

Rhythms

- We all know what it's like to be in rhythm. Things clicking, happening when supposed to, predictability, consistent routine, etc.
- Ironic start to series with almost two weeks of snow days. Maybe God's sense of humor.
- My wife and I: Is there school tomorrow? Who's in charge of kids? Church activities cancelled?
 - o Emma (4) 20 minutes before – Do I have dance class today?
 - o Just feel out of it – anyone else feel that way lately?
- Life works better when we're in rhythm, when routine (whatever it is) is consistent
 - o Same true of discipleship – easier to follow Jesus when in rhythm with God's kingdom
 - God created life in rhythm, there are ways in which we can be more in tune with God's Spirit, be in sync with God's kingdom
 - Today look at one way to get back in rhythm

Today we continue our Rhythms series with focus on **fasting**

- **Definition:** spiritual practice of **going without** in order to grow closer to God
 - o usually food but could be other things too
- Saw Jesus doing this a couple weeks ago when we looked at temptation account
 - o Jesus, led by HS, fasted for 40 days in wilderness before beginning public ministry

Matt 6 – in middle of Sermon on Mount

- Here are three practices God's people do to be in sync with kingdom rhythm
 - o Giving, Prayer, Fasting
 - Each expected of disciples
 - We should give to poor, it's something disciples do
 - We should pray (here's how: Lord's Prayer)
 - Each to be done in secret, don't make a show about it
 - When give, don't let left hand know what right hand doing
 - When pray, don't stand on street corner, go in closet and shut door
 - It's not about other people, it's about you and God, me and God
 - o Today's focus: Fasting

Read Matt 6:16-18¹

16 "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Whenever you fast

- First, Jesus expects his followers to do this
 - o Doesn't say how often, just says to do it
 - o Same with prayer, giving
 - o Simply a spiritual practice, discipleship practice, a tool for growing closer to God

Don't look dismal, like the hypocrites

NT Wright, Matthew for Everyone, p 62

- The current practice of Jesus' day seems to have been to **advertise** one's fasting by **letting your hair (and beard) go tangled**, and by **smearing ashes** on your face.
- That's just play-acting, Jesus declares. It's putting on a mask.
- Real fasting is between you and God, not something you do to show off.
- So do what you normally do to your head and face – wash, comb, sort yourself out in the usual way (in his culture that included anointing with oil)...
- Anyone here wash your face lately? Do something with your hair? Great, you're ready to start fasting – that's all the prep you need.

Do it in secret

- Don't let others know you're fasting – just between you and God
 - o Point is not for others to notice, not to lose weight, not to legalistically check a box that we did it, not to be holier than thou
 - o Reason we participate in spiritual practices is to draw closer to Jesus
 - be more in sync with the rhythm of God's kingdom
- I confess fasting is a huge challenge for me
 - o I'm really bad at fasting.
 - o Challenge for me is not so much to go without food but to stay civil in the process
 - Wedding advice from Greg – just make sure he doesn't get too hungry
 - Family, coworkers can attest (saw it this week when fasting! – GET OUT!)
 - Later told my wife "You know, I'm not very good at fasting." She said, "Oooohhhh, ok, yeah that makes sense."

- I'm much kinder person when I'm not hungry
- Best for me to fast in solitude. Do whatever's best for you.
- Jesus talks about rewards. Father who sees in secret will reward you.
 - Some of rewards I've experienced while fasting:
 - more mindful of those who are chronically hungry
 - more aware of God's presence
 - more grateful for God's provision
 - more dependent on God to be a decent human being while fasting
 - Those are pretty good rewards. Grateful for the spiritual practice of fasting.
- I encourage you to try fasting, figure out the best way for you to fast in secret

Biblical examples

- Exodus 34:28 Moses fasted before receiving 10 commandments
- 2 Sam 12:15-17 David fasted for God's intervention in his son's life
- Daniel (9:3), Ezra (8:23) and Nehemiah (1:4) all fasted on behalf of Israel in exile
- Esther (4:16) fasted on Israel's behalf before she pleaded for them to the king
- Jonah (3) Ninevites fasted in order that God might not destroy them.
- Acts (13:3, 14:23) Apostles fast while commissioning leaders in the church
- Jesus – Fasted 40 days in wilderness before entering public ministry

Common denominator – most of them (not as much in NT) have something to do with sin. There's an inherent connection in scripture between fasting and sin. We'll explore further in a moment.

