

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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21 Days of Prayer and Fasting
Bowing Down and Rising Up

Matthew 2:1-23 (NIV)

2.1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who

were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. 17 Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18 “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.”

21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Philippians 1:1-13 (NIV)

2 Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

[Slide 1] Opening

Good morning church! We're opening this New Year of 2022 as we have in recent years with three weeks of prayer and fasting as a church. I hope that you will participate in some way. Not only is it good spiritual discipline, but there is a release of spiritual power from heaven when we fast, and that can be enormously important for us as a church family as we move forward in this coming year.

[Slide 2] *A reminder about fasting*

Jesus considered that fasting would be a normal part of the life of his disciples, as his instructions to them in Matthew 6 indicate (“*when you fast,*” not, “*if you fast*”). But the New Testament doesn't record that he gave them specific directions on how to fast. He may have done so privately, but what we see in Scripture and in the history of the church indicates that he left matters fairly open as to how, when, and how often his followers ought to fast.

So there are a whole lot of ways you could participate in these three weeks of prayer and fasting. Let me begin today with a few important reminders:

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1. *Fasting refers to going without food.* Abstaining from television, or forms of social media, or other kinds of entertainment may certainly be valuable. But they are not a substitute for actual fasting.

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2. *Fasting may take a number of different forms.* There are many ways to fast, and all of them can be valuable, meaningful, and powerful. An absolute, or total fast would be going without food and any liquids, including water. This should never be done for more than a day or two, and only if you are in excellent health. A normal fast would be going without food (but not water) for some period of time—for a portion of a day, or for one or more days. A partial fast would be going without certain foods, such as meat or sweets, for a number of days.

So what could fasting look like for us during these three weeks? You might fast for one meal, or for one meal for several days, or for one meal every day. You might fast during the daylight hours and have one meal after sundown for a single day, or for several days, or for all twenty-one days. You might choose to fast by abstaining from certain foods that you normally enjoy for one day, or for one week, or for the entire three weeks. Or you might only eat certain foods during the three weeks. Perhaps you would fast for one entire day, or one day per week. Perhaps you would fast for three days in a row, or one day every fourth day, or every other day. Or you could fast the entire three weeks. Maybe you try intermittent fasting, where you only eat during an eight- to ten-hour window each day. *There isn't a wrong way to do it.*

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3. *Follow the Holy Spirit's leading, wisdom from trusted counselors (including your physician), and common sense when fasting.*

If you've never fasted before, start with something simple, like fasting a single meal, or a single day, or doing a partial fast from certain foods. Going without meat and sweets, for instance, can be both manageable and healthful (often called the "Daniel fast"). If you have medical issues (such as diabetes, hypoglycemia, anorexia, or low weight), consult your physician before attempting to fast, and follow his/her directions carefully if you are cleared to fast.

If you would like additional information about fasting, you can send me your questions, or give me a call. I'd be happy to share more with you.

[Slide 6] *Why we fast*

More important than how we fast is why we fast, and why we would do so as a church.

On both a personal and corporate level, fasting is an important spiritual discipline. For one thing, it is a helpful reminder that we are not prisoners of our appetites. Our desires do not rule us; Jesus does. Fasting, especially regular fasting, helps us keep that in mind.

It is also a helpful reminder that God gave us good gifts—including food and our taste buds! One of the great lessons I learned from fasting is that eating is a good thing. I'm being serious, here, even though it sounds like something that Captain Obvious would say. "*Of course, eating is good.*"

Maybe it is an obvious truth—but it's something that can be twisted in our minds, particularly in a culture where we have such abundance. Christian faith is not opposed to pleasure, and following Jesus does not require the elimination of all pleasure from one's life. But at times in the history of the church—or in the life of a single person—we've fallen prey to this twisted idea that godliness looks like anorexia. But it doesn't. (Neither does it look like gluttony, which is more often our particular sin in the US—something that fasting can help us conquer.)

However, fasting is still a good reminder that pleasure is neither the goal of my life nor a necessary good. I can live without pleasure; I can deny myself the pleasure of eating, something that God considers good for us, for a period of time, in order to accomplish a higher, spiritual goal.

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Fasting also helps me put aside ordinary concerns (like buying groceries, figuring out menus, preparing meals, saving leftovers) in order to pay attention to spiritual concerns that I might otherwise ignore or dismiss—spiritual concerns that

are actually of great importance, but which are easily masked by the screeching demands of life, including the loud noises from my stomach (and the louder noises from my inner “I want” center).

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The truth is, there are some lessons from God that can only be learned by tuning out the noise of my cravings and my desire for food. There are some spiritual truths and spiritual realities that can only be perceived by eliminating for a time what is ordinarily a very good habit—eating food.

