



This Year FASTing Has New Meaning

"...better to fatten the soul than the body."

Some 420 years after Christ was born, St. Jerome wrote: "If you wish to be perfect, it is better to fatten the soul than the body."

That's still true. But today when a headline tells us that someone is fasting, we understand that kind of self-denial as symbolic fasting, a political tool of protest. But not a religious practice.

When the word "fasting" appears in the Bible, it's speaking of spiritual goals -- something very different than a demonstration for political ends.

By Jesus' time, fasting had become a very important part of the Jewish life. Market days, when everyone from the countryside came to town, is when the Pharisees would fast. They would walk where they would surely be seen with their hair disheveled and wearing old clothes. They covered themselves with dirt and rubbed their faces with white chalk in order to look pale. Fasting became a "look-at-how-spiritual-I-am" exercise.

Later on, Christians used fasting as a way to prepare for Easter. Traditionally, they gave up meat during Lent. (So in Trinidad they call the pre-Lenten festival *Carnival*, Latin for *farewell to meat*.) When we fast today, we may also avoid eating dairy foods, maybe wine and desserts too. But why do we give up food?

"We do not fast," explains an Orthodox Christian bishop, "because we think there is something in itself unclean about the act of eating and drinking. Food and drink are, on the contrary, God's gifts."

So why fast?

Fasting can seem to be an attempt to twist God's arm or win God's approval. Rather, we are taught that fasting is a discipline to help us seek God "with all our heart." It is a demonstrable way of saying that food is not as important to me as _____ (fill in the blank).

Ideally fasting should result in something that benefits our community. Isaiah wrote: "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to *continued next column*

Too Much Talk? They're Doing Something Now, FAST

One issue, justice, may be the only issue that almost all churches will agree on. Whether your sacred text is the Bible, the Torah, the Koran or the Book of Mormon, justice is the starting point, the minimum, the absolute essential if any religious meanings are to take hold.

So if your patience is thinning with pieties and politics, take courage. A group has arrived here that has shown it can focus on specific goals, rally large numbers of people and exert the pressure to get justice done. It's called FAST, Faith and Action for Strength Together. Our parish delegate, **James Corn**, says. "I appreciate the goals of this organization. They want to correct the issues at the cause."

"You take 20 people to city hall," James observes, "and the powers do listen politely. But you arrive with 200 and they respond!" And FAST has a record since 2005 of producing the big numbers (1200 committed people for full-day Pre-K event in 2005). "That's a show of power that officials couldn't ignore," James says.

These assemblies, called Nehemiah Actions after the O.T. prophet who led the Hebrews to the restoration of the city of Jerusalem, are the culmination of careful planning and study. The confrontations have addressed School Discipline, Senior Transportation, Affordable Housing and Bus Shelters. *continued, back page*

undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? (Isaiah 58:6).

Perhaps the writers of *The Shepherd of Hermas*, a popular book in the 2nd century, were thinking about Isaiah's questions when they wrote, "On the day of the fast, eat only bread and water. Work out the cost of the food you would have consumed, and give a corresponding sum to a widow, an orphan, a needy person." In this sense, the fathers spoke of striving to be an *icon of Christ*.

One of the great doctors of the church in the 4th century, St. John Chrysostom, asked, "Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works.

"If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him....For what good is it if we abstain from meat and fish, but do not love our brothers?"

So the question is "Are you fasting this Lent? To what end?"

SIMPLE SUPPERS

EACH Wednesday during Lent this church aspires to a discipline of meals that are much less lavish than usual. People cook for each other -- most often a hearty soup with good breads. No, that's not exactly monastic self-denial, but combined with short programs where invited guests share their faith journeys, this promises to be a memorable Lenten exercise in reflection, repentance and renewal.

Fr. Whitlock says that Lent is the sabbath of the church year: like on the Lord's day, we observe a quieter time to overcome our own spiritual hurdles.

Thus our personal faith journeys -- and those of the guest speakers we will hear from each Wednesday after our 5:30 Simple Suppers -- are rich stories of overcoming major obstacles.

Each of our storytelling speakers, no matter their faith tradition -- and they will come from diverse religious backgrounds -- has an awareness that believing is an adventure that promises to be fascinating.

So sign up today. Help in the Lenten kitchen. Bring your best soup or bread, or help someone else.

Reflect. Repent. Renew yourself this year!

This weekly newsletter is for members and friends of one courageous Episcopal Church in south St. Petersburg, FL. The publication is about recognition and nixing hearsay, about candor, spiritual attitude and, yes, unashamed cheer leading. Members Judy and Tom Krug are the project's co-editors. Some 65 parishioners are essential to the effort. We think of this publication as the first draft of our congregation's recent history. Issues are available each Sunday after the service and also online at www.staugstpete.org, our web site for church-shoppers.

