

The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas

Practicing Lent

A Series of Weekly and Daily Reflections for Lent
2015

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*Fasting and Simplicity with the Desert Fathers and Mothers:
How Should One Fast?*

Introduction to the Desert Tradition

Each Friday through Lent we will look at an aspect of the practices of fasting and simplicity through the lens of the desert tradition.

Historically speaking the desert tradition has its origin in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria beginning in the late third century and continuing through the late seventh century. In all its various forms the desert tradition is one of the earliest expressions of Christian monasticism.

The desert tradition has been preserved and handed on to us through various collections of sayings. These are not systematic teachings but more akin to wisdom literature. The sayings are usually short, pithy statements or stories and often take the form of an elder giving spiritual counsel, practical advice, to his or her disciple. "Give me a word," the disciple would say to his or her elder, often referred to as *abba* (father) or *amma* (mother).

The elder's word to the disciple was not, however, ultimately spoken only in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.

For the desert is not so much a place as it is an experience. It is not outside us but within us. The desert is an interior geography, an empty, barren, and desolate landscape, in which there is no place to hide, through which we confront ourselves, and by which we surrender ourselves to God and learn to become authentic and truly alive human beings.

The elders' words continue to be spoken in each of our deserts today, reminding us that "if we seek God, he will show himself to us; and if we keep him, he will remain close to us."¹

¹ Arsenius 10 in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), 10.

A Word from the Desert.

“Abba Joseph asked Abba Poeman: ‘How should one fast?’ And Abba Poeman said: ‘For my part I think it is better that one should eat every day, but only a little, so as not to be satisfied.’ Abba Joseph said to him, ‘When you were younger, did you not fast two days at a time, abba?’ The old man said: ‘Yes even for three days and four and the whole week. The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light.’”²

Reflection.

The Book of Common Prayer has only two fast days, Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. It also asks us to observe “by special acts of discipline and self-denial” each Friday through the year and the weekdays of Lent.

With this in mind we often ask and are asked, “What are you giving up for Lent?” Neither *The Book of Common Prayer* nor Abba Poeman tells us what to fast from or how much. There is wisdom in that restraint. It seems Abba Poeman is more interested in fasting as a means and not as the goal. Fasting has a purpose beyond not eating. For Abba Poeman that purpose is to restore balance and moderation. Food is not the enemy, excess is. Abba Poeman is asking Abba Joseph to examine and be discerning about his life. Abba Poeman gives two hints about this discernment: “so as not to be satisfied” and “but just a small amount.” Abba Poeman wants Abba Joseph to feel and experience his hunger.

For Consideration and Practice.

- Consider in what ways food is sometimes used to satisfy and hide some of our deeper hungers; for companionship, for entertainment, for meaning, and significance. What are you *really* hungry for?
- Where is there excess in your life? This question is not just about food but all the many things and ways we use to make ourselves full and satisfied. What parts of your life are out of balance? Where is moderation needed? What would restore balance?
- Fasting, special acts of discipline, and self-denial do not have to be huge undertakings. Small, simple, and doable acts may bring us to greater awareness of our life and relationships than something large that can easily become the focus of our attention. Forego the second cup of coffee or glass of wine. Fast from bread or meat. Interrupt the usual patterns of eating. Skip the evening snack, refuse seconds, or

² Poeman 31 in *The Sayings*, 31.

take only a half portion. Let yourself feel hungry, and allow that hunger to point you toward the fact that our deepest hunger is from and for God.

- Being cognizant of and reasonable about your medical conditions and needs, regularly fast from a meal. Remember the hungry in your prayers, and donate the cost of the meal to your local food pantry.

Prayer

Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth and living bread from heaven. Grant me the grace of a holy hunger in both body and soul. Keep me mindful of the needs of others. Let me find my hunger satisfied in you. All this I ask with thanksgiving, in name of our Lord Jesus Christ who, with you and the Holy Sprit, lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*