

January 29, 2006. Fasting Esther 4:6-17

## **Drawing Near to God and to Each Other**

### **A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

Copyright © Makiki Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

**The Sermon in a Sentence:** We can fast in any number of ways, but the goal is always to grow in our relationship with God and with our neighbor.

**Why I am Preaching it:** So that the congregation will see fasting as a possibility for themselves for growing in love of God and of neighbor.

We have come to fasting, which is the third of the spiritual disciplines in our series. This is the first discipline that might seem a little strange to us. Prayer is something that we all do in one way or another. We are familiar with meditating on Scripture. But fasting is another story. It sounds kind of radical, maybe something for monks and religious hermits.

Last week Pastor Wayne preached on fasting, and sixty or more people saw the DVD on fasting in the Upper Social Hall. This week the small groups are talking about fasting and how it might work out in our lives. This morning I will be going back and forth between the fast experienced by Queen Esther, and some modern examples of fasting that I am aware of or have participated in. Although in the Bible fasting always refers to abstaining or limiting food intake, I will expand it to abstaining from anything temporarily for the sake of spiritual growth. I hope that by the end of the sermon we will have some useful ideas on how we might fast, and we will see fasting as a way to grow in our love for God and our love for our neighbor.

The first two times that I fasted, I didn't even know that I was fasting. Let me tell you about them.

When I was in elementary school I heard some of my Catholic classmates talking about giving things up for Lent, so I thought that I would try it, too. I decided to give up chocolates, but I didn't tell anybody—not even my parents. I had forgotten that Valentine's Day came a couple of days after the beginning of Lent that year, and as it turned out, my father gave my mother a big heart-shaped box full of chocolate candy. Since my mother didn't know about my fast from chocolate, she offered me a piece. I eagerly took one and

silently prayed: “I changed my mind, God. I’ll give up kite flying for Lent instead of chocolate.” So that was my first fast. Not too impressive.

A few years later, in junior high school I think, I decided to try observing Lent again. This time I got up early every morning and read a few pages of the Bible, starting at the beginning. I don’t think I understood much, especially when I was working my way through books like Leviticus, but anyway, I got farther than I had with the chocolate fast.

I didn’t think of what I was doing as a fast. In fact, I don’t know that I had ever even heard of fasting. But according to Richard Foster, fasting is giving up something that is ordinarily good for the sake of intense spiritual activity. You could say that I was fasting from half an hour of sleep every morning for the sake of the spiritual activity of reading God’s Word. As in all fasts, there is something that you choose not to do, in this case sleeping late, and there is something you choose to do, in this case, drawing closer to God by reading his word.

This morning’s Scripture reading tells the story of a fast that took place about 2500 years ago in Persia, or modern Iran.

Esther is one of the most popular books of the Bible for Jews. They still celebrate the festival of Purim, which is based on these events. Esther’s life has everything needed for a great story—drama, intrigue, risk, violence. It would be easy to make a movie of this book. Some have already been made.

The book of Esther never mentions God directly, yet you see his invisible hand in every chapter. The original queen is deposed, creating a need for a new queen. The man in charge of the harem is pleased with Esther, which helps in her journey towards becoming the one chosen by the king. In that way the Jews had one of their own as queen in their time of crisis.

Esther’s cousin and guardian Mordecai happens to overhear a plot against the king and reports it, so he, also gains influence at court during this critical moment in Jewish history. The book is full of what some people might call strange coincidences, but what Christians call the work of God.

The book covers a time when things were looking very, very bad for the Jews. Years earlier they had been taken away in exile, and had settled in what later became the Persian empire. Haman was the most powerful man

in the empire, after the king of course. He had a personal vendetta against the Jews. He deceived the king into ordering their elimination—something like the Holocaust.

Today's reading picks up the story at that critical moment. Queen Esther commits herself to an absolute fast—nothing to eat, and nothing to drink. All the Jews fasted with her. Most fasts allow at least water, but apparently the crisis was so grave that she felt that extreme measures were necessary.

Every other part of the Bible links fasting with worship and prayer. As an infant, Jesus was blessed by Anna, the prophetess. Luke tells us that she always worshiped, fasted, and prayed in the Temple. We think, too, of the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch in Acts. They fasted, worshiped, and prayed when they selected Paul and Barnabas as missionaries to the Gentiles. The Bible does not say that Esther and the other Jews worshiped and prayed along with their fast, but I figure they probably did. At any rate, worship and prayer will be appropriate for any fast that we participate in.

Like any spiritual discipline, fasting is never an end in itself. All of the spiritual disciplines exist only for the purpose of opening us up to God and to each other in some way.

So let's get back to Esther's fast. The Jews were in a crisis, and they may have been approaching God to ask him to intervene and save them from being slaughtered. God invites us to make our requests known to him. Of course the fast is not meant to pressure God into doing things our way. We make our request, and then he gives or withholds according to what is best.

