

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEB. 18, 2024
SERMON: FASTING AND PRAYER
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Scriptures:

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” **4** But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** 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.’ ”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, **9** and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” **10** Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 6:16-18

16 “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. **17** But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, **18** so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Sermon: Fasting and Prayer

I want to preface this sermon by saying I am explicitly Christian. Jesus said in John 14 “I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me,” and I hold that true and believe Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth to show humans the way out of darkness.

I begin with that preface because I’m going to talk about Islam a little bit. As you may know, my in-laws are Muslim and I’ve spent a lot of time in Islamic majority countries. While I staunchly believe Jesus’s words are true, I also hold a theological understanding that God created diversity, we humans don’t know everything, and we never will until the day of reckoning when God calls us home. Given that understanding, please bear with me with an open mind.

For one full lunar month of every year, Muslims universally participate in a communal Fast called “Ramadan.” This year that fast begins on March 9th and ends on April 8th. During this time period, they refrain from eating anything, drinking anything (including water!), smoking, sex, foul or resentful language, music, and violence from sunrise to sunset. In Hawaii, that’s about 5:30am to 7:15pm – 14 hours. In Iceland and Alaska, if Ramadan falls in the summer months, the fast can be up to 23 hours a day!

Despite being Christian, I’ve been participating in this month-long fast every year since 2013. Jesus told us to fast in times of discernment, and Jesus himself fasted for 40 days in the desert in preparation for his entrance into ministry. Our own scriptures tell us the importance of fasting, so I simply applied my own religious context of it into the host population that I was living in. It was somewhat out of necessity that I fasted anyway – in the country of Jordan, where I lived from 2012 to 2015, it’s illegal to do any non-fasting activities in public during Ramadan and everything is shut down.

The reason I’m telling you about the Muslims is because being in a Muslim country during this communal fasting experience was truly fascinating. Every evening just before sundown you’d see all the stores open up and glittering lights flicker on above the streets. The wafting smells of cardamom, cinnamon, and mint tea floated from every doorway and into the nostrils of intensely hungry people. Then a huge voice would boom over a series of loudspeakers at the exact same time all over the country, singing praises to God and inviting the people to all come together for prayer. Everyone would stop what they were doing all at once, take exactly 3 sips of water and eat a date, and then suddenly the streets were lined with people all praying together in tandem before sitting down for a meal. And they did this every night for 30 days straight. It was truly an incredible sight to see and participate in.

So how does that foreign practice from a different religion apply to us here and now? Like I said, Jesus did it, although he did it alone. He also encouraged us to do it, but quietly and without pomp and circumstance. So what should fasting look like in a Christian context, and when and why should we do it?

The reading from Matthew 6 is the basis for why we mark our heads with ashes at the beginning of the 40 days period of Lent, which is the season we are now in. Lent represents the time period that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, and we are encouraged to also fast and resist temptation in this time period.

Aside from the liturgical season, we have many reasons to fast and be intentionally cognizant of the places where the devil is tempting us. Fasting, from experience, necessarily takes away all the worldly pleasures such as impulsiveness, satisfaction, and distraction that the devil loves and forces us to rely on God for understanding. This may be a good practice for those of you who are experiencing personal battles with your health, work, or relationships; it’s

also a good practice for this church as a community as we reflect on our decisions to move forward in mission and spiritual direction. I like the way Muslims do it in the intensity of no water all day, and everyone doing it together. But I also like the way Jesus asks us to do it by being individually quiet and still, listening for the voice of God in the wilderness and resisting temptation to reject it.

I urge you this Lenten season to fast. Fasting for Ramadan has been an incredible experience for me over the past decade or so, and I always come out the other side of Ramadan feeling closer to God, my family, and my community. Your fast doesn't have to look like the way Muslims do it, but it does have to look the way that Jesus taught us. At times where you hear the devil whispering to you to get distracted by worldly pleasures or act impulsively, know that Jesus has given you the tools to resist those temptations through fasting and prayer.

If you've never fasted, here's some suggestions for how to do it in a way that produces results of greater clarity and connection with God. More traditionally, there's the refrain from food and drink like Jesus did in the desert. If you're physically healthy and cleared by a doctor, you can spend 5 intentional hours of the day refraining from food or drink and watch how the nakedness of your empty stomach and diminishing mental faculty from lack of water controls your thoughts. Allow those thoughts to be redirected to listen to God. Recognize how weak and dependent you are on the abundance He provides you through access to food and water, an abundance that not everyone has.

If you're not physically healthy enough for that sort of activity, take away the coping mechanism you use to relax yourself such as puzzles, tv, social media, or knitting, and replace that coping mechanism with prayer for these 40 days, even if just for 20 minutes a day. Just take the first 20 minutes that you regularly settle into your relaxation routine and replace it with listening to God and rebuking the devilish impulses that come into your head during your prayer. Invite trusted friends from the church to hold you accountable to your fast and pray with you for strength of body and spirit, but follow Jesus' mandate to be humble about your fasting and recognize it's for Him and not for your own pride in accomplishment.

I believe if we all commit to fasting in our own ways this Lent through the method Jesus taught us, we will communally come out at Easter a renewed people that are centered on God and the plans He has for us, both individually and communally. The way forward is often confusing and life throws us many curveballs. Through fasting, prayer, and intentional listening to Him, we are empowered to navigate through the confusion and see the Easter sunrise that He has planned for us. If we use this time intentionally together to interrupt our routines to listen to what God is telling us in the wilderness, the Easter of this church and our lives will be magical.

Godspeed to you on your fasting journey, and know that we are in this together, and God is here with us guiding us along the way. Amen.