

BELPRES CHURCH

Hungering For God

Isaiah 58, Esther 4:1-4, Matthew 4:1-11, Matthew 6:16-18

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Thank our guest worship leaders one more time.

If you're new here, we don't always do bluegrass, but man, you can't be unhappy when there's bluegrass, right? It just makes you feel so good. And take me back to my Eastern Washington roots, my grandma used to sing all those songs to me.

So, thank you guys for being our guest worship leaders today.

Holy Spirit, as we turn to your word, ask that you would teach us by it. Help us to know how we become more like you. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, I do want to say hello to those of you who are in the room and those of you online, thanks for joining us.

Last Sunday, 48 people were baptized or reaffirmed their baptism and 16 of those had not signed up. They just felt the Holy Spirit nudge them in the service to get baptized and as I said last week, that means that in the last 13 months we have baptized well above 200 people in this church, which is just so cool and shows that God is really moving in our church.

And there were so many great moments last week, but one of my favorite ones was at our 11 o'clock sanctuary service, one of our middle schoolers did a full-on cannonball dive into the baptismal tank and this tsunami of water splashed onto the front row, baptizing people whether they wanted to be or not. And when he came out of the water, he said, "This is the best day of my life."

And that is just so cool, and it's a picture of where God is taking us as a church. We want to be fully immersed in the hope and the courage and the joy of Jesus and that happens when we are disciples.

A disciple is just someone who is learning to become like Jesus and part of the way we become like Jesus is through spiritual practices that he himself did and that for 2,000 years have proven to make folks more like Jesus and have more of his courage, hope, and joy. And we've been talking through this list the last couple of weeks, and today the one we're going to talk about is fasting. Yay, fasting.

All right, so... Oh you... They were not excited in the other service, but you guys are really stoked to do the fasting thing. I'm so glad. You got up this morning and you thought, "Man, I hope the sermon is on fasting." Right? That was the first thought when you woke up.

And if you're not, if you're like, "Fasting, eh," just hang on. Don't tune me out just yet and start thinking about brunch, because that would be ironic.

For thousands of years people have fasted because it leads to joy. Fasting leads to feasting on the presence of Jesus. It's giving up natural to experience something supernatural.

Now, before I go any further, I just want to say if you have certain medical conditions, if you're pregnant, if you're prone to disordered eating conditions of any kind or if you're a kid, you should not fast from food. But there are other things you can fast from like anything involving a screen, or maybe for you fasting is eating just bland food with no salt or seasonings, things like that.

As I go through this sermon, be thinking of things other than food that you can fast from, but for the rest of us, the biblical norm is to fast from food and it is not meant to make us miserable.

In the Bible, God commanded the Israelites to celebrate seven feasts per year. Seven feasts because God likes a party and in fact, throughout church history, fasting was prohibited on the Sabbath because the Sabbath is meant for feasting. And there's nowhere in the Bible that God commands that everyone should fast, so it's not a command, but it is highly recommended.

Jesus himself fasted and he tells his disciples, "When you fast," not if. He's assuming we're going to do it. "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do for they

disfigure their faces to show others that they're fasting. I tell you they've already received their reward in full, but when you fast put oil on your head, wash your face so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting but only to your father and your father will reward you." Reward you.

That doesn't mean we can only fast in secret. In fact, in the Bible, lots of times people fasted as a community, but what Jesus is saying is fast for the right reasons, not to virtue signal how holy you are or feel good about yourself or something like that, but fast to experience Jesus more. That's the point of it.

In the book of Isaiah, God says, "If you fast for the right reasons, then your light will break forth like the dawn and you will find your joy," joy, "In the Lord and feast on the inheritance of your father, Jacob." Fasting leads to feasting on the presence of Jesus and it brings joy for a number of ways that I'm just going to tick off real quick in this sermon.

First way fasting brings joy is in a gluttonous culture, fasting helps us hear Jesus better. We are a gluttonous culture. We have way too much of everything and Americans especially I think need fasting because it's all about the joy of less. It is like a bowl full of rice. This picture here, that's your life. That's my life. Just completely full with work and school and social engagements and vacations and they're all good things. I like rice. My wife is Chinese. Her family... We eat a lot of rice, which is great. I like rice, but there's just too much of it in our lives.

What happens if God wants to give you chocolate ice cream? There's no room for it in our lives. Fasting is about opening up space for God to fill you up. In a gluttonous culture, it's about creating space so that we can hear God.

If you're standing right next to 405, there are birds that are singing, you just can't hear because of the cars. But if the cars stop, you can hear them. Fasting is letting go of a lot of stuff for a season so that we can hear Jesus better and I'll give you more details in a minute.

