

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

As a pastor who specialized in children, youth, and family ministries you spend your time doing some crazy things; some things you probably could have never dreamed that you'd ever be doing. One year during Lent when another one of my brilliant at the time ideas took flight, I found myself wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into this time. As we all know Lent is typically a time of fasting. During the forty days and forty nights of this season, although between you and me there are really forty-seven of those days and nights, we strive to follow Jesus fasting in the wilderness and give up something we love. What did Jesus fast from, do you remember? That's right, he didn't eat or drink at all...not for forty days. And understandably at the end of his time he was famished. And this is when the devil swooped in and tempted him.

Well, in following along with Lenten tradition, I decided it would be a great idea to have my high school youth to participate in something called a 40-hour famine. For those of you not familiar with this program, the 40-hour famine was actually established in Australia in 1975. The purpose of the famine, or fast, was to develop empathy for hungry children in third world countries while raising money to help feed them. The movement was originally developed in response to dying children in Ethiopia.

So, we made plans. We were going to have the youth gather together at the church. Our fast would not only be from food and drink, with the exception of water, but also from any kinds of technology. Also, as suggested by the designers of the 40-hour famine, we would sleep outside in cardboard boxes with just a pillow and a blanket.

The kids thought this was a fabulous idea. We had over forty kids who signed up to participate. We collected large cardboard boxes and set up our “camp” alongside the road in downtown State College. Did I mention that our church happened to be located next to fraternity row AND on the corner of a very busy intersection? We set up guidelines for parents to bring their youth with full bellies and ready for quite the experience.

As we gathered together on a Friday afternoon, after school let out everyone was happy. We played lots of board games, we sang songs, we played basketball outside, but around 7pm, only four-ish hours into the famine my youth were starving. Lock-ins were no stranger to my youth. We spent many nights together at the church and I would always feed them and feed them well. This time was different. They grumbled a little but we played on. As it neared time for us to settle down in our “beds” outside where it was cold and damp with just a blanket and a pillow and our bellies were grumbling reality set in. This is really how people lived. Many of my youth expressed how scared they were, not just to be exposed to the elements and to rowdy college students, did I mention that our church was located on the corner of a very busy street in downtown State College but also we were located on fraternity row, but they were also scared to try and sleep with no food in their bellies.

The next day was long and hard. They were lethargic. They were starving. They didn’t feel like playing games or doing arts and crafts or singing or dancing, all normal things we’d be doing at a sleepover. And I’m sure as you imagine they started agitating one another. It was difficult to distract them from the pain of being hungry and from being tired since their grumbly bellies woke them up at night. And this was the point at which I thought I had lost my mind. What had I gotten us into?

As we laid in our cardboard boxes for night number two of the famine, tired and hungry I couldn't help but think about all the people in the world, the babies, the children, the people my age, middle age, and the elderly that experienced this kind of life on a daily basis. And I thought about how fortunate I was to have a full belly, to have a roof over my head where I didn't have to worry about someone sticking their head in my box and asking what I was doing or if they could stay with me. And I thought about Jesus and what his time in the wilderness must have been like if I was this desperate for food after two nights and I wondered how in the world he lasted forty days and nights. And for the first time I really saw why it was a part of our calling as Jesus' followers to feed the hungry, because when you are hungry, truly hungry, it prevents you from doing the things you should be about and even God's plan for your lives.

During Lent many people fast in some form or another. For the ancient church, fasting means to give up all of your food and drink only water. For us, in modern day Christianity we aren't quite so extreme, or maybe not as dedicated, however you choose to look at it. Christians today tend to choose something to fast from, not everything. The hope is when choosing something to give up, it would be something that you hunger for every day, something that you absolutely love. Maybe for you that is wine or chocolate, television or social media, video games or books. The hope is that it would be something that you will notice when it's missing.

In our fast past world where everything happens in a click of a button, in an instance, fasting causes us to take a pause. It allows us to experience our hunger instead of quickly feeding it. Fasting helps us to consider what need is so important that we are literally dying for it by giving up our time, our money, our very lives. When you fast it allows you to break the pattern of addiction, the very thing you think that you need and it replaces the addiction with reflection.

When we fast we are invited to experience a deeper awareness of our hunger for God. God is the food that we need to sustain us in our daily lives, the basics of human need. Perhaps we have confused our hunger for God with something else, and maybe that's what fasting will show us upon further reflection? You see all the things we think we need-food, shelter safety, love, accomplishments, even life itself, all those things are good and wonderful things, but they are temporary. We know from reading the temptation story with Jesus in the desert that it takes more than bread alone to live. We need God.

Today as we begin our Lenten journey, we realize that we are totally dependent on God. We can't eat, sleep, have shelter, or even breathe without him. All of our things, including our bodies are dependent on his grace and mercy. You know, the sad reality of this world is that the mortality rate is 100%. Not one of us will get out of this life alive. So fast if you must, but fast intentionally. Reflect and examine your lives. Try and discern what it is that is getting in the way of your relationship with God. And this Lent reignite your hunger and yearning for God. After all God feels so passionately about you and his love for you and his desire of relationship for you that he sent his own son to die for your sake, for the restoration of all creation. Fast and set your eyes upon Jesus, the bread of life, the everlasting water, the only end to hunger, the giver of life. Amen.