

FAST  
Esther 4: 1-3; Acts 13:2–3

In 1981 Henri Nouwen, then a professor at Yale Divinity School, spoke at my Princeton Seminary graduation. Since that time even though he was diminutive in stature, I have decided he was a giant in the spiritual life. In his book *The Way of the Heart*, he wrote:

Solitude is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Jesus himself entered this furnace. When he was tempted with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant (turn stones into loaves), to be spectacular (throw yourself down) and to be powerful (I will give you these kingdoms), there he affirmed God as the only source of his identity (You must worship the Lord your God and serve him alone). Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter—the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self....In solitude I get rid of my scaffolding: no friends to talk with, no telephone calls to make, no meetings to attend, no music to entertain, no books to distract ....[New York: Ballantine Books, 1983, pp. 15-17]

Solitude is what I seek to write sermons- no music, no distractions, no texts. Solitude takes me to new levels of thought; even new levels of consciousness. It is a discipline that is needed to not just skim the surface of life or of spirituality. But one area that I have only skimmed is the spiritual discipline of *fasting*. That discipline was a deep dive for me. I am not used to spiritually fasting; I am used to fasting—as most all of you—when we “break our fast” every morning with something to drink or something to eat or both after allowing ourselves to sleep—deeply, fitfully, or sporadically. Some people snack in the middle of the night and that does not honor the fast. Deep REM sleep allows the body to do what the body needs to do in order to function at top capacity. And I fast two or three times a year for 12 hours to have blood work done so my endocrinologist can check my blood glucose. But a fast for

spiritual reasons? I know some who did that: the Desert Fathers and Mothers; monks and nuns. But today I confess that I found more people fasting in the Bible than I had realized. My best exposure to the idea of “the Discipline of Fasting” is from Professor Richard J. Foster in his groundbreaking book, first published in 1988, called *Celebration of Discipline*. In it he wrote: ”In a culture where landscape is dotted with shrines to golden arches and an assortment of Pizza Temples, fasting seems out of place, out of step with the times.” [San Francisco: Harper and Row 1988, p. 47] In fact in his research he could not find a single book on the subject of Christian fasting written between 1861 and 1954, a period of almost 100 years! But as we examine the Bible with eyes open to the topic, we find that Moses the lawgiver fasted, David the King fasted, Elijah the prophet fasted, Daniel the Seer fasted, Anna the prophetess fasted, Paul the Apostle fasted, Esther the queen fasted, and, of course, Jesus the Savior fasted; *they all fasted*. Perhaps people gloss over all of those examples. Fasting generally refers to abstaining from certain foods. It can also be a period of time abstaining from any food—like our youth have done in a 30-hour famine—to help experience conditions that many poor people face weekly. Spiritual fasting is for spiritual reasons, however, just as health dieting may invite fasting for physical reasons. Spiritual fasting involves abstaining from foods, and sometimes from some liquids, like caffeinated ones or alcoholic ones. But not water. Water is still consumed in a spiritual fast. There are some extreme examples in Scripture of “Absolute Fasts” which meant abstaining from both food and water. “Foster described one in the book of Esther: “It appears to be a desperate measure to meet a dire emergency. Upon learning that execution awaited herself and her people, Esther instructed Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews ... and hold a fast on my behalf and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do.’” (Esther 4:16) Paul engaged in a three-day absolute fast following his encounter with the living Christ (Acts 9:9). [Foster, p. 49] Sometimes public fasts

are called for, such as the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 23:27. Otherwise fasts are usually private.

In our day of electronics, if a modem, or a Smart TV, or a computer is not working the way it is designed to do, unplugging it for a time and plugging it back in usually resets the problem. *Consider a fast as something of a reset; often it may include solitude to turn off the noise of the world.* News broadcasters, along with people who write commercials, and actors are trained to share what they do in sensational ways; ways that get our attention to follow a plot, or to buy a product, or to change our minds. But the longer we disconnect from those media influences online or on television, the better chance we have to hear the still, small voice of God in our lives. In 1 Kings 19 when Elijah's stamina and backbone were far spent fighting King Ahab and Queen Jezebel who were after him, he retreated to a cave for solitude. He was apparently fasting in his distress when an angel of the Lord awoke him and said "Get up and eat." [1 Kings 19:5] He continued his fast until an angel spoke again: "Get up and eat; otherwise, the journey will be too much for you." What journey? God wanted to speak to Elijah and protect him, but not there in the lowlands at the base of Mt. Carmel. He would travel 40 days and nights and go to the mountain of Horeb—also called Sinai—where Moses had spoken with God. And there, only there, after fasting and traveling, God revealed the Holy Presence to the mighty but beaten down prophet: as recorded in 1 Kings 19:12 in the King James Bible, the prophet who had fasted and who had traveled saw and heard what God wanted him to see and hear:

[The Lord] said, "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the

earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

Most of the time it takes solitude to hear the voice of God. Sometimes fasting can clear out our systems from worldly distractions. Sometimes fasting takes place before an ordination to a ministry, or before being commissioned to a task. In the church of Antioch, we learn in Acts 13 that the Christians were worshipping and fasting, and “The Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off.’”

We are on the cusp of the season of Lent when Christians traditionally dust off spiritual practices that can bring them closer to their Holy God and their Savior. Today, as the world says it is almost time to sin boldly in Mardi Gras season before we face Ash Wednesday, we say “No.” We even want to grow closer to Christ today. And so we can; with prayer, study, solitude, and perhaps fasting.

Let us pray:

Holy God, first we pause to listen: Then we listen more; then we seek to disconnect ourselves from the world, just for a time. Let’s have a prayerful conversation; help us to not just ask, but to listen too. Then change our hearts, O God. In the name of Jesus I ask it. Amen.

Jeffrey A. Sumner

February 27, 2022

