

Fasting and Feasting

**A Sermon Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on February 21, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Church**

*Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. (Isaiah 55:1-5, NRSV)*

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 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.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. (Matthew 4:1-11, NRSV)

It has been said that the first book of the 21st century was published in 1985 – at least that’s what many students of modern American society would tell us. It was a little book by educator Neil Postman called *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

The book's origins lie in a talk Postman gave to the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1984. He was participating in a panel on (funny enough!) George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* and its relevance to the contemporary world. Of course, back then, in the early to mid-80’s, we were still in the midst of the Cold War, and so it was natural that we would connect with Orwell’s warnings of the evils of an all-controlling state ... of totalitarianism.

But Postman said something surprising. He suggested that for all the dangers of the Soviets, our greatest social threat was less reflected in Orwell’s *1984*, where the public was oppressed by state control, and much better reflected in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, in which the public was oppressed by its *addiction to amusement*.

Published a year later, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* burst on to the scene as a groundbreaking polemic about the corrosive effects of television on our public discourse and social fabric. From his vantage point in 1985, Postman examines the inherent biases that TV has as a medium – it demands rapid-fire editing, non-stop stimulation, and quick soundbites rather than patient, rational deliberation –and he worries that our world has yet to truly consider the long-term effects of these things for face to face human relations and for the bonds which must be nourished for healthy communities to flourish.

His argument has – sadly – aged well. Today, with television joined by more sophisticated electronic media—from the Internet to smart phones to social media—it has taken on even greater significance. It has, in fact, been proven to be *prophetic* – we know that the drive for entertainment, stimulation, and ratings has come to dominate the content of so much public discourse, such that a message itself is less important than the performance value of its delivery. Postman’s study is a frightening look at what happens when politics, journalism, education, and even religion become subject to the demands of what amounts to show business.

And just think that Postman never even lived to see our own age of alternative facts, post-Truth, closed media bubbles ... and he died still thinking that a “tweet” was the sound a canary made!

In the scripture passage we just read a moment ago, we hear the words of one who saw times not so different from our own, though 2500 years ago. A few decades before these words were first uttered, the Babylonian empire under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar, had conquered the Kingdom of Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. Thousands were killed. Of those who survived, the best and the brightest and their children were taken away into exile – to Babylon itself – to be re-educated, re-trained, and absorbed into the life and activity of the

most exciting city in the world. The glittering lights of Babylon represented countless allures and distractions ... a thousand ways of being entertained.

For the young, it was an especially powerful temptation – to leave behind the backward ways of the past, the way of walking in covenant with God and with one another, and embrace the culture of the winners. They had good reason to wonder if their God was even still around.

After all, hadn't the Temple been destroyed? Hadn't the "chosen people" been defeated, humiliated, and exiled? By any measure, the Jewish God was a LOSER. So why not live a little and distract yourself as everyone else did? Indulge in those fast foods, buy Golden Calf Lotto tickets, get sucked into the Babylonian News Network, and go to another chariot race. Look the other way when inconvenience comes calling. Seek the path of least resistance. Your personal happiness is what matters. Take care of number one.

But into this air of self-absorbed forgetfulness, a voice cries out ... like the voice of a merchant in a crowded Middle Eastern bazaar, seeking to get the attention of the passing crowds, hawking his wares with enthusiasm:

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1, NRSV)*

This is no ordinary salesman! *This* vendor is inviting the crowd to engage in a very unusual and mysterious transaction. The normal rules of commerce don't seem to apply, and truthfully, they have been completely overturned. One need not bring goods to barter or money to pay, because water, bread, wine, and rich food will all be provided "without money and without price". All one must bring to the exchange is thirst and hunger. And so, it's here that the challenge is laid bare:

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
(Isaiah 55:2, NRSV)*

Is it possible that *even 2500 years ago*, God's people needed to hear a wake-up call ... a call to take a moment, a time-out from the glitz of empire, and to try putting down the gadgets for a moment ... to turn for once from the abundant distractions that promise much, but in the end, deliver little ... that seductively promise a fuller, more abundant life, but cannot finally satisfy the longing of the heart?

The prophet knew his people better than they knew themselves. He knew that the distractions, the entertainments, all the amusing ways in which we are drawn more deeply into ourselves present themselves as liberation, as a satiation of our deepest desires, but in the end, they can't deliver the goods. As Jesus would say many years later, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but loses his soul?"

Countless people today, as caught up in the world as any of us are, are opening their eyes to this truth ... They seek a path out of this bondage to that which cannot satisfy. They seek a different way of life ... They seek something beyond show business ... They seek something *real*.

In this season of Lent, we, together with Christians all over the world, are looking closely at our lives, and are choosing to set aside, even in small ways, those things that we sometimes think we truly need, but don't really ... or not as much. We examine our own hearts and consider ways in which we might draw closer to God, together, by letting go of things which command so much of our attention. In one form or another, this practice could be called *fasting*.

I use that word with some hesitation. Fasting is not one of the more popular words in the Christian spiritual vocabulary. But this is unfortunate, for fasting need not mean refraining from all food for a long time, nor is it intentionally making oneself miserable – all for the sake of Jesus! It need not be – and often isn't – about *food* at all. Fasting at its root is simply choosing to refrain from something that we are used to, so that we might appreciate and grow into something else.

Echoing the prophet, what is it that we spend our money for, but isn't bread? What is it that we labor for, but doesn't satisfy? Is chocolate or caffeine really your great nemesis? Or is it the multitude of ways we allow distractions to divert our attention from what might be a claim on us? What is it? Our answers will vary widely, of course, but we all could stand a little less of something in our lives, even if we sometimes think we couldn't live without it.

But this is not about self-denial for its own sake, but so that we might make room for something else far more satisfying – something which would heal and revive our souls ... something which would bring us into deeper communion with one another ... and so equip us to speak the truth in love and be light in a dark world.

And so, this Lent we might *fast* from many things, but then also *feast* on better things. Let this responsive call to fasting and feasting be a start as we look more deeply at our lives and respond to the call to *live*:

*May we fast from judging others; **may we feast on the Christ dwelling in them.***

*May we fast from emphasis on differences; **may we feast on the unity of life.***

*May we fast from apparent darkness; **may we feast on the reality of the Light.***

*May we fast from words that tear down; **may we feast on words that build up.***

*May we fast from discontent; **may we feast on gratitude.***

*May we fast from anger; **may we feast on patience.***

*May we fast from worry; **may we feast on trusting God.***

*May we fast from complaining; **may we feast on appreciation.***

*May we fast from bitterness; **may we feast on forgiveness.***

*May we fast from discouragement; **may we feast on hope.***

*May we fast from idle gossip; **may we feast on purposeful silence.***

*May we fast from self-concern; **may we feast on compassion for others.***

To the Glory of God. Amen.

(Litany abridged and adapted from a poem by William Arthur Ward (American author, teacher and pastor, 1921-1994.)