

Ash Wednesday

Read Luke 4:1-15

This story takes place right after the beautiful scene of Jesus' baptism, with the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. But do you notice in Luke's account that it is the Spirit that leads Jesus out into the wilderness? There he fasted for 40 days, and was tempted by the devil.

Why would the Spirit of God direct Jesus to such a place, right after he hears God's voice saying "You are my son, the Beloved- with you I am well pleased!"?

It seems we sometimes overlook the benefits of "wilderness time" in the discipline of learning to distinguish God's voice from the voice of temptation. In our busy, noisy lives, the voices can blur, making temptation harder to notice.

But Jesus clearly identifies the source of the voice and stands firm, backed by God's word. He rejects self-indulgence, power, popularity, greed, and idolatry in favor of his God-given calling. Jesus' experience of 40 days of hunger aligns him in solidarity with the poor who often go without food involuntarily.

Almost every child entering the Zoe Empowers program describes the experience of "sleeping hungry" or going days with no food, having to beg or steal to survive.

Most of us have no real possibility of going hungry, although many in our country still do. Many of us do not participate in voluntary hunger through fasting (unless it is for weight loss!) on a regular basis, if at all, for spiritual purposes.

But today we take note of Jesus' example of fasting for deeper spiritual awareness and closeness to God. This example has been followed by Christians for centuries during the 40 days of Lent. Today, if we are honest, we must confess that we have succumbed to the temptations of self-indulgence, pride, seeking popularity, power or control, or some type of idolatry where we elevate our own will and desires over God's. We are truly sorry, Lord.

During Lent we are invited to think deeply about this, and fast from something we "can't live without." This practice is not meant as a personal challenge of willpower or a punitive deprivation of our self, but rather a spiritual tool to clear space in our minds, hearts, and time for more of God, and the values of God's reign in our lives.

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What is it that fills your time, demands your financial resources, or keeps you “too busy” for prayer? What goals are the focus of your life? Take some quiet time away to ponder these questions- a whole day, if you can, or at least a few hours. Try fasting from everything in your “normal” life for this time and you will soon discover what your body, mind, and spirit crave most, and what is a higher priority in your life than God.

Is it your cell phone, Facebook, coffee drink, cookies, candy, shopping, fast food, TV, sports, video games, work- to name a few? We are so used to being “full” all the time, but Lent calls us to experience some “emptying” to know who we really are and to become more like Jesus.

Try fasting from one of your “cravings” this Lent. Giving up something so you can take on something better. Give the time saved to prayer, daily reading through the gospel of Luke, and serving others in a food pantry or other act of service.

For example, you might give the money saved from skipping your Starbucks or fast food to Zoe Empowers to help empower an orphan child-headed family that would love to raise their own food to eat today and every day. This is fasting with a purpose.

Let's go to Kenya now to visit 16-year-old Glory, in her first year of Zoe Empowers, and see how the gifts from your fasting can transform the lives of hungry children.

[Launch Video](#)

Fasting is hard at first, but you will find deep peace, joy, and freedom as you loosen these bonds and perhaps embrace a new lifestyle of simple living.

Take some time this week to discuss what your family or small group might do together to give up something and in the process take on better health, more prayer time, deeper interpersonal relationships, and more generosity to orphaned and vulnerable children. Doing this with others helps you to be accountable.

Some ideas might include giving up a pizza night weekly or having rice and beans once a week and donating the money saved. Making your own coffee at home and giving that \$15-20 to Zoe youth instead of Starbucks.

Let's go to Rwanda to visit Anne Marie and see how even small gifts can be life-saving for vulnerable children.

[Launch Video](#)

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Fasting is not only about food! You can fast from bad attitudes or behaviors, like criticism, complaining, hate, or gossiping, and take on more kindness, encouragement, love, and gratitude.

Maybe you will decide to give up all cell phones into a basket at dinner and use the time to really listen and share your lives, building relationships, and sharing prayer together for one another.

How about giving up TV (totally or for one night a week) and using the time to take a walk, read books together, play games, or learn more about the lives of the Zoe children by watching the videos in this devotional resource together, or exploring the website www.zoeempowers.org. Lent can be an important time to improve your health and family relationships.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What stood out for you in the videos?
2. What are some things you would find hard to "live without"?
3. What is a temptation you struggle with?
4. Have you ever experienced wilderness or retreat time or fasting? Share how that was for you. What did you gain?
5. How can you create more space for listening to God's voice?

Prayer

Jesus, we see your example of spiritual seeking and faithfulness to God and we confess that is not always our path. Help us to walk closer to you in these 40 days of Lent! Open our eyes to the things that clutter our days so we may discern what to fast from in order to feast more on your love. Fill us with your spirit today and open our hearts more and more to the needs of others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Action

Take time to be alone and quiet asking God to guide you. Make a covenant with yourself, family and/or small group to fast in a particular, meaningful way this Lent. Write down your pledge. Designate a box, bowl or basket as your Zoe Blessing box in which to place money saved or IOU's for your sacrificial gifts to Zoe children.

Mark your Bible for Luke 1 to begin the scripture journey. Read a chapter each day. For example, if you fast from lunch, use the time to read and pray. Instead of watching TV, read a Bible story about Jesus with your kids and talk about it.