

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany February 8, 2026 jj  
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✠ sdg ✠

Fasting is clearly an individual activity (Jesus Himself said, let no one see what you are doing, Matt. 6), but it is also understood to be done together as a church, in mutual love, as a positive kind of discipline or bodily training for the building up of the whole congregation. Lutherans fasted in years past, but it was not to make God look upon their good works in addition to those of Jesus, nor did they try using it to connect themselves to Christ on some emotional level. You see, fasting, when tied closely to a Christian's faith alone in Christ and what He has done for us, is a certainly fine outward training, as Luther says in the Catechism, because it helps the humble believer rely wholly on God's Word for life now and life eternal.

But the sinful nature would not let fasting remain a good and wholesome thing. Satan himself would stop at nothing to corrupt it because he commonly uses even the most salutary-looking church practices to teach his faith-destroying doctrines. How else can a simple exercise in humility become transformed into the height of arrogance? Eventually, as good things like fasting and private confession and absolution were corrupted and simply allowed to die out in church practice, people were led to believe that all religious matters only had to do with your mind, and certain bodily training exercises were regarded as superstitious and anti-intellectual.

Now, to be sure, everything we do must not be left to mindless individual feeling or ritual, but should always be tested according to God's Word, especially the Ten

Commandments, and not by how we feel about it or just because of who said it. The same thing goes for fasting. While Scripture mentions the practice several times and has a lot to say about it, in no way can those Bible passages be taken to command us to do it as a requirement for our salvation, nor as a condemnation for those who do not do it. Romans 14 in fact says about food rituals, "The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God." Fasting is a fruit, a response of faith, just like good works, and you wouldn't be Lutheran if you didn't know that good works are not what get you to heaven, but rather they serve as a sign (one of several, in fact) that the Holy Spirit has given you the one, true, and saving faith, and faith does give heaven to you as a gift.

That is the point that the prophet Isaiah is getting at when he was inspired by the Holy Spirit to address fasting among the people of Israel in our Old Testament reading. They had let their faith grow cold, and then slip away altogether. They became so wrapped up in their everyday lives that God did not matter to them, and they themselves mattered most. They said, however, that they had no sin, and so they were in the very midst of deceiving themselves. God's people did not honor Him as the only true God, nor did they have any regard for His holy and pure Word that was announced to them by the divinely inspired prophets.

But they fasted! Boy, were they on top of that one! That last time some of them had a

massive stomach ache to prove it! Their sackcloth and ashes this year were especially austere; nobody was able to outdo the people of Israel in their exercise of humility. Their news channel even did a story on one woman who fasted so hard that she started seeing visions! Everybody can acknowledge that we're special, so they would say. All the nations are well aware that we fast and we pray and we humble ourselves—they take notice. So what's wrong with God, then? Why can't He see how devout we are? What is it going to take for our Lord and Creator to notice when we need Him? Isaiah quotes these baffled Israelites when they said to God, "Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?"

Your objections may not be about fasting, but they still sound quite similar, don't they? I come to church and do what I was trained to do from early on as a believer—I come even on most football game Sundays! I have been involved in many things that help make this church tick. I put my fair share in the offering plate so nobody has the right to get on my back about that! Why doesn't all that I do count for anything with God? Why is it that He seems so far away so often in my life? Even when I go through a difficult trial, I tell myself that God is with me and His will is best, but frankly, there are lots of times like that when I just don't believe it, whether I say it or others attempt to comfort me with it. Why are the wicked and godless people of this world doing so much better than I am? I know I'm not perfect, but at least some of this stuff that I do as a Christian has to count.

And so gradually, faith that struggles like this without an answer begins to feel isolated, cold, and indifferent. Church and

other religious actions reduce down to a mere going through the motions. Church leaders and pastors in this spiritual funk start getting concerned only about the finances and the material prospects of staying afloat and in business, so to speak. God becomes a mere idea, or an intellectual exercise where one can recite the doctrine verbatim and yet the heart receives nothing of the joy that comes from the forgiveness of sins. So this lukewarm faith hides behind empty actions, on the one hand staying focused on oneself, while on the other hand looking for whatever activities or programs that can at least give the appearance of vigorous spiritual activity, just like those Israelites, who feigned their spirituality behind the mask of an empty, faithless brand of fasting.