When I was in seminary, the school faced a financial crisis. A time of prayer and fasting was declared for all who desired to participate. We were free to respond in any way that we desired. Some fasted, some prayed individually, some prayed in groups, we had chapel services. Individually and as a school we did draw closer to God. As it worked out, money started coming in from unexpected sources; the crisis was resolved.

It is possible that Esther and the others also fasted to draw closer to God so that he would form their character. Maybe they wanted to prepare themselves spiritually for whatever happened, whether it was death or rescue. It has certainly worked out in history that whole nations have been

converted when the people saw something of the character of Jesus in Christians as they faced persecution. As we approach God, little by little we become more like him.

Some people have found that fasting focuses the mind and helps them to think God's thoughts more clearly. Esther needed to be very wise in her interaction with the king. If that was why she fasted, God honored her request. She was extremely clever in how she approached the king. You can read about it in the chapters just after this morning's reading.

A friend of mine fasted as part of his decision making process about accepting a leadership position in a Christian group. He told me that fasting helped him to see the issues more clearly.

So God is the focus of our fasting. We are asking him to intervene in our lives, or we are asking him to make us more like Jesus, or we are asking him to guide our thinking regarding a difficult decision or situation. But a side benefit of fasting can be a closer relationship with our Christian brothers and sisters. That comes as no surprise. Jesus said that the greatest commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor. He also said that people will know we are Christians by our love for one another.

I think that when our school fasted, worshiped, and prayed, it affected our relationships with each other. I would imagine that the Jews felt a deeper bond with each other after they had this common experience of Esther's fast.

I have fasted from time to time on my own, but the fasts that meant the most to me were when for a few months a friend and I committed together to fast before communion. It drew us closer to God, but it also strengthened our bond with each other. On a practical level, too, it is easier not to cheat on your fast if somebody else is participating with you.

A couple of other things I would like to add about fasting: First, there is no one right way to do it. You can read what other people have done, and what to expect in fasting. Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*, has a chapter on it. Other books are available, too. The Bible give some instructions on fasting. You can read, talk with other people, and then experiment with different ways of fasting.

The other thing I would like to mention is that, although biblical fasting is limited to food, the concept behind fasting can include other things. As Pastor Wayne said last week, there are a number of people who for medical reasons should not fast from food. If that is your situation, try fasting from something else.

As part of my preparation for this sermon I decided to experiment with fasting from something besides food. Before I tell you about it, I need to make a confession: I can get kind of compulsive when it comes to e-mail, and also the newspaper. Normally I check e-mail three times a day, but sometimes I get out of control and check if much more frequently. I am eager to be in touch with people, and to have other people be in touch with me. I get and send prayer requests by e-mail. I also like to be on top of the daily news. I don't feel quite right until I have read at least the front section of the newspaper. And sometimes I end up spending a lot more time with the paper than I should.

Remember that fasting includes not doing something, and it includes doing something else. Foster talks about fasting from people. So I decided that I would fast from my compulsion to be in touch with people. Instead, I would try to be more in touch with God for a day. So here was my plan: I would not check my e-mail for a full day. I would send e-mails if they were necessary for my work, but I would not check what had been sent to me. It wouldn't work in some jobs, but I never get any e-mail that can't wait a day. I also decided not to make any phone calls, although I would answer the phone if it rang. Finally, I would not read the newspaper. The world would keep turning even if I didn't know what was happening for a day.

So how did it go? The e-mail was the hardest for me. I really wanted to check it, and I felt anxious that I didn't know who might have sent me something. I was glad that I had told a couple of people about my plan. I didn't want to have to confess to them that I had sneaked a look at my e-mail. I thought of a few phone calls to make, but then I realized that they could wait. When I walked through the Lower Social Hall and saw a newspaper sitting there, I reminded myself that I didn't need to know what the headlines were.

Well, if I was not reading e-mail or the paper or making phone calls, what could I do that might draw me closer to God and to my neighbor? I brought a CD of Christian music to work, and every so often I took a break and

listened to it, trying to focus on the message. There are people who send me prayer requests by e-mail. Since I could not read their requests for the day, I prayed for them according to some of the prayers in the Bible. I prayed that they would be filled with God's love, that they would live a life worthy of God, and please him.

Nothing amazing and dramatic happened. But there were some small results. As I mentioned, I started out the day feeling anxious. But as I prayed for people using the Scriptures, I felt a sense of gratitude to God for them. In a small way, fasting did affect my love for God and for my neighbor.

It wasn't a burden. In fact, it was kind of fun. I suggest that you experiment a little with fasting. Here is one possibility of a fast you might try: We will be starting up some small groups during Lent. Try fasting from a couple of hours of TV each week, and use the extra time to try out a group. It should be an enjoyable way to prepare for Easter. And I think you will find that you will draw closer to God and to each other.

Let us pray.