

Dr. Amy Erickson: Fast Faith

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One of the most striking and overlooked features of the faith of the Old Testament Israelites is their calendar. For their neighbors, time was cyclical. It looped in an ever-revolving cycle of seasons that providing the earth's annual rounds of crops and harvests. To secure ample food and provision, the gods of this predictable but temperamental pattern needed to be appeased - often by gruesome sacrifices or cultic orgies.

But for the Israelites, time was not an endless cycle. It had a redemptive ending, a direction, a goal. This sense of time was implanted in their memory during the Exodus, when their God's volley of plagues upended the Egyptian agricultural cycle and overturned the supposed power of every pantheon member along the way.

When the Israelites finally settled into their own land, they too celebrated God's provision of food through the yearly cycle of the seasons. But their calendar was more than just an annual merry-go-round of cultic fervor and mollification. Their calendar was punctuated by celebrations that chronicled their redemptive journey and anticipated God's ongoing work to reconcile them with him, with one another, and even the land. Many of these celebrations command for lavish feasts (Lev 23). But one of these important festivals - the Day of Atonement - strictly requires the Israelites to fast (Lev 16:31; 23:27; Num 29:7).

But this was not the only time the Israelites fasted. In line with their own theological view of time, leaders and laypersons throughout Israel's history discerned that there were certain moments in history for which fasting served to acknowledge God's inscrutable work in their particular time (Judges 20:26; 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 12:16; Joel 1:14; Psalm 35:15; 2 Chronicles 20:3; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4). For these saints of old, fasting acknowledged that God was up to something unique - if painful and

in a posture hungry with hope.

Our nation, like Israel's neighbors, also has a sense of time. But it is no longer cyclical. We postmoderns do not take our cues from the rhythms and signs of the seasons. Instead, our nation's time is governed by our gods: the gods of productivity, satiety, distraction, and accessibility. The same fruits line grocery shelves regardless of the season, the neon lights of businesses boast 24/7 hours, social media apps scroll endlessly in timeless chatter, our news "cycle" can barely earn the name.

This virus has offered to disrupt that sense of time. But bulging shopping carts and straining netflix bandwidths promise only to obscure, not to heed, the unique time in which we dwell. We, like Jesus' contemporaries, are only too eager for a good show (Matt 16:1), especially if there's ample food involved (John 6:26). But Jesus indicates that instead of looking to be entertained or gorged, that we should seek first to discern the signs of our time (Matt 16:3).

Which brings us back to fasting. Like the Israelites, we too - the church - have a season for fasting in our church calendar: Lent. And we can't imagine it to be a coincidence that this disruption has come upon us in this time.

In a previous post, ECO's theology coordinator, Greg Wagenfuhr, sagely cautioned us against defaulting to practices of virtualized communion. After all, Jesus expected his disciples would fast in grief over his absence (Matt 9:15). Jesus has been ascended for two millenia now, and our habits of fasting often fail to reflect our hunger for his return. And yet now we are being forced to fast from our eucharistic feast and to lament our separation from Christ's body, which *is* the church (1 Cor 12:12; Eph 5:30). And perhaps - if we are rightly reading the signs of the times - we are also being invited to fast from other, less sacramental meals as well. Perhaps this is also a time of hungering in solidarity with struggling families who must now squeeze even more meals for home-bound children on even less income, maybe even no income at all. Perhaps this is a time for mourning with the elderly shut-in whose loneliness is now heightened with vulnerability to disease. Perhaps this is a time of

Perhaps this is a time for being united together as God's people not in our eating together, but in our fasting together. Such fasting might be our most powerful tool in the coming days, weeks, months ahead to express our longing for God to gather us together again. But it also might express another, related longing, expressed in Isaiah's vision for that one day when:

"the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 25:6-9)

In such a time as this, let's hold fast to this hope.

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