

**“Fasting to Feast upon God”**  
**Psalm 32 and Matthew 4:1-11**  
**Pastor James York**  
**March 13, 2011, North Presbyterian Church**

**SCRIPTURE READINGS**

**Psalm 32**

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.  
Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.  
While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.  
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.  
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’,  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.  
Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.  
You are a hiding-place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.  
I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.  
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.  
Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.  
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’  
Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” ’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” ’

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## **“Fasting to Feast upon God”**

David Legge said “Fasting is detaching yourself from the earth. Prayer is attaching yourself to God.” John Piper begins his book *A Hunger for God* by writing, “The birthplace of Christian fasting is homesickness for God.”

Jesus overcame temptation and prepared for his ministry by fasting. Fasting is a simple discipline. All of us can fast and pray. However what is simple is often not easy. Fasting and prayer takes ongoing commitment, discipline. The when, where and how are not nearly as important as the slogan, “Just do it”. Fasting and prayer are learned behaviors that are to be practiced. Just do it. Just fast and pray. Why, because Jesus overcame temptation and received love, strength and wisdom for his ministry through fasting.

Pastor Craig Simonian preached, “I believe that most of us here share a deep desire to be more intimate, more devoted to God. But something gets in the way of that devotion. The desire we all have to give our hearts to God is shared with a desire for things... yet, the weakness of our hunger for God is not because God is unsavory, as John Piper puts it, but because we keep ourselves stuffed with other things. In other words, we are so full on food & entertainment, that we have no appetite left for God. Is there something wrong with food or moral entertainment? Of course not... but because these things are not bad, we often don't realize that they can be to blame for our lack of hunger. You see, it is not our feasting that typically robs us of our hunger for God but the constant nibbling at the table of the world that leaves us so full that we have no appetite left for God.” Simonian continues “I experience this every Thanksgiving. I nibble all day long... so much so that when the main meal comes, I don't really enjoy it. Again, what we are nibbling on, computers, investing, TV, surfing the web, work, shopping, exercising, talking on the phone, home repair, and even our Christian work, are all fine, though, taken together, can leave us so inebriated that we have nothing left for God. Fasting is that discipline which tries to recapture our hunger for God. It says to God, I am willing to forgo anything in order to be in your presence. Fasting provides an atmosphere whereby we are prepared to face up to the dulling effects of food and all those things which we continually nibble on.”

Fasting is making space in you for God. Fasting and prayer go hand in hand. Spend some of the time set free by fasting in prayer. Whenever you crave whatever you are fasting from, pray. This does two things it makes fasting easier because after a few minutes in prayer you will likely find your desire for what you are fasting from dissipate. Second you are nourished by your communication with God.

Scripture is full of people who fasted such as Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Anna, Paul and Jesus. Our denomination was formed by people who regularly fasted, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards to name just a few. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, **Matthew 6:16 “When you fast...”** Jesus seems to be making the assumption that all of us will

fast to deepen our relationship with God. Clearly fasting is a discipline that all of us should regularly practice.

If you can only remember two things on fasting then remember first and foremost, just do it, just fast, second fast to connect with God. Richard Foster stresses that, “Fasting must forever center on God. If our fasting is not unto God, we have failed. Physical benefits, the enduing with power, spiritual insights—these must never replace God as the center of our fasting.” John Wesley declares, First, let fasting be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on God. Let our intention herein be this, and this alone to glorify our Father which is in heaven...” That way we will be saved from loving the blessings of fasting more than God the Blessor.

Foster writes, “It is sobering to realize that the very first statement Jesus made about fasting dealt with the question of motive. To use good things to our own end is always the sign of false religion. How easy it is to take something like fasting and try to use it to get God to do what we want. At times there is such stress upon the blessings and benefits of fasting that we would be tempted to believe that with a little fast we could have the world, including God, eating out of our hands.” Rather our fast is to make space for experiences of God. Charles Spurgeon describes his experience of a fast centered on God. “Our seasons of fasting and prayer at the Tabernacle have been high days indeed; never has Heaven’s gate stood wider; never have our hearts been nearer the central Glory.” of God.

I have fasted from a variety of things at different times yet every time fasting gives me an amazing focus on God. Usually my mind is full of thoughts, concerns with the future, calculating how I am going to get everything done, planning and setting goals. Fasting for me slows down time, focuses my entire attention on God and opens me to experience God. My biggest hurdle with fasting is too often I fail to fast from anything.

In our scripture today Jesus fasted to overcome temptation. Foster writes, “More than any other discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. This is a wonderful benefit to the true disciple who longs to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately. David writes in **Psalm 69:10** “**I humbled my soul with fasting.**” Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. At first we will rationalize that our anger is due to our hunger; then we will realize that we are angry because the spirit of anger is within us. We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.”