Second way fasting brings joy is it makes Jesus more tangibly real. It was common for Christians to fast up until the Enlightenment in the 18th century, which emphasized our minds over our bodies, and that's good for a lot of things like science and Jesus calls us to use our minds, but that whole division between body and mind or body and soul, that is not in the Bible, that's Plato and Aristotle. The Bible doesn't say we have a body. The Bible says we are a body and soul fused together. There is no such thing as a spiritual practice that isn't also physical.

When God came himself and the person of Jesus, he came in a body and fasting is a way to get us back in touch with the physical nature of following Jesus.

The Bible says, "In view of God's mercies, present your thoughts and spiritual stuff to God. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice." And the problem in our culture is our faith is literally... It's disembodied. It's all about what we think. It's about believing the right things and thinking the right doctrines. It's all cerebral. And it's important to know things, but it's even more important to do the things we know. And we all got a lot of knowledge that we don't even need.

I know lots of things. I know that there's no word in English that rhymes with month, for instance. I know that it is physically impossible to lick your elbow, and I know that before today is over, some of you're going to try to lick your elbow. And sadly for some of you that's all you're getting out of this sermon. Like, "What'd the pastor talk about?" "Can't lick your elbow. I don't know what that has to do with Jesus. Something."

I know lots of things, but if our faith is only cerebral, it makes Jesus less tangible, which is why so many Western Christians say, "Jesus just doesn't seem real to me." You want Jesus to be more real? Fast. Worship him with your body. Fasting is a way to do that. And for those of you who should not fast from food, there are other ways to involve our bodies in worship. Again, eat only really bland food for a day or two, or going on prayer walks. If you're prone to disordered eating, maybe, a eating condition of any kind, maybe talk to a therapist to find out what's going on in your body as a way to get more in touch with that.

Third way fasting brings joy is it teaches us to rely on Jesus instead of all the other things we're clinging to.

A man I know told his five-year-old daughter that he was going to fast and she said, "You can't go without food, you'll die." And he said, "No, no, no. Look at all the people in the Bible that fasted. Moses, David Paul..." And she said, "Yeah, they're all dead." And that's how we feel sometimes. "I can't live without that thing." The food or the social media or the whatever it is we're clinging to, but when we fast, we feel Jesus sustain us, which makes him more real to us.

See, normally we have the illusion that we are in control, but you go just one day without food and you realize you are not in control. And every time we feel hungry or a little weak, it reminds us that we are not the creator, we are the created and we need Jesus, and that helps us turn to him more.

Jesus said, "A person shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." He said that after he had fasted for 40 days. He also said, "I am the bread of life."

Fasting reminds us that we need Jesus as much as we need food. He is our spiritual bread. And it also... Fasting also reveals how addicted we are to feeling good. We love to be comfortable and feel good, and there's nothing wrong with feeling good, but if that's what we rely on? [inaudible 00:10:21] Relying on that instead of Jesus, it controls us and we are not free from it. If we can't be happy if we're a little hungry or cold or tired or if it ruins your vacation, if the air conditioner in the hotel isn't working... Not that that's ever happened to me, just a thing I made up. Probably happened to one of you. That shows what we actually are depending on and it's not Jesus.

I know a woman who recently fasted for one day and she said, "What struck me was how often I reach for food just to feel better or because I'm bored." Same thing can be said for social media. We use it to feel better or because we're bored. What if we turned to Jesus instead? And she said, "But when I fasted I couldn't do that. All I could do was pray." And she said, "For some reason the lower my energy got, the more I wanted to pray." And she said, "If I'd had my normal energy, I just would've crammed the day full of other things to do, but my weakness made me depend more on Jesus, which led me to pray, which made him more real to me."

Fourth, fasting helps us experience joy in the ordinary. As I just said, we are addicted to feeling good and like any addiction, if we are turning to social media or vacations or binge-watching or whatever it is to feel good, then like any addiction, pretty soon we're going to need more and more and more and bigger and bigger and bigger to get the same dopamine hit. Fasting returns us back to earth, settles us down a little bit from that.

The same woman I told you about, she fasted for a day. She said, "At the end of the day I got together with some other people from my church that were fasting," and she said, "The simple meal of soup and bread that we had to break the fast, I enjoyed that simple meal more than I've enjoyed most meals." Just one day of fasting and she's getting joy out of ordinary food. Doesn't need a five-star restaurant. That breaks the pattern of, "I need more and more and more to be happy." And that is so liberating.

