

## **Feasting and Fasting: A Lenten Invitation**

Psalm 121 and Luke 4:1-13

First Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent, which is the holy time leading up to Easter, six weeks from today.

Lent is a time for spiritual renewal, a time for honest reflection on sin, and new openness to God's grace. With the help of prayers like Psalm 51 which says, "Create in me a clean heart O God," Lent is a time to be re-energized as followers of Jesus.

One way for us to be renewed is through prayer. On Wednesday evenings, we are gathering for supper at 5:30 followed by a 40 minute worship service at 6:15, focusing on prayer and a psalm.

You just heard Psalm 121, and that will be our focus psalm on Wednesday this week. I encourage you to prayerfully reflect on that psalm this week.

Our gospel reading tells of the temptation of Jesus—a 40 day wilderness experience, where he fasted and faced temptation. Lent lasts for 40 days, not counting Sundays, to give us plenty of time for fasting, prayer, and renewal.

Jesus shows strength and wisdom in the face of temptation, from his strong foundation in Scripture. Listen for God's word from Luke 4.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup> for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’

<sup>11</sup> and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Jesus liked to eat. In Luke’s gospel in particular, it seems that Jesus is always at a meal or just leaving one, or heading to one, or at least talking about food.

So it might not seem as if Jesus likes food, since one of the first things he does is fast from food, and one of the first things he says has to do with food, as we heard in the gospel reading. “One does not live by bread alone.”

But from there onward, Jesus is eating a lot. In the next chapter, he has a meal with Levi the tax collector and other so-called sinners.

Then Jesus teaches about food and hunger in Luke 6, saying “woe to you who are well fed, and blessed are you who are hungry.”

In Luke 9, Jesus feeds thousands of hungry people, with only five loaves and two fish.

He taught his followers to pray in Luke 11: Give us this day our daily bread.



He is routinely accused of eating with the “wrong” kinds of people, which bothered the religious and political leaders of the day as we see in Luke 14 and several other places.

In Luke 16, Jesus contrasts a wealthy man who feasted sumptuously and a poor man named Lazarus begging for scraps.

At the Last Supper, Jesus shared bread and wine with his disciples.

After the resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, he met two disciples, and they shared a meal, in Luke 24. Jesus broke the bread for them, and that’s when they realized it was Jesus.

So food is central in Luke. Food is central to our faith and to our life. But too often we don’t really think about it, eating too fast, and too much.

Wendell Berry offers a theological perspective on food, writing:

To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorant, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecrations we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want. (cited in *Food and Faith*, by Norman Wirzba, page 1)

My hope, in this season of Lent, is that we could think more intentionally about our food, to slow down and be more aware of it, to take time to be thankful.

One way to do this is to consider fasting.

Fasting is not really popular today, but it’s a core part of most all religious traditions. Fasting generally is for two reasons: as a sign of humility and repentance, and to seek strength and wisdom and clarity for the journey ahead.

So Lent is a good time to fast.

In her classic text on Christian spiritual formation, Marjorie Thompson wrote about fasting:

Lent is not a six-week inconvenience in an otherwise abundant year, during which we somehow please God with voluntary if minor suffering. . . . It is certainly not a 'spiritual' rationale for losing ten pounds before venturing to the beach in a bathing suit. . . . The question we need to ask with any spiritual discipline is What does God want to accomplish in me through this practice? (Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, page 72)

So maybe you fast for a meal or two, or even a day or two.

For several years, with youth ministry at another church, we did the World Vision 30 Hour Famine. Teens and adult leaders gave up food for 30 hours, and we donated the estimated cost of those meals to fight hunger.

Fasting for a day gave us an experience of what it is like for too many people around the world, who don't have enough food. It wasn't that hard. Unless you have medical issues, I encourage you to give it a try.

If fasting for a whole day isn't right for you, maybe you should fast from something in particular, like dessert, or coffee, or alcohol, or soda. None of those things are inherently bad or wrong, but we get them out of balance.

If there is something that has taken on too much importance in your life—perhaps a food product, perhaps something else—maybe it's time to fast, to give it up for Lent.

A good prayer for us would be from Proverbs 30:8

give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that I need.

In reading and reflecting on food recently, a few themes keep coming back to me.

1. We don't know where our food comes from. When I lived in Nicaragua for a year, I got a sense of the rhythm of agriculture, with corn and beans, carrots and mangoes.

As for meat, it was a rare treat. One time, while a group of us from the USA were visiting a remote Nicaraguan community facing all sorts of hardship from poverty and war, they did something special. They killed a cow, with a gunshot actually. It was a bit jarring for those of us not used to such things. But together that night, we had very tasty and very fresh barbecue.

It's good to know where our food comes from.

2. We eat too much, too fast, and we don't taste our food sometimes.

Years ago on the radio I heard about a dietician who met with a group of people and gave them all a chocolate bar. And she had them take an entire hour to eat that chocolate bar slowly, enjoying every little bit of it.

I think we'd all be better off if we ate a little less, and a little slower.

3. We forget that millions of people don't have access to good food. Even here in Madison, there are hungry people.

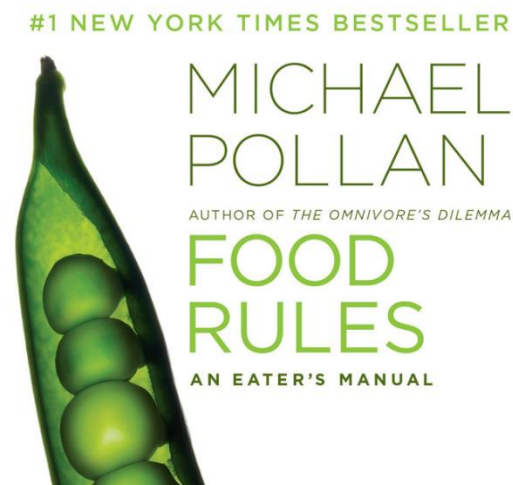
I got to go to Grace Episcopal Shelter on Friday night, with several other Covenant folks, where we served fried chicken to 80 hungry men. It was a blunt reminder that we have people here in Madison who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

So over the course of Lent, I hope we can prayerfully reflect on our food and these issues.

You should have a purple bulletin insert today, with prayers for your meals, along with things to discuss. I also hope you'll make use of a fish bank for our 5 cents a meal offering, putting a nickel in for every meal, as you remember hungry people. All the funds will go to our One Great Hour of Sharing offering, which supports the Presbyterian Hunger Program.

Some of us are hungry for food for our stomachs. Some of us are hungry for meaning and purpose and love. We need to find ways to get what we need, no more, no less.

For now, the focus is on food for our stomachs, and to help us think about that, I want to share a few of the food rules that Michael Pollan compiled. Author of *The Omnivores Dilemma*, Pollan consolidated his thinking with this short rule book, which is meant to get us thinking.



(1. Eat food)2. Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food.

7. Avoid food products containing ingredients that a third-grader cannot pronounce.

23. Treat meat as a flavoring or special occasion food.

36. Don't eat breakfast cereals that change the color of the milk.

44. Pay more, eat less.

(49. Eat slowly.)51. Spend as much time enjoying the meal as it took to prepare it.

64. Break the rules once in a while.

I would add rule 65. These rules are for you, not for you to force on someone else.

The Good News is that God feeds us. There is enough food for everyone. There is enough love for everyone.

Augustine who taught that God is always trying to give us good things, but our hands are too full to receive them. (Cited in *Soul Feast* by Marjorie Thompson, page 76)

So my hope is that Lent is a time of renewal for us, where we let go of the unnecessary and excessive things in our lives where our deepest hungers are fed.