the Spirit's lead and said no to something else. Rather than a bad rep, perhaps we can see fasting as a tool God uses to break into our lives when so much of our culture tries to lock the Lord on the outside. One of the blessings of fasting is that it's a temporary practice that can have eternal impact. Think about that. How many temporary investments can you make that have unlimited, everlasting returns? If you know of one, let me know, but my guess is that fasting is in rare company.

And fortunately for us, the Spirit doesn't often lead us all into the wilderness for forty days of foodless wandering. But that doesn't mean we're not called to make valuable, though temporary, sacrifices. This year, as I continue to realize that I need to encounter God more and more in my body, the fast I've entered is a solid food fast during the daylight hours. Even as I've been losing weight, I've been relying too much on food for comfort. So, rather than rely upon cheesesteaks and buffalo wings for strength, though I do love cheesesteaks and buffalo wings, I realize that I need to allow for more space and more opportunities to meet God in my daily needs. I'm learning to say no to food so that I can say yes to God's fulfilling presence. Sometimes a fast looks like giving up time on social media so you can develop new prayer practices or spend more time in Scripture. Sometimes a fast looks like an a commitment to service, spending less time with Netflix and more time feeding those who face food insecurity. Fasting isn't just giving something up. It's opening up your body, your schedule, your wallet, and your talents to God. It's

saying no to something, even something good, so that we can set yes to the deeper work of God in our lives.

So, my challenge for you this Lent is this. Don't just give something up. Don't just say no to something. Follow the Spirit's lead to fast so that you take on your God-given identity, so you can say yes to something good, something blessed, something divine. Learn to say no so that you can learn to say yes. Amen.