You may choose to fast from TV, reading, texting, cell phone, computer, technology, a particular food (maybe chocolate, coffee, soft drinks), credit card, music, alcohol, sports, a hobby, fast food, talk, remote controls, food or anything in your life. Your fast may be for a certain time every day such as I will not use any form of technology from 8 pm until I go to bed or for a duration of time such as I will not drink any soft drinks for a year.

If you are inspired to be bold fast from your comfort item; whatever you do when you have a bad day. You will likely find that as you fast from that and spend that time in prayer that you will be forced to deal with the root cause of your pain. God will heal you.

Or if you are inspired to be bold fast from the symptom of a troubling temptation. Perhaps hurry is a symptom in your life. It is in mine. Hurry can be a symptom for a variety of temptations. Love and hurry are fundamental incompatible. Hurry diminishes one’s capacity to love. Hurry sometimes flows from unhealthy self worth. Thinking that I must accomplish a certain volume to be worthy, or I must hurry to meet people’s expectations so I hurry in hopes of being good enough, to be loved.

I think I hurry out of fear. Fear that if I don’t get things done for others they will not approve of me, then I will be unemployed, then I won’t be able to provide for my family. Ironically my hurrying interferes with my ability to love my family. When I fast and think about it I realize it is an absurd circle. My fear that I will not be able to show love by providing for my family in the future causes me

to hurry today diminishing my ability to love them now which is the root of my fear in the first place. If I continue to hurry out of fear of approval I will be less loving for the rest of my life causing the root of my fear love for family to be realized. Fasting untangles this type of twisted thinking.

There are numerous ways to fast from hurry. Perhaps, schedule more space into your day. Use that time to be fully present for those you love. Perhaps deliberately drive in the slow lane. Use the extra time and concentration it would take to change lanes and speed to pray. If you normally get impatient or angry when you drive pray for God to bless every driver who goes by you. Eat your food slowly. Get in the longest check out lane and let the next person who comes go in front of you.

Fasting makes spaces for God to nourish us. Foster writes, "Fasting reminds us that we are sustained [as Jesus said **Matthew 4:4**] **"by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."** [Things] do not sustain us; God sustains us. In Christ, **Colossians 1:17** **"All things hold together."** Therefore, in experiences of fasting we are not so much abstaining from [something] as we are feasting on ...God. Fasting is feasting! When the disciples brought lunch to Jesus, assuming that he would be starving, Jesus declared, **John 4:32 & 34** **"I have food to eat of which you do not know...My food is to do the will of God who sent me and to accomplish God's work."** Jesus was, in fact being nourished and sustained by the power of God."

Fasting helps us see what is really important in our life. Fasting helps us set and live holy priorities. Foster writes, "Fasting helps us keep our balance in life. How easily we begin to allow nonessentials to take precedence in our lives. How quickly we crave things we do not need until we are enslaved by them. Paul writes, **1 Corinthians 6:12** **"All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything."** Our human cravings and desires are like rivers that tend to overflow their banks; fasting helps keep them in their proper channels." Fasting set us free.

There was a young boy who was throwing a temper tantrum at the mall. He was tired, over stimulated and wanted many things. When nothing else worked to settle him down, in essence the father forced him to fast. The father picked his son up, held him in his arms and began to sing to him a song that he made up as he went along. "I love you. I love the way you laugh. I am glad I get to be your dad." Suddenly the boy's eyes focused on his dad and his father's love. The boy becomes silent, smiled and nestled into his father's chest and listened all the way to the car. When his father put him into the car seat and buckled him in his son threw out his arms and said, "Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing it again." Fasting is like that. Fasting detaches us from the earth and attaches us to God. Fasting enables us to put down stuff so we can hug God. Fasting enables us to let out the herd of racing thoughts so we can hear God sing God's love song over us. Amen.

## Soul Renewal

### Spiritual practices for your extreme makeover

#### Fasting

Fasting is ...

Fasting is abstaining from something to center on God. Fasting is opening yourself to God. Fasting is making space in you for God. Fasting is detaching yourself from the earth and attaching yourself to God. Fasting is putting down stuff so you can hug God. Fasting is letting out the herd of racing thoughts so you can hear God sing God's love song for you.

## Practice fasting by...

- † centering on God.
- † abstaining from something such as TV, reading, texting, cell phone, computer, technology, a particular food (maybe chocolate, coffee, soft drinks), credit card, music, alcohol, sports, a hobby, fast food, talk, remote controls, food or anything in your life.
- † giving something up for a certain time every day such as I will not use any form of technology from 8 pm until I go to bed
- † giving something up for a duration of time such as I will not drink any soft drinks for a year.
- † praying during the fast to dissipate your craving.
- † praying to receive nourishment through your communication with God.
- † abstaining from your comfort item.
- † abstaining from a symptom of a temptation such as hurry.
- † abstaining from something so you can feast upon God.
- † letting go of something so you can receive God's hug.
- † letting go of something so you can hear God tell you how much God loves you.