What was the Lord's answer to Israel as they continued in this damnable spiritual condition? Let's be serious, you folks are not really fasting—you have your mind on other matters, on your own pleasure. You fast, making yourselves look so pious and holy, but all you do is quarrel, and fight, and hit with a wicked fist. For us in our situation today, we need look no further than what the Catechism teaches concerning the Third Commandment, Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. That's not about sitting in a pew, running a committee or activity, nor is it about some detailed evangelism program. Those may come in their time, because they're the results. Rather, this commandment is about holding sacred the preaching of God's Word, gladly hearing and learning it—and in your sinful human nature, you have not done this. Yes, you are here, you're hearing God's Word now, I get that. But this Law is relentless—it condemns me, too, probably crashing down more so on pastors due to our vows to teach and preach the Word.

The Lord's harsh, condemning word comes to a head in our Old Testament reading when He says these words, "Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high." Almighty God, is that possible? I'm serious...how close are we here today to that dreadful precipice? That all we do each week and through the week in our daily callings, if they continue with a dead and cold faith, with no regard for one another, that they will become useless, meaningless spiritual activities, and we'll be closed off from the mercy of our heavenly Father. How soon will this point of no return come upon us in this congregation? This is a serious matter that we face, and our answer to it is not in fasting, nor in any other new and fancy devout works or useful ministries that we can think of, our answer is in Christ and what He has done for us. You can't do more and more church stuff to get out of it. If you try that way, you will get overwhelmed in guilt and sooner or later entertain the temptation to fall away, whether you decide to stay home, or you simply tune out and just do little more spiritual activity than warm your seat.

But at just the right time, Christ the Lord appeared among us sinners and spoke the comforting Gospel words that our ears had desperately needed: Here I am. He is the one and only answer to our struggling souls' cry for help. Though you had failed to keep the Commandments, including that Third one, He came as your light breaking forth like the dawn. He attended to all the details of true and perfect worship of the Father, so that you would be accounted as righteous and holy in God's sight. He was rejected and reviled to remove from your lips the unkind words that you allowed to soil them. Jesus bore all your sins on His shoulders all the way to the cross, so that by His suffering

and death He would pay in full for your spiritual healing, that is, for your forgiveness once and for all. He rose from the dead on the third day, so that His all-encompassing glory would be your rear guard—to guide and protect your conscience so that guilt will never overwhelm you.

Isaiah continues the good news in the rest of this chapter: "And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail." That good news did not die out with the ancient Israelite inheritance in the holy land. That forgiveness of sins and life everlasting continue for you to this very day, because Christ is still with you: Here I am! He says. Here I am in the Word you hear today. Here I am in the never-failing waters of Baptism. Here I am, in the bread and wine of the altar, under which I feed you the living heritage of your fathers in the faith—my real and true Body and Blood.

So then, what about fasting? You could so choose to do-or not do- with full freedom, and Lent is coming, after all; it would be a good idea to prepare in body as well as in mind. What about being in church and getting involved in its activities? That could be done too, most of all to hear and learn the Word with a genuine, God-given faith that truly delights in the habitation of the Lord's house. These resulting good works will fit in nicely with all the other fruits of faith that are also pleasing to the Lord (vv. 6-9). You're not using these works for the poor and unfortunate to inaugurate your own version of the glory of God on earth like the social gospel, but you are spreading the mercy of Christ that comes only from the pure Gospel of eternal, heavenly salvation.

This way, whether you abstain from food or not, you are still observing the fast that your Lord has chosen for you—that is, to rely totally on the spiritual nourishment of His pure Word, go in the confidence of sins forgiven, love your neighbor with a sincere heart, and cherish the life together that you have with one another as the Body of Christ, the family of faith.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.