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Sermon Title: Fasting for Lent
Scripture: Matthew 4:1-4
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What are you giving up? That was the question that was posed to me by my best friend in fourth grade, Charlotte. We were hanging out in her house after school, as usual, and out of the blue she'd asked this. *What are you giving up?*

I had no idea what she was talking about. *What do you mean,* I said, *why would I give something up? You know,* she said, *for Lint. Lint?* I said. Why were we talking about the stuff Mom cleaned out of the dryer?

Lint, she said, *you know, right now, before Easter. If you're a Christian, you're supposed to give something up. Oh,* I said. *What are you giving up? Candy,* she said. *I don't want to give up candy,* I said. *Can I give up something I don't like? No, stupid,* she said, *it has to be something you really really like. I'm supposed to take something I really like and give it up?* I said. *If you're Christian,* she said.

I walked home slowly, pondering this. *Mom,* I said, *Charlotte says I have up give up something because of Lint or something. No,* she said. *That's their church. Presbyterians don't have to. Thank goodness,* I said, and that was the end of Lint in my house.

A lot of you did grow up giving something up for Lent. And maybe some of you have already given up something this year, maybe even something, as Charlotte said, that you really really like. And where all that goes back to is the scripture passage you just heard [Meghan/Nicole] read. We just read a short bit, so let me give you a little context – this is the very very beginning of Jesus being Jesus. He's emerging from thirty years of being a carpenter with his dad, at least we figure that's what he was doing. We have a lot of great stories about how Jesus was born, but we don't know a darn thing about what exactly happened when he turned thirty. All we know is that one day he showed up at the Jordan River, where his cousin John the Baptist was, well, baptizing, and he walked out into the river and asked to be baptized. And when he walked back out of the river, nothing was the same. From that moment on,

he was healing and preaching, challenging and loving, the Messiah on his journey toward Jerusalem.

But first, *first*, it says, he decided to fast for 40 days. He went out into the wilderness with no food and for 40 days there he was, alone with his thoughts, praying mightily, and fasting. And that's where the tradition of giving something up for Lent comes from – Jesus fasted, the tradition says, so we too should fast – and if not give up food entirely, give up something.

Fasting's a big thing in most religions, actually. Jesus deciding to fast in order to get ready for his mission was only doing what his ancestors in the Jewish faith had also one – King David and Elijah, Moses and Queen Esther. Fasting's a part of Hinduism, a part of Buddhism, and of course a faithfully observed part of Islam, with the entire month of Ramadan spent fasting from sunup to sundown. Which, when Ramadan happens to land in, say, August, is really hard. "Yeah," said a Muslim friend of mine, "we're pretty psyched when Ramadan lands in December." "I could see that, I said."

My one and only experience with fasting was in college, when each October we all participated in a daylong fast to raise money for Oxfam. I was light-headed, miserable, and crabby – and, suddenly, much more aware of what millions endure each day, which was, of course, part of the point.

All right. At this point you are no doubt starting to worry about just where this sermon is headed. It's Lent. And so far I've talked not just about giving something up, but actual fasting. You're starting to think "I'm about to lose chocolate privileges, or even worse, Alida's about to ask me to stay away from those Starbucks mini-donuts during daylight hours."

No. I *am* talking about fasting today, but in a very different way. Yesterday at our women's retreat, our theme was Sabbath – not talking about Sunday, but Sabbath, that concept that God thought important enough to put on the Top Ten list of Commandments. Sabbath is time and space just to be, just to be with God, and our Orthodox Jewish brothers and sisters do a lot better job taking it seriously than we do. Our Sundays as Sabbath time are a thing of the past. So we talked about how to clear out time to be with God, how to clear out mental clutter to be with God. And we talked about fasting, only what we meant was figuring out what it is we fill up on so much that we run out of time and room for God – figuring out what that is, and fasting from that.

We are busy, busy creatures. We are full, overfull. What we do say when someone asks us to do something we don't have time for? I've got a full plate right now, we say. My plate's pretty full. So what is it we need to take off the plate? What we do we each need to fast from in order to create room – time – space for God?

Sometimes we really are just *doing* too much, a particularly Fairfield County disease, for sure. One person yesterday observed that we wear our busyness as a badge of honor, almost – a full calendar is a full life, a full life is a valuable life, a worthy life – the plate fills up because we want it to. I am absolutely as guilty of this as anyone in this room – I would much rather hear someone say “oh, you’re always so busy” than “what exactly do you do all day, anyway?” But when our doing means that there’s no time for being, when our full plate means that we are spiritually starving, then it’s time for something to go, time to take something off the plate or at least take a much smaller portion. To open up time to be, to be with, to be with God. That’s Sabbath time, and it only emerges when our time isn’t eaten up, when we find a way to fast from busyness.