Which brings me to a fifth way fasting brings joy, and that is freedom, because we break free from the things that control us, whether that's food or social media or whatever it is.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote, "I do not understand what I do for what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do. What a wretched man I am." Do you ever feel like that? I am so glad this verse is in the Bible. This is one of the verses that makes me a Christian. Thank you for being real Apostle Paul. The thing you want to do, you don't do the thing you don't want to do, you keep doing it?

A lot of that stems from the tyranny of the body where our natural drives for food and sex and self-protection, they reside there in the body and those are all good things. They're not bad things. Those are all good things. It's just sometimes they get out of whack or they become out of control or they get out of balance or they get misapplied and then they turn into things like substance addictions or pornography or holding on to bitterness because it feels like self-defense. The tyranny of the body. And again, our bodies are good and we are both a body and soul fused together, but fasting helps break the tyranny of the body when those natural drives get out of control and out of balance.

We live in a culture that says, "If it feels good, do it." The corollary is if it doesn't feel good, don't do it. And the problem with that is, more and more if we lean on that, we become people who cannot do the right thing unless it feels good. And sometimes doing the right thing doesn't feel good. Then we start trampling over each other because we're all just trying to feel good and we're running over each other in the process and it's destroying our country because there are fewer and fewer people capable of doing the right thing if it's the hard thing to do.

Fasting puts our good desires for pleasure back into balance again, so if you are trapped in some behavior, you don't want to be in pornography, yelling at your kids too much, over consumption, fasting breaks those chains and sets us free and helps us become the people that we really want to be.

Fasting helps us hear Jesus, makes him more real, helps us depend on Jesus more, find joy in the ordinary, sets us free, and finally, fasting brings change.

Often in the Bible, people fasted as a way to amplify their prayers to God. Now, and to be clear, God hears our prayers whether we fast or not, but in some mysterious way, fasting somehow amplifies our prayers to God, which is why for instance in the Bible, when the Israelites faced annihilation in the book of Esther, they called a fast and God interceded and averted the crisis.

Now, we have to be careful. Fasting is not some kind of hunger strike to get God to do what we want. The point of not eating is not to get God eating out of our hands, but in a mysterious way in the Bible, when God's people fast and pray, especially together as a community, God moves.

In the book of Jeremiah God says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart." And in the original Hebrew, the word that's used there for heart can also mean stomach, intestines, kidneys. So, seek me with all of your kidneys. That's kind of what he's saying here, and what he's saying is your whole body. When we fast, we add our bodies to our prayers, and now we're seeking God with everything we've got, body, soul, heart, mind, all of it, which releases God's power and things begin to

change. And the thing that always changes is us. Regardless of what happens in our circumstances, fasting makes us more like Jesus.

Fasting brings joy for all of those reasons, which is why people have done it for thousands of years. They wouldn't keep doing it if there wasn't some payoff to it.

Let me give you some practical tips for how to fast because we don't practice this much here in the United States. So, just some practical tips.

First, start small. Don't be like, "I'm going to fast for five days." Okay, that's just going to fail. Don't do that.

The most common fast is from dinner one night to dinner the next night, 24 hours. Start with that and if you can't do that, then fast till three or something. Start small.

Second, keep at it. The point of all the spiritual practices we're talking about in this sermon series is not to do them once and then never do it again. That doesn't transform us. You wouldn't practice the piano once and expect to be a master pianist the rest of your life. It's as we practice these practices over and over, which is why they're called practices, it's when we do them over and over that we begin to be transformed.

To be honest, when I first started fasting, all it did was make me hungry and grumpy. I didn't like it. But over time, as my body got more used to it, I really did find that it started to connect me to Jesus in a deeper way. So, work this in periodically as just part of your spiritual life.

And then third, never fast without lots of prayer. Fasting and prayer always go together in the Bible. If you don't add extra prayer, all you're doing is going through your day hungry and grumpy. That's all you're doing. So add extra prayer. Use the time you would've spent cooking and eating to pray. Every time you feel hungry, that is a reminder to pray and say to yourself, "As much as I need food, I need Jesus."

And this is one of the benefits for me fasting. Every time I feel hungry, I pray, because as I've shared with you before, I love to eat. I just loved... I'm so glad there's going to be food in heaven. I'm so glad about that. I just love to eat. I've told you lots of stories. I remember one time we were visiting my parents and my mom noticed that I had eaten an entire bag of cookies in one evening and as I had a cookie in my hand, my mom said, "There were two dozen cookies in that bag." And I was like, "and your point?" I love to eat, so fasting is uncomfortable for me. That's the point. It's breaking my addiction to comfort. And every time I feel that discomfort, it spurs me to pray.