Again, let me be clear—there’s nothing bad or unspiritual about eating. But those ordinary, very mundane, very necessary tasks and routines of preparing and eating food can mask the voice of the Spirit of God. And because it is easy, particularly in our culture, to live as slaves to our appetites, listening to the constant barrage of enticements to eat more and more often, our spiritual sensitivity can become dull, unable to recognize the voice of the Spirit of God.

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Fasting helps clean up the noise so we can hear more clearly. Think about the audio specialist on the criminal forensics show who eliminates certain frequencies from the recording so the detectives can hear the person’s voice that is hidden behind the wall of background sound. Or imagine clearing off the clutter on your desk and finding the beautiful wood underneath your piles of papers. Fasting helps us clear away the things in our minds and habits that are hindering us from hearing God.

So, as individuals and as a church, there is great value in setting apart a special, focused time, in order to bow our hearts and humble ourselves before God. We lay aside our rights, as it were, our right to feed ourselves, in order to set God’s purposes before our needs. We choose to intentionally withdraw from our everyday, ordinary concerns in order to give God our attention more fully, more consciously, more consistently. That in itself is a powerful spiritual weapon, one that can have a dynamic affect on us and on those for whom we are praying.

[Slide 10] *Fasting and our everyday lives*

There’s another side to this equation, however; another critical piece of the puzzle that we really must understand. Fasting is an act of worship; but like every other aspect of our worship, it must be connected to the rest of our ordinary life in order to have any effectiveness. The prophet Isaiah, to whom we’ve been listening over the past month in preparation for Christmas, spoke very pointedly about this very matter:

“Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them.

‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord?

“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.” (Isaiah 58:1-9)

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God’s point, spoken through Isaiah, is pretty straightforward. Fasting is not just a religious exercise. There are no “points with God” to be gained by doing it—as if God would be impressed with your willingness to be hungry for a while! Fasting is only spiritually effective when it is connected to the rest of your life, in which you are actively carrying out God’s commands and advancing his kingdom.

Think about it. Why do we fast? We fast in order to help us hear from God. Why do we want to hear from God? In order to know what to do. So, we bow our hearts, we pause from eating, in order to position ourselves to hear what God would have us do. Then, we rise and do what God has said to do. Without the rising and doing, the bowing and listening don’t accomplish anything.

[Slide 12] *Two types of people*

Some people are all about action. They are very strongly task-oriented: they love projects. If you don’t give them a project, they’ll come up with one all on their own. They see a problem, dive in, and they don’t stop until it’s done. The

world is a better place because of people like this. Our church is a better place because we have people who are like this.

But action-people can make a mess of things or cause more problems if they don't consult with others, or with whoever is in charge—especially if they're the “*shoot, ready, aim!*” type of people.

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For instance: Imagine a guy. He comes home from work early, notices that his wife is gone, but on the kitchen counter he sees a recipe for blueberry pancakes, a skillet, some flour and eggs, but no sugar and no blueberries. He thinks, “*No problem. I can fix this. I'll be a blessing to my wife and get dinner ready.*” He grabs his favorite camp griddle and proceeds to whip up some amazing pancakes. There's no blueberries, so he skips all of that, substitutes some applesauce for the sugar, throws in some bacon, just because, well, bacon; adds a side of sausage and voila! Dinner is set.

Then his wife comes home with their two daughters. Each of the girls is carrying a new apron and a carton of fresh-picked blueberries; Mom has five pounds of sugar and a new strainer. “*Ta da!*” he says, “*Dinner is ready!*” His wife gives him that look. “*I promised the girls I would teach them how to make blueberry pancakes. We've been planning this for a week.*” And she points to the calendar with the date circled and marked, “*pick berries/pancakes w/girls.*”

Shoot, ready, aim. Mr. get-it-done action man has just ruined his wife's carefully prepared plan for a special time with her daughters. He saw what he thought was a problem, solved it (in his mind), but failed to consider that he didn't have all the information he needed. He was ready (as usual) to rise up and do something. But he hadn't bowed down and listened yet.

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On the other hand, we've got people who are thinkers. They love to play with ideas, mull things over for weeks or years on end, consider and reconsider every possible permutation of potential outcomes. They are extremely helpful when it comes to planning and policy-making. The world, and our church, is better when we have this kind of people involved.

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But thinkers can be slow to act. Sometimes, they spend so much time reconsidering things that all of the momentum needed for the particular project is lost, and it goes on top of the pile marked “*good ideas we never got around to doing.*” Or they want to pray about this decision “*one more time.*” Or they have great ideas, but they're not willing to get their hands dirty to actually get the job

done. Or perhaps they simply want to talk about things, and soon become the critics who are quick to find fault with every possible solution, quick to complain about how the project turned out, quick to criticize the efforts of those who tried to do something. They're happy to bow down; not so interested in rising up.

