



Finding God

Our Response to God's Gifts

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Read

Why do we fast, and you do not see it?

afflict ourselves, and you take no note of it?"

Lo, on your fast day you carry out your own pursuits, and drive all your laborers.

Yes, your fast ends in quarreling and fighting, striking with wicked claw.

Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!

—Isaiah 58: 3–5

Reflect

This chapter from the book of Isaiah is a conversation between God and his people. The people tell God, "Look at us. We're doing what you told us to do." God responds, "It's not just what you do, it's the way you do it. It's about intention." Then God shares his hopes for them, and us. ■

Lent: A Time of Giving Up?

If you're like me, Lent is usually associated with thoughts of what to give up. As a kid, I went through a process of deep analysis. I made sure to craft the wording of my intended fast in just the right way. I could give up candy, or I could give up dessert. The former would involve 40 sugar-free days, while the latter included only sweet treats falling within the thirty-minute time period following a meal. Looking back now, I shake my head and laugh. But have I really changed in my thinking all that much?



As an adult, my ideas for sacrifice often sound like second chances on my New Year's resolution. Many have added benefits such as losing those pesky five pounds or breaking a few bad habits. If I am not mindful, I run the risk of centering a bit more on myself than on God.

This "me-ness" may explain why typically a week or so into Lent, with a daunting 30ish days ahead, my spiritual exercise has faded into an angry pout. I'm suffering and letting everyone around me know it. At that point I'm not feeling very close to God, and friends and family aren't a high priority either.



Trouble with fasting isn't new. For example, the fifty-eighth chapter of Isaiah referred to as "True Fasting," tells the story of some people who were so caught up with their religious practices that they lost sight of how fasting relates to God and each other.

It is consoling to know that God

offers some advice and a better way. In this newsletter, we'll explore true fasting and hear from some people who benefited from it. Their stories might give you some ideas for how you can open your heart to a true fast this Lenten season. †

Read

*Is this the manner of fasting
I wish,
of keeping a day of penance:
That a man bow his head like
a reed,
and lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
This, rather, is the fast that
I wish:
releasing those bound unjustly,
untying the thongs of the yoke;
Setting free the oppressed,
breaking every yoke;
Sharing your bread with the
hungry,
sheltering the oppressed and
homeless;*

—Isaiah 58:5–7

Reflect

Lent is not meant to be a time for us to test our willpower or prove ultimate feats of strength. It's more about a quiet realization of our complete dependence and reliance upon God. ■

Kelsey's Story

Chicken! Veggies! Soy! Rice!

These four words get a lot of use if you volunteer at Feed My Starving Children. They also bring with them a lot of excitement. Who could imagine that a group of teenagers could pack 19,224 bags of food and save the lives of 56 children in a matter of only two short hours? That's exactly what happened when my youth group traveled to this organization's headquarters to volunteer one morning during spring break.



It's certainly not unusual for teenagers to be volunteering. These days most of us need volunteer hours for different clubs, organizations, or classes. But needing them and wanting them are two different things. I think that's because so few of us understand the amazing things a volunteer can do. As a younger kid, I remember seeing speakers talk about changing the world. I would get excited,

but pretty soon feel overwhelmed. What could I really do? I thought changing the world meant raising millions of dollars! Now that I'm older, I'm starting to see that making a difference isn't about a big, glamorous production. It's more often about early mornings, plastic gloves, and hairnets. Changing the world can be as simple as scooping chicken, soy, veggies, and rice into a bag to feed a starving child, and then cheering about it with your friends. ■



What You Can Do

A priest friend once told me this about fasting, "Would God prefer you to go hungry with full cupboards, or feed the stomachs of those who have empty cupboards?" If you're looking for ways to share your bread, here are a few ideas.

- Donate to a local food pantry, and check on their volunteer needs.
- Organize a food drive at your school or parish.
- Learn at least three facts about hunger and tell everyone you know.
- Volunteer at a soup kitchen or shelter.
- Make dinner for an elderly person or a family in need.
- Share your lunch with someone who may have forgotten or cannot afford one.
- Invite those who may be alone to join you for a holiday meal.
- Buy lunch for someone.
- Do not take more than you can eat.
- Never waste food.
- Instead of gifts, ask for food donations at your next party. Donate the collection to a shelter or food pantry. ■

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Dee's Story

I've spent my entire life watching my mother take care of people. My memories are filled with instances of her helping aging relatives, needy friends, or one of the many ladies for whom she was a hairdresser. She has driven people to appointments, bought and delivered groceries, cut lawns, cleaned houses, sat in waiting



and emergency rooms, listened, comforted, and counseled more folks than I could count. She has rarely told anyone no and never felt too busy or important to do any job asked of her. More surprisingly, she has often performed these tasks for people who were less than kind and not very grateful. People ask why she puts up with so much. Her reply is always the same, "What else could I do?" This simple yet profound response catches everyone off guard. For my mom, it isn't about judging whether or not someone deserves the help, and it isn't about measuring the quality or quantity of his or her gratitude. For her, the bottom line is that you never turn your back on someone in need. ■

