

Good evening, and welcome to our Ash Wednesday edition of Wisdom Wednesday. As always, I am your host Pastor Seth. And today we are beginning our 40 day journey towards Easter, though technically it's only 40 days if you don't count the Sundays; they're considered mini-Easters of a sort, and so don't count for whatever reason. But today marks that start to the season in the Church's calendar called "Lent." As we begin this journey together, let's start by sharing together in a song.

[Open Our Eyes]

Before we get into our lesson, I'd like to share our Scripture reading. Tonight we are reading from Isaiah 58:1-12. There we read:

"Shout loudly; don't hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their crime, to the house of Jacob their sins. They seek me day after day, desiring knowledge of my ways like a nation that acted righteously, that didn't abandon their God. They ask me for righteous judgements, wanting to be close to God. "Why do we fast and you don't see; why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?" Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want, and oppress all your workers. You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast; you hit each other violently with your fists. You shouldn't fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one's head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothes and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, in trying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the

dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here." If you remove the yoke from among you, the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon. The Lord will guide you continually and provide for you, even in parched places. He will rescue your bones. You will be like a watered grade, like a spring of water that won't run dry. They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account; the foundations of generations past you will restore. You will be called Mender of Broken Walls, Restorer of Livable Streets."

As we reflect on these words from the Prophet, let's share together in another song.

[Lord Throughout These 40 Days]

Ash Wednesday is a peculiar day in the Church. It's one that is normally marked by people getting ashes placed upon their hands or foreheads as a sign of their repentance and commitment to God. Others in this time of Lent choose to fast from something, or go without a particular item they have relied on as a means of relying on God instead. For example, some people use this as an opportunity to begin a diet by giving up sweets, or fatty foods. Others, like our Roman Catholic cousins, might give up eating meat. Still others give up coffee, or social media, or all those alluring games we have on our cell phones and tablets that distract us from reality or being present with friends and

family. Others may even approach this season as an opportunity to begin something new. Maybe that looks like new physical exercises, or taking extra time for prayer, or reading, or other healthy and positive habits.

And all of these are great ideas. Some of you may have already thought through what you plan to fast from. Others of you may have never recognized the season of Lent through such acts of self-denial before, and have no real intention of doing so now. Regardless of where you may be in that spectrum, I want you to really think through your motivation for doing so. After all, the season of Lent is not meant to simply be an opportunity for us to try the latest diet craze, or take another stab at our New Years resolutions. This season ought to be something more.

So for the next few weeks on Wisdom Wednesday, and perhaps even into LOL when that picks up again next month, I want to focus on some of the different spiritual disciplines that we have in our Christian tradition. I know that “spiritual discipline” sounds like a very intimidating thing, but really such practices are tools that we have at our disposal which can help us draw closer to God. By exploring these tools, my hope is that the season of Lent might become something more like a launching point for you in your faith even beyond Easter.

But for today, I wanted to keep my focus on fasting. And I want to talk about the passage we read from Isaiah. That passage makes fasting sound very much like a kind of prayer, a way to make our voices heard by God. The idea being we sacrifice

something of ourselves for a time, whether it is our time, or interest, our comforts, and redirect that energy towards God through prayer, the study of Scripture, or other acts of service and kindness.

The problem that Isaiah brings up, though, is the same problem many of us are experiencing. We do the fasting, the self-affliction, but then we turn right around and continue in the same unhealthy patterns of behavior. As Isaiah put it, you quarrel and brawn with one another, then you fast, and then you hit each other all over again. Fasting in and of itself is pointless if we aren't intentional about how and why we do it. So unless our fasting leads to some other change in our behavior, then Lent will simply be a re-do on your New Years resolutions and nothing more. Maybe good for your physical health, but not so much for your spiritual health.

Instead of simply causing ourselves discomfort in these empty gestures, we should use our fasting to help transform our behaviors in some way. Isaiah gives a great list of things that God would love to see God's people do: releasing wicked restraints, in trying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, breaking every yoke, sharing your bread with the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, clothing the naked, and making it all a family affair, something we do with our parents, our siblings, and our children. It is about removing the finger-pointing, the wicked speech, and opening our heart to those in need, and providing for those who are afflicted that we begin to draw closer to God. In other words, it is all about transforming our behaviors so that God's love and light can be made known to others through us.

That will prove our faith so much more than simply giving up Facebook for a few weeks... Or attending worship every so often... Or even getting our foreheads smudged with ash before we wipe it all off a few moments later. Those things don't make us God's followers... But by acknowledging our mistakes, recognizing the harm we have caused to ourselves and others, and making some changes through fasting and prayer, we can truly acknowledge God's work in our lives and be the kind of people who help restore life and hope for others.

And so I want to give us some space to pray and think on what we may to change in our lives for Lent. Maybe it does look like giving up Facebook, but don't let it end there. Give up Facebook, and use that time you would have been on there to call a friend or family member and catch up with them and pray with them. If you are giving up coffee, or candy, some other sweet treats, maybe you can donate the money you saved on such things towards a local shelter or food pantry. I'm sure in the brutal cold we've seen lately, shelters are looking for any help they can getting coats, hats, gloves, or socks. No matter what you choose to do this Lent, I hope you can intentionally engage in the spiritual discipline of fasting as a means of connecting with God, and allowing your life to be transformed in some way as a result. But as you think on what you may want to do, let's share in another song.

[Sundays Palms are Wednesday's Ashes]

And now dear friends, I invite you, in the name of the Church, to observe a holy lent: by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word.

And now let us share in this responsive prayer, from Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;

According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was born into iniquity, and I have been sinful since my mother conceived me.

Behold, you desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me hear with joy and gladness; let the bones which you have broken rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

Deliver me from death, O God, God of my salvation, and my tongue will wing aloud of your deliverance.

O lord open my lips and my mouth shall show forth your praise.

For you have no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Amen.

Well friends, that just about concludes our time together here, though I'll remind you that I will be at the Church's driveway, on the east side of the building off Mundt, from 3:00 to 6:00 pm today to impose ashes to-go if you would like to recognize the start of Lent in that way. Simply pull up to the door, and I'll come out with some ashes ready to go on q-tips.

Before I say goodbye, though, I'd like to say one more prayer, and then we'll share in one more song.

[Prayer]

[Cry of My Heart]