One of the books we read my kids mentions a baobab tree in Africa.² I never knew much about the baobab tree until I came across this in a devotional this week:

From *Give Us This Day* reflection 2/19/16

Sr. Janice McLaughlin

- Nun who worked in Africa for 30 years
- *Ostriches, Dung Beetles, and Other Spiritual Masters*, p3

“Looking as if it were planted upside down, the baobab thrives in hot, dry climates where nothing else will grow. Its fruit is the tartar that is used in various toothpastes and creams, while the pods can be used as sponges and its bark can be beaten into mats or clothing. This versatile tree has another distinct advantage. When a disease strikes it, the plant explodes from within to rid itself of the sickness.³ This leaves it with huge gaping holes in its trunk that looks as if an elephant has attacked and scooped out the inside. Though it looks ugly, the baobab is healthy once more.”

When a disease strikes it, the plant explodes from within to rid itself of the sickness.

- what a beautiful and biblical image – emptying leads to fullness of life

I wonder what it would look like for us if when our hearts encountered sin and sickness we did everything we could to explode it out of us?

It might look a lot like biblical fasting.

- Fasting doesn't have to be just about food
 - o Broader than that – it's about emptying ourselves to make more space for God

I mentioned earlier there's a connection in scripture between fasting and sin. Often when prophets call God's people to repent they call for fasting as well.

Joel 1:14⁴ (NIV)

Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. Summon the elders and all who live in the land to the house of the LORD your God, and cry out to the LORD.

Joel 2: 12⁵ (NRSV)

“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” 13 Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. 14 Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing...

We're in the midst of Lent, a season of reflection, confession, turning back to God.

- We turn back because we know we are sinful. And God is gracious and compassionate.
- Joel: Rend your hearts – think of that image.
- Literally tear your hearts open, break them, empty them of disease and sin through confession, give them to God, let God cleanse them, and see what blessing God might leave behind

Baobab trees, when they explode their disease out, it creates holes that open up.⁶ Those holes:

- provide access to roots that store water – people can drink in desert
- storage to keep grain and other food safe, dry, fresh
- shelter/homes for animals, even people

Joel 1:14 NIV

Joel 2:12-14 NRSV

- Process of emptying leads not only to tree's own health but to life for others

Isn't that just what Jesus modeled for us? He emptied himself in order that his broken heart would be filled with the Holy Spirit, open to however God would use him to bring life to the world.

In season of Lent, many people give something up – identify in small way with Jesus' sacrifice

What might you give up for Lent? How might you empty yourself to be filled more with God?

- could be food, might practice regular fasting
 - o Friday lunch prayer 12-12:30 in chapel – chance to skip one meal and pray instead
 - Skip a meal and when you get hungry give God thanks for his provision
- could chose fasting in general from certain kinds of food, alcohol, dessert
 - o fine to do (I have) and can grow closer to God in doing so
 - o But most people by sheer will power can quit these things for a short time

Wonder what it would look like to give up something you couldn't possibly give up without God?

- FB: Pope suggested fasting from indifference
 - o STOP NOT CARING about things God cares about – poor, widows, orphans, homeless, refugees. Give up indifference to the plight of the vulnerable and marginalized.
 - There's something that might take God's help to give up
- How about giving up anger? What would it be like to give up road rage, or frustration with your kids or parents or neighbors? In this season of heightened political awareness, what would it look like to give up criticizing the other side? What would it look like to give up self-doubt? Or insecurity? How about giving up resentment, or comparing ourselves to others, or bitterness? What would it look like to give up fear? Or worrying? Or stress? Or control?

What look like to tear open our hearts and empty them for God? What disease or sickness or sin or dependence might we need to explode out of our hearts? What might we give up or fast from in order to create more space for God?

- SANCTUARY ONLY
 - o might be something tangible like food or drinks
 - o could be intangible like bad habit or tendency
 - Pope – fasting from indifference...others from two weeks ago (above)
 - o might be particular sin that we can't seem to shake
 - o Invite us to commit to giving that up today, at least for a few weeks during Lent

INVITE WORSHIP TEAM BACK UP

- there's a card on your seat/bulletin
- spend some time reflecting on fasting, emptying ourselves. Write response on card.
- to prepare our hearts let's read scripture together

Psalm 51:10-12⁷

*10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

Respond – write something on your card

- What do you need to clean out of your heart?
- **What do you need to let go of, fast from, empty yourself of⁸**
 - o in order that God might fill you up and give you a willing spirit?
- Write on your card and bring forward now
 - o CR: Folks here to pray with you too

Psalm 51:15⁹

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

God wants our hearts, not our sacrifices. The goal of fasting and giving things up for Lent is broken, empty hearts. That God might fill them, and make our spirits willing for whatever God has in store for us. When we engage in that practice regularly, when we get in the rhythm of emptying ourselves, and giving our hearts to God, we'll be more in sync with the rhythm of God's kingdom. We'll be more in sync with Jesus, who taught us that rhythm. And we won't be able to do anything but praise God.

O Lord open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. Amen.

Psalm 51:10-12 NRSV

Psalm 51:15-17 NRSV