Fasting from busyness is one kind of fast we need to go on – but fasting from stuff is another way to open up our hearts and lives. *You don’t own your possessions, your possessions own you*, someone famously said, and that can happen. Last year I was both struck and deeply moved by the story out of Atlanta of a family that decided to sell their house and buy a house of half the value so they could give the other half away. Their story began on a day when the family was stopped at a red light and the 14 year old daughter, Hannah, looked out the right side of the car to see a homeless man on the sidewalk and then looked out the left side at the expensive sports car idling beside them at the light. If that man didn’t have that car, she said, maybe the man on the sidewalk could have a meal. Instead of ignoring the comment, Hannah’s parents went home and thought and asked the kids – what if we sold our house.

Now they had a nice house to sell, no question. But sell it they did, and with the money they raised, an organization called The Hunger Project was able to provide support to more than two dozen villages in Ghana. What they did was generous. But what the giving-away did for them was something unexpected. Here’s what the dad, Kevin, said: What we did transformed our family, he said, in “a magical way.” We gave away stuff, he said, but it turned out we traded stuff for a deeper level of connectedness, and trust, and togetherness. The truth is it was just an amazingly easy deal when you realize what we gained. Another way to clear the plate that was too full, another kind of fasting that left them feeling full in ways never ever expected.

Clearing out time, clearing out stuff, these are both ways of fasting, fasting that can fill our souls even as it empties the plate. But there’s one last kind of fasting that we need, and that’s the one where we clear our overfilled minds, our overburdened spirits. There are things that fill us up that are no good for us, spiritual junk food, those things we grab hold of all too easily but in the end leave us feeling lousy. Pride is one of those things, self-focus another, worry is one we frequently nosh on, but the easiest junk food to grab too often is anger. And you can’t be close to others, you can’t be close to God,

you can't even really stand yourself too much when you're filling up your plate with big old helpings of anger.

Each year, the folks at ASP, the Appalachia Service Project, choose a book to recommend to their group leaders, and last year their pick was a book of daily reflections by Jim Ryun, former Olympic medalist in track and congressman from Kansas for a decade. There was a lot of good stuff in the book, but the one that really stuck with me was his reflection on the most devastating moment of his career. Jim Ryun was, after all, the runner who in the 60's set the high school record for the mile, a record that stood for almost 4 decades. He was the golden boy of the Olympics in '72. All the world expected him to win the 1500 meters. Coming into the final lap, a competitor spiked him, brought his foot down on Ryun's, sending him falling helplessly off the track, knocked unconscious. There was a coach's protest, but it was denied by the officials and that was the end. The end of Ryun's dream. For years, he wrote, my bitterness defined me. I told and retold my story, each time more bitterly. Instead of catharsis, the retelling only made me angrier. My growth as a Christian was stunted. [I could neither feel God's love nor give it]. But I refused to surrender my anger, I clung to it. One night, two years later, as I lay in bed, I felt, I felt the Lord say to me, "Forgive. Forgive." And I rolled out of bed, and I got on my knees, and I said the simplest of prayers: "Lord, I forgive."

And that was the beginning. What Ryun gave up was anger, anger based in true injustice, but anger just the same, bitterness that, as he said, was stunting his growth as a Christian. The fast he chose was the giving up of something that was feeding him in all the wrong ways – anger that was feeding his bitterness, his indignation, his distance from God and others.

So the good news is that I'm not asking you to give up chocolate. Don't let me stop you if you want to – David broke his pipe-smoking habit during Lent a few years back, so giving up something sure doesn't hurt. But what I'm really suggesting, for you, for me, for all of us, is a Lenten fast of a different sort, and maybe one that will take hold not just for Lent but well beyond. I'm asking us to do some spiritual fasting. To get some things off the full plate... to clear things off the calendar in order to open up time for each other and for God ... to clear out the stuff that owns us instead of us owning it ... and most of all, to fast from the junk food of our souls, all that stuff that's way too easy to chew on but that fills our spirits in all the wrong ways. I invite you then, brothers and sisters in faith, to a Lenten fast that will feed our souls. Amen.