

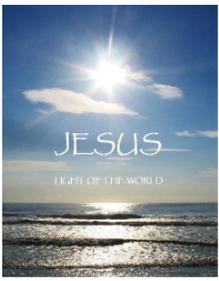
Sunday February 8, 2026

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

So, do you want to look buff and ready for that beach body even in the dead of winter? I know there's some of you out there who are thinking ahead now, thinking of summer and getting that body ready for the beach wear. Well, if that's the case, then it's time to do a 5-2. Know what a 5-2 is? Have you ever heard of it? A 5-2 is a diet based on the eating patterns of medieval monks and nuns. When food was often scarce, they ate five simple meals, fasting in most cases, just eating one meal twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays. Now, as a side to this, other people are trying omad one meal a day. Up to that. There are juice cleanses, detox retreats, pricey spa fasts, influencer made fasting plans sold with glossy before and after pictures. On social media, you see hashtags like fast with me and acts such as zero tracking your fasting window. Some people, now I kid you not, some people are so desperate to pursue a size zero, they resort to having plastic mesh sewn to their tongues or have swallowed tapeworms to shed those elusive pounds. Nah, I don't think we want it.

While there's nothing wrong with fasting to look better or for better health, let's get it straight. Fasting as the Bible teaches, as Isaiah spells out to us today, is not about fashion. It's about repentance and purification, preparing for a rebirth or a new stage in life. True fasting makes us salt and light as Jesus calls us to be. Jesus fasted before he began his public ministry. Moses fasted before he received the 10 commandments, Daniel fasted and was blessed with wisdom. Esther fasted, called for a three day fast for all the Jews in her city and they were spared annihilation. God called Paul and as he prepared for the assignments of his life, he went on a strict fast and Peter was fasting when God gave him a new revelation. The king of Nineveh declared a fast even to the animals and God diverted a plan of punishment. So, fasting is about moving hearts towards God and preparing people for mission and mercy much more than monitoring our waistline.

So, as we come today to our scriptures, we are confronted with a God who calls fasting to be a force for justice and healing. Now, the people in Isaiah's time, it sounds like they were fasting and the fasting looked pretty good on the surface. But the prophet accuses the people of crying out for God's



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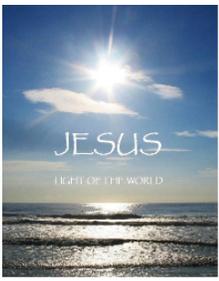
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attention while practicing fasts that were entirely self-centered. They fasted but they still quarreled and they still oppressed those around them and God answers the fast I choose is not one marked by hunger but by undoing injustice, loosening those bonds of wickedness, freeing the oppressed, sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless and clothing the naked, not turning away from your own kin. Do this, God says through Isaiah, and then that's how you will make your light shine in the darkness and your healing will begin.

So, let's try to bridge the ancient and the contemporary. Why fast today? Why fast for America? Well, we know that here in our country we face many moral fault lines of injustice and poverty, housing insecurity, all the immigration challenges and healthcare inequalities. These are not merely political issues. They are about human suffering and moral failures that call us as church to respond. So, Isaiah's challenge is not some distant echo that happened to apply only in times gone by. It's a direct indictment in an invitation for our own context. When we fast for food but ignore hungry children, our fasting rings hollow. When we abstain from entertainment but don't speak against systems that marginalize or terrorize people, our abstinence is incomplete. When we fast by drawing into our own little social media bubbles, we end up hardening ourselves to our neighbor's pain.

So, let's go back again to Isaiah and realize how startling is his promise. God says that when God's people fast in the way that God desires us to, by facing the injustice and doing good, the darkness lifts and light, our light dawns. Healing comes. So, our calling today is to let our spiritual disciplines push us into the love of our neighbor. And if we are willing to fast in this way that in a way that loosens chains and shares bread, our communities will become places of renewed dignity and hope.

There's a story about a wealthy businessman who went to a monastery for a retreat. He wanted to get closer to God. And don't we all? So, he was brought before the abbot of the monastery to seek spiritual direction and the abbot asked the man if he would like a glass of water. When this man said yes, the abbot began to pour him some water and he poured and he poured and he



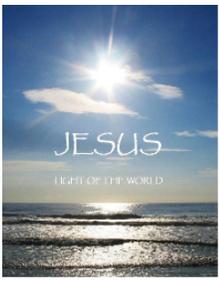
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poured until the water reached the top of the glass and he didn't stop. He kept pouring and pouring until the water overflowed down to the table and then drenched the extensive suit the man was wearing. Well, he jumped up angry and yelled at the abbot, "What are you doing? Look you did to my suit?" And turning to the man, the abbot said, "You are like this glass of water. You are so full of yourself and concerned for riches and other anxieties of the world that you are completely full. There's no space in you to hold anything else inside. There's no room for God to come in. And before God can come in, you must empty yourself and make the room for you to enter."

So, you see what Isaiah is getting at and I believe Jesus in his words to us today is that true fasting involves abstinence from anything that distances us from our God. So, by emptying ourselves of sin, of gossip, of hate, of vanity, whatever is getting in the way, whatever is filling our hearts these days, we become clean and healed and put in our right minds. So, fasting in this manner makes us light to the world and salt to the earth, for an earth that is lost its flavor through gluttony and attachments to money and power, a false sense of beauty and life purpose. A godly fast is a fast from greediness, a fast that curbs our tongues from slanderous speech, a fast from the gluttony of the gadgets that we indulge ourselves in. So, maybe instead of food, we need to fast from pride. Maybe instead from food, we need to fast from digital media, the computer or the smartphone and spend time with someone who's lonely, alone, and needs our presence. Maybe instead of food, we can fast from eating out and give that money to charity. God's acceptable fast asks us to stop feeding our own wants and desires and redirect our energy to feeding the hungry and helping the afflicted. That is how we make our light shine in the world. We fast for compassion and connection for a world for which fasting is, for many people out there in our world, not an option for them. It's an imposed, inescapable reality.

The bottom line doesn't matter how each of us chooses to fast, but fast we should. Whether it is abstaining from meat or coffee or sugar, a fast from electronics, a fast that returns resources, our resources, and shares them with the hungry and needy in our midst. So fast, but in a way that is acceptable to



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you and to God. Do you want to still be a side zero? I say, "Yeah, let's be a size zero." Well, let's be a side zero in how we deal with gossip and envy and hoarding and ignoring the plight of the poor, let us fast and let our hearts be filled with the Holy Spirit, creating that reality in us that we are truly salt and light and bring that healing through our righteousness and restore and be repairers of the breach, as Isaiah declares, and doing so fulfill God's word in our midst. Amen.