In both cases, we've got people who are potentially crucial for the success of the church; people whose input and help are vital and necessary for the work that needs to get done. And in both cases, they are missing a crucial element of the process that God has given to us for spiritually effective living.

[Slide 16] *The example of the magi*

Think about the familiar story we read again this morning of the coming of the magi. The magi are a great example of bowing down and rising up. They bowed down when they were studying the Hebrew Scriptures and the positions of the stars in the skies, seeking to hear from God. They spent their lives attending to both the word of God and the natural sciences, so that when the new star emerged in the sky, they were prepared and able to recognize the sign from God.

But they didn't just make notes about this new star's position in the sky. They didn't say, "*Isn't that interesting?*" and continue on with their studies. They rose up, changed their focus from studying to action. They made preparations for a lengthy journey, selected their gifts, and set out on a quest that took perhaps two years to find the newborn king. Their example is so telling for us, because they did both parts of the process: they bowed down and they rose up; they prayed (listened for God's direction), and they acted.

[Slide 17] *Philippians 2:12*

We see a similar thing in Paul's letter to the Philippian church. In chapter two, Paul is addressing a problem within the church: there is disunity among the believers, with several key individuals particularly responsible for making things worse because of their self-serving attitudes. Paul's answer is two-fold, and it involves bowing down and rising up.

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He begins by explaining what it is that ought to be their goal—being people whose personal lives and life together demonstrate what it means to know Jesus, because they are characterized by humility and self-sacrificing love. Then comes the "*bowing down*" part. Paul lays out for them the picture of what that humility and self-sacrificing love actually looked like in the person of Jesus. He calls the church to consider the example of Jesus, to ponder what it meant for him to divest himself of the privileges of deity in order to serve and save human beings. Verses 5-11 actually form one of the church's oldest hymns, one that the Philippians may

have already known and used in their corporate worship. Paul wants them to prayerfully and deeply reflect on this description of Christ, and to ingest, as it were, its truth. He wants the model of Christ clearly in their minds as the template for everything in their relationships with one another.

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Then Paul switches gears, quite sharply and directly: “*Work out your salvation,*” he tells them. He does not say, “*Work to earn your salvation*” or “*Work to prove that you deserve salvation.*” Paul is not suggesting that salvation is something that can be obtained through religious duty, hard work, or being good. What he means is, “*Put into practice the things you say you believe. Make your faith real, concrete, by living according to what your Christian faith teaches.*”

In the specific context of the Philippian church, therefore, Paul is telling them that they need to adopt a mindset of being humble and selfless. Their model, the pattern they must keep in mind, is that of Jesus Christ. That’s the “*bowing down*” part.

But in addition to acknowledging Christ as their model, they are to actually imitate his life in their own daily affairs with one another! They are to live selflessly, making sure that they honor others above themselves, and considering how they might meet the needs that others in the church have. That’s what it means to work out their salvation, to make sure that what they have acknowledged in their faith is taking root and growing fruit that is actually visible. That’s the “*rising up*” part.

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So it is for us as well. Not only in this season of prayer and fasting, but throughout our lives, both as individual followers of Jesus Christ, and as a congregation of those who have committed to following him together. And when Paul mentions that Jesus Christ is the one with all authority, whose name is above every other name, that is not simply a throw-away bit of liturgy. It is to Jesus that every knee will eventually bow, to acknowledge the greatness of what he has done, and who he is as the rightful Lord of all creation. But we, who know him, must be the first to bow down. We are the ones who acknowledge him as Lord and God now. So we bow in prayer to hear what he would say to us. We pray and fast, in order to know what he is asking us to do. And we listen so that we can carry out his commands. Then we rise, we work it out, we follow his instructions in how we live so that God’s will becomes apparent in us; it takes on concrete, visible form in the patterns and choices of what we do. We put his instruction into practice, and so we see the kingdom grow in us.

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So as we start 2022, let's set our hearts to hear from God and to do what he says. Let's make sure that we're bowing down; that we're consciously putting ourselves in a position to hear from God: through fasting, with prayer, with humbled hearts. And let's also make sure that we're rising up; that we're connecting our praying and fasting with our everyday lives by doing what we hear God tell us to do, so that our lives reflect his goodness, his love, his truth, and his presence to people who don't even know that there is a God out there.

[Slide 22] *Transition to communion*

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]

Invite people to receive prayer; mention membership