Read

*Clothing the naked when you
see them,
and not turning your back on
your own.
Then your light shall break forth
like the dawn,
and your wound shall quickly
be healed;
Your vindication shall go
before you,
and the glory of the Lord shall
be your rear guard.*

—Isaiah 58:7b-8

Reflect

While a physical fast from food is a meaningful form of prayer, it's a personal experience we share only with God. The true fast described in Isaiah involves a communal relationship with others. It's not about our private suffering, but instead about easing the suffering of others. ■

What You Can Do

Catholics tend to be a generous people. We support causes and fundraisers, donate gently used items, and dig deep to support relief efforts. We're great at organized compassion and giving, which is good. Almsgiving is a traditional Lenten practice. This Lent, why not also take a look at how we show charity and mercy to the people in our homes? And how do we treat our co-workers, or those we encounter in line at a store or in traffic? Here are some ideas that might help you be more mindful of the people you meet in the course of your daily life.

- Smile at store clerks and restaurant workers. Make eye contact and greet them.
- Reach out to a relative you haven't spoken to for a while.
- Hold open a door for someone.
- Turn off the car radio and talk to the people riding with you.
- Have breakfast and conversation with a family member—no electronic devices.
- Visit a neighbor or co-worker and listen to what's going on in his or her life.
- Offer to drive someone to an appointment and wait with him or her.
- Sit with a friend in the hospital.
- Visit a relative in a retirement or nursing home.
- Greet people, even those you don't know, at church this weekend.
- Allow someone to go ahead of you in line.
- Do something for a family member to make life easier today.
- At work, make sure someone's opinion gets heard and respected. ■

Read

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer,
You shall cry for help, and he will say;
Here I am!
If you remove from your midst oppression,
false accusation and malicious speech;
If you bestow your bread on the hungry
and satisfy the afflicted;
Then light shall rise for you in the darkness,
and the gloom shall become for you like midday;
Then the Lord will guide you always
and give you plenty even on the parched land.
He will renew your strength,
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring whose water never fails.

—Isaiah 58:9–11

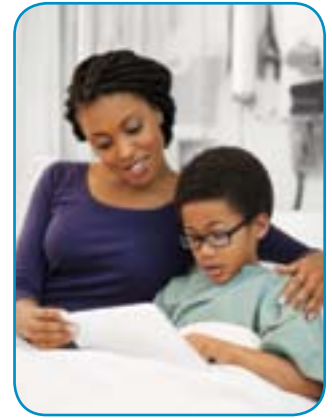
Reflect

It's not just what you say, it can also be what you think. *Who do they think they are? Do they know what I've done for them? Why doesn't anyone help me? Why am I responsible for all this mess?* While those around us may not hear the words, they often feel the emotion speaking through our actions and attitude. How might you act, interact, and react differently if you replaced negative chatter with humble compassion? ■



Jason's Story

Last year, my two-year-old son underwent spinal cord surgery. The operation was successful, but the recovery was difficult. For three days, he had to stay horizontal. Worse, my wife became ill. I stayed with the boy, sleeping on a chair that tilted back into something less L-shaped and more V-shaped. I was exhausted and severely stressed. The other family in the room, behind the curtain, watched television loudly, ate pungent carryout at odd hours in the night. I'd grit my teeth, shake my head. I grew irritated with them. They made a difficult trial even worse for me.



On my last day, I saw their boy for the first time; twelve or thirteen, he quietly held his head while rolled out in a wheelchair. I was moved, as anyone would be. And I realized that, caught up in my own difficulties, I'd thought not one bit about their suffering. Obsessed with my drama, I'd shut all the curtains and locked the

doors, which bred within me malicious thoughts and disregard for others in need. When they returned from their walk, I offered to share some of my son's DVDs. I think they knew what I really wanted to say. The burden became much more bearable when I stopped making myself the center of the story. ■

What You Can Do

How can you eliminate prejudice, disrespect, gossip, lies, judgments, and angry words from your life? What blessings will be awaiting you when you do? Consider these suggestions.

- Focus on being loving, not being right.
- Give someone the benefit of the doubt.
- Forgive someone for something.
- Be conscious of your negative speak; even sarcasm can hurt sometimes.
- Open yourself and share your feelings with a friend or family member.
- Do not participate in gossip.
- Stand up for someone being gossiped about.
- Don't judge someone based on appearance.
- Ask questions if you don't understand. Don't make assumptions.
- Apologize for something you've done wrong or to someone you've hurt.
- Compliment someone.
- Pray for patience, and then practice it. ■

“If we focus too much on what we are going to do or not do, we risk missing out on the gift God wants to give us during Lent.”

—Andy Alexander, SJ, and Maureen McCann Waldron in *Praying Lent: Renewing Our Lives on the Lenten Journey*