And then also just super practically, when you fast drink lots of water. Super practical. Here's the action step. As a way of practicing the spiritual practice of fasting and prayer, we are calling our entire church to a church-wide 24 hours of fasting, prayer, and feasting from seven P.M. Friday, May 17th to 7:00 PM Saturday May 18th in two weeks. And during that same window, we'll have 24 hours of prayer.

In the lobby today, you can sign up for a thirty-minute prayer shift, or you can do two, you'll make it an hour, and we're going to give you a short list of things to pray for yourself, for our church, and for the world.

For our church, we're all going to be praying together the same things that we become more like Jesus, experience an outpouring of His Holy Spirit, and that people will come to know Jesus as Lord. And our hope is to get every hour of those 24 hours covered. So, for those of you whose brains love to wake you up at three A.M., that's your prayer shift. Sign up for three A.M. and pray. You can do 30 minutes, you can do an hour. And you can pray from wherever you are, but the church will also be open for those 24 hours and we would strongly encourage you to come here and pray, even if it's at three A.M.

And then the next day, Sunday, we're going to come together and worship, and there's going to be some food here and we're going to celebrate together as a community. Our 24 hours of prayer and fasting coincides with our East African community, New Hope Revival, coincides with the end of their 21 days of prayer and fasting where they have been fasting from sun up to dinner for 21 days. We felt like 21 days might be a bit much for us, so we shrink it down to 24 hours, which will coincide with the end of their prayer and fasting time.

Next year it's going to be 21 days.

You can sign up for 30 minutes or an hour in the lobby today or on our website, but if you're here, sign up today in the lobby at the table so you don't forget.

And for those of you who should not be fasting from food, think about what else you're going to fast from in that time.

And I believe if we do this as a community, we're going to see God move and I'm actually excited about it, because I believe if we do this, we're going to see God move in some way. I can't predict how, but I am really excited to hear the stories you're all going to tell of how you saw God at work in these 24 hours.

There's a woman I'll call Amy, who had a co-worker named Sherry that she just couldn't stand because she thought Sherry was shallow and superficial and pushy and irritating. And so Amy's pastor said, "Well, why don't you pray and fast for Sherry?"

And Amy said, "No, I'm not going to do that." But then later on she started to think, "Well, maybe if I fast, God will change Sherry."

Oh, you so know where this is going, right? You so know where this is going.

So, Amy fasted for one day every week for 10 weeks and it didn't change Sherry a bit, but it did wonders for Amy. She said she experienced Jesus in a more tangible way in those 10 weeks. And she said, "Whenever I had a craving for a Twinkie," which is a weird thing to crave, but whatever. She said, "Whenever I had a craving for a Twinkie, I realized why Sherry filled her life with empty things like clothes and makeup and... Just to fill it with something. And I realized, who am I to judge? I'm no different. Here I am craving a Twinkie to make myself feel better. I'm just the same." And Amy began to have more compassion for Sherry. And over the course of those 10 weeks, they actually ended up becoming friends. And the other thing that changed was the atmosphere in the office got way better. It got friendlier. It got a lot less stressful.

Now, the result of her prayer and fasting wasn't some giant miracle, but it was one step that helped Amy experience Jesus more and made him more real to her, and it changed her and it changed her entire office. She became a little more like Jesus with more of his hope, courage, and joy and a little less judgmental. And I believe that's going to be true for all of us.

So, sign up to be part of that 24 hour prayer, fasting, and feasting weekend as a start to a lifelong process that really will lead you into a closer relationship with Jesus.

And then as God promises us in the book of Isaiah, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn and you will find your joy in the Lord and you will feast on the inheritance of your Father in heaven forever."

Jesus, we are hungry for you, we just don't know it, because we have filled our lives with so many things other than you. So Jesus, thank you for this invitation of fasting to do without for a little bit so that we can experience you a lot more.

And so Jesus, help us to do this. Help us to want to do this. Help us to do it, and when we do, help us to experience you moving in our lives. Jesus, all we want is a closer walk with you. And so lead us into that closer walk.

We hunger for you. Help us realize how hungry we are for you, because you are the bread of life and in you we have our satisfaction and our joy. In your name Jesus, amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- From these texts, what are the purposes (there are multiple) for fasting?
- According to these texts, how should we fast and how should we not fast? What makes fasting spiritually helpful?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- As we practice fasting together, we are encouraged to start small, keep practicing over time, and combine it with prayer. What emotions come up for you as consider the practice of fasting (excitement, hopefulness, fear, concern?) What part of prayer & fasting do you anticipate will be the most challenging for you?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.