

“In a Sun-Scorched Land”

Ash Wednesday, March 6, 2019

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I ate a paczki yesterday. You may have heard of them, or at least heard people trying to pronounce ‘paczki’. You can find entire articles on how to say it, and the one I am going with says it should be said “pownch-key”. There are also lots of funny clips about people trying to say it. Here’s what I know about the ones we got at the Pig: they are like a mudpie on steroids. (Now, if you are not from Sheboygan, even that might sound like food from an alien land, but I need to start talking about Lent.)

To Americans of **Polish** descent, **Pączki** Day means eating **pączki**, special jelly-filled buns. While the practice of **Pączki** Day is traditionally observed the day before Ash Wednesday in the United States, in Poland, **pączki** sales **are** the highest on Tłusty Czwartek, or “Fat Thursday.” (The Thursday before Ash Wednesday).

My point in bringing this up is that, on this Ash Wednesday I have denied myself chocolate, and I was able to do so because yesterday I had this taste sensation of melted chocolate on a roll with custard which will remain in my mind, and my fat cells, for 40 days.

Let’s be honest though. If we could have our way, or if I could have my way anyway, we would find a way to fast-forward right to the Easter Brunch. I can take Ash Wednesday’s fasting because I over-indulged on Fat Tuesday, but 39 more days of this? Sounds a little extreme, don’t you think?

I wonder what God thinks. Well, actually, I don’t have to wonder too hard, because God makes it pretty clear in Isaiah, and elsewhere, what he thinks about ritual fasting. To be clear, if you want to fast to lose weight or for some other personal reason, no problem. Go for it! But what I hear God saying is, ‘don’t think that forty days without chocolate is going to get you closer to God, Bill.’

It's not just one day (v. 5 ff.) The fasting days had become religious rituals for the Jews, days they thought would get them in good standing with God for what they 'gave up.' The people thought this would get God's ear (v. 3).

But God gets pretty clear about this (v. 6-8).

What God is teaching us through the prophet is that what God is interested in is not religious rituals, not for one day or even 40 days, if the purpose is to try to get on God's good side. What pleases our Creator God? That we fight against injustice in society; that we strive to set the oppressed free; that we share out of our abundance with the hungry and the poor and naked.

John Calvin captures the essence of Isaiah's meaning when he writes, "In vain do men serve God, if they only offer to him trivial and bare ceremonies." He goes on to say that works of kindness are not enough 'if our disposition toward them were not warm and affectionate', with a reference to Paul's famous line, 'without love I am nothing'.

I am not arguing in support of eating paczki every day, although I could be persuaded to try my hand at attempting such a persuasive writing assignment. What I am trying to say is that it is wrong to think that I am 'fasting' on Ash Wednesday if my purpose is to get God to send me extra blessings. It is foolish to think that doing that every day for 40 days makes me a better Christian in God's eyes. I would be a thinner, fitter one, but I don't know that God is too hung up on body shapes (as you can see.)

What I hear Isaiah shouting (v. 1), is that God is looking for a church that engages in concrete works of spreading his love to the community. If you remember the text from a few weeks ago about 'the measure you use', that was Jesus' point too, I think. As you spread the love of God in Christ, the more you will know the joy of God in your own lives.

Isaiah as much as says this in vv. 8-12. I want you to think with me about this astounding promise. When we offer God a real fast, a sacrifice of our resources and time and heart for those in need of justice and release, then we move from darkness into light; then we have the LORD protecting our back; then we can cry to the LORD and he will say, "Here am I."

The picture Isaiah uses of a 'sun-scorched land' really caught my ear because of the sermon series I am starting on Sunday. I want to use this Lenten season to think about how God is leading us on a journey through the wilderness as we head home. The journey begins in a sun-scorched land. No food. No water. No shade. We are desperate for each of these, and who will bring it in what seems to be a God-forsaken place? God will. God will satisfy our needs, not by turning the desert into a farm field, but by bringing the blessings directly and miraculously to us.

We will gain the strength of the LORD in our bones and muscles; we will be like a garden full of blossoms and a deep spring of water that never stops flowing.

That is how we get through the sun-scorched land. The promise of God is not that there will be no desert experiences. We will all have times we feel like God is far away and that our ruin is near. But, if we will be honest with God in our emotions and in our service, then we will come to know blessings that those who engage in mere rituals will never know.

So, in a moment we will offer you ashes, and then later healing oil. This is all voluntary. You can simply sit and pray. But, if you feel so moved, you can come forward. We offer these gestures not as 'religious rituals' that will magically make you right with God. Not at all. Rather, we offer these gestures as a way of showing God and the world that we confess for those times we have sinned by engaging in ritual instead of seeking justice and release.

We ask God to remind us, in the ashes and in the oil, that we are not able to be the source of abundance in our sun-scorched lands, and that we know we need a generous and gracious God to shower blessings upon us.

We offer you ashes and oil instead of paczki because we want you to join us in coming before God with humble hearts, and bowed spirits, asking God's forgiveness and the courage to fast; to fast not from paczki, but by seeking to find where God is calling us to be His healing presence; to satisfy needs in a sun-scorched land.