Another Great Year; Women Redefine Tradition

ECW just upended your birthday cake. In a stroke of truly original thinking, the ladies decided that birthday individuals will no longer be honored. Instead the Birthday Girl or Birthday Boy will become honorer instead of honoree – the celebrity will honor everyone else. Now that's egalitarian!

Beginning in April, "Happy Birthday," will be changed to "Come have some of my birthday cake."

At its meeting last Thursday, ECW decided to inaugurate once-a-month birthday celebrations here. Now get this: 1) The birthday folks themselves will be hosting the party. 2) Each month a birthday person will be asked to organize that month's celebration. 3) "Just cake and the birthday song added to our regular Sunday breakfast." 4) "Let's keep it simple and easy," advised **Inez Ford**.

In other plans, **Hazel Allen**, chair of Christian Growth, will initiate plans for a Quiet Day of Reflection. "Lent is a perfect time for this," she says. "I want to get started planning right away."

Also during Lent, ECW will sponsor a repeat of last year's celebration of a Seder Supper on Maundy *continued next column*

Thursday. **Judy Krug** will work on this with **Fr. Whitlock**.

That grand tradition, The Tasters' Luncheon, is scheduled for April 28th, shortly after Easter but well before hurricane season begins. "One year we chose a day during the season and ended up rescheduling twice because of storm threats," recalls **Mary Clowers**. "Never again."

Later this year, our Authentic British Tea, so successful this past year, will be repeated. **Donna McRae** is in charge and will be recruiting others to work with her this fall.

ECW President Mary Clowers reported that the ECW Cookbook is just about ready to submit to the printer. Targeted publication date is late April or early May. "Our cookbook will be just in time" **Joyce Corn** predicted, "for a wonderful Mothers' Day gift."

Once again the Episcopal Church Women came through on their pledge to raise \$2000 for the church's general budget. At the same time, Inez Ford reported in her treasurer's report, ECW satisfied all donations requested by the diocesan ECW. "And," she said proudly, "we still have \$789 in our treasury as yeast for this year's fund raising."

Brotherhood Tightening Its Operation

Thursday night, Men's Club President **Bobby Allen** firmed details of a new club dues program that will begin this month. Men of the parish will soon be getting letters explaining the program.

Bobby also formed four committees, seeking to take the study and discussion of issues into smaller work groups. And every event is being coordinated with the church's new Master Calendar.

Alternative dates, times and venues for the **Men's Prayer Breakfast** are being investigated. The MPB committee might redefine the MPB's purposes: fund raising, recruiting, fellowship, or education.

Another committee will schedule a forthcoming Saturday to invite the Britt House Boys over for a **Raking Party**. There are funds left from last year's Fish Fry to provide lunch for all.

Finally two members are investigating other dates for the Club's annual **Picnic & Mass on the Beach**. With Pentecost and Memorial Day falling on the same weekend, the group is looking for a less crowded Sunday at Fort DeSoto Park.

"Just about everything is getting a look-over to see if we can make our activities more effective," Bobby said.

It might have been yesterday's wisdom – but it was our St. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th century: "In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it."

FAST Talking *continued*

James is assembling a Justice Ministry Network here at St. A's. That's a band of folks who will make a difference by lending their strong presence to FAST engagements. James and three others will each bring three people to assemblies to demand more changes in affordable housing and school discipline.

Shirley Davis enlisted **Mary Clowers, Ida Matthews** and **Pat Stewart** to join her on February 26th and March 12. **Louise Stroude** has persuaded **Greg Duckett, Theresa Martin and Mordecai Walker**. **Joyce Corn** signed up **Mary Jones, Judy and Tom Krug**. **James Corn** is bringing **Bobby Allen, Shirley Davis and Louise Stroude**. These 15 people make up our church's first major affiliation with the FAST organization's actions.

For many months **Fr. Robin** has been encouraging our congregation to look at FAST as a way to address our need to get more involved in the concerns of the larger community. In fact he invited a FAST official to speak briefly at a recent Sunday breakfast.

Father Robin's wife **Ann** is the representative to FAST from Holy Family Roman Catholic Church in the city's north side. She says, "This group is a networking community. It lets churches do things they could not undertake on their own."

There are five other Episcopal congregations in Pinellas County that are involved in FAST's efforts.

As it continues to reinvent itself, St. Augustine's faces dramatic challenges. That process will require decision making well beyond the coping and survival mentalities that strangled our vestry's efforts for so many years.

It is ever more necessary that our process be prayerful.

We are now struggling to catalog our assets in this remarkable congregation. We are almost afraid to acknowledge what we are and how perfectly we are situated to do God's work.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."

from a speech by Nelson Mandela