



"A Time of 'Without' – On the Meaning of Fasting"

Bookmark Evening on March 18, 2025, with Rabbi Prof. Dr. Andreas Nachama, Former General Superintendent Ulrike Trautwein, and Imam Kadir Sanci

Christian Perspective by General Superintendent Ulrike Trautwein:

A well-known Catholic theologian, Johann Baptist Metz, once said:
“Interruption is the beginning of all religion.”

To interrupt, to come to rest, to abstain – that, for me, is the essence of fasting: to pause everyday life, to reflect on its meaning, and in that, my relationship with God.

This kind of interruption seems to be a deep human need – after all, it exists in all religions and cultures, to varying degrees.

For me, as a Christian, the Sabbath is a primal moment of such interruption and abstention. On this day, religious Jews radically interrupt their week.

Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism – the Hebrew Bible, the so-called Old Testament, along with the New Testament, is our shared Holy Scripture.

And so I repeatedly refer to it. I will return later to the Sabbath, this primal moment of interruption.

In the major world religions, fasting plays a role – though it is weighted differently. In the Hebrew Bible, fasting occurs often and for various reasons – as we’ve heard from Rabbi Andreas Nachama.

In the New Testament

In the New Testament, which contains the stories of Jesus and the early church, fasting also plays a role – not least because Jesus was a devout Jew.

There is a well-known story about Jesus that takes place just before he begins his ministry – traveling through the land, speaking with people, telling them stories about God, and healing them.

(Matthew 4:1–11) In this story, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to prepare for his mission. There, he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. And when he is extremely hungry, the tempter appears – the *diabolos*, the divider – who comes to him at his weakest moment and points to the stones lying nearby and says:

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.”

But Jesus does not give in to this temptation to satisfy his strong physical need. Instead, he responds with words from the Holy Scripture, from the Book of Deuteronomy:

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

Jesus does not allow his body to overpower him but emphasizes that God’s word is our true and essential nourishment.

The devil does not give up and tries two more times, but Jesus resists these offers, by which the devil tries to pull him away from God.

It was not least the fasting that prepared Jesus for this trial. He is now strengthened for his future path with God.

In the Gospels – the accounts of Jesus’ life – fasting does not play a major role. On the contrary, providing enough food for everyone is a focus (for example, in the story of the feeding of the 5,000).

Jesus is even called a glutton and a drunkard by his opponents, because he sits at the table with questionable people, eating and drinking with them.

Later, Jesus even forbids his disciples to fast, because the time with him is a time of joy – not a time for mourning and fasting.

In the Early Church

Later, in the stories of the early church, fasting regains importance.

In the Acts of the Apostles, fasting is mentioned again – early Christians fasted before sending out missionaries and appointing elders.

In Church History

Over the course of church history, fasting became increasingly important.

Certain fasting periods developed in the church calendar based on the story of Jesus: Lent and Advent.

Today, however, only one fasting period is widely known and observed: Lent, which we are currently in – the time when we reflect on Jesus' path of suffering up to his crucifixion.

The other fasting period, Advent – originally a time of preparation for Jesus’ birth – is now shaped very differently: comfort, baking cookies, Christmas markets and mulled wine. In other words, quite the opposite of fasting, even though we often speak of "reflection."

That’s how it is today, but historically, fasting played a significant role in structuring religious life.

In the Middle Ages, the church exercised strong control over people by fueling their fear of hellfire if they didn’t have enough good deeds to show.

So the church offered many rituals – including fasting – by which people could redeem themselves from the fires of hell.

People could even purchase indulgences for their deceased loved ones.

You can easily imagine how much money was made from people’s fear of hell and their suffering.

The Reformation

The reformer Martin Luther denounced these practices.

As a result – to put it simply – he was excommunicated from the Catholic Church, leading to the formation of the Protestant Church.

Martin Luther strictly rejected the idea that one could earn salvation before God through good deeds.

We cannot be saved from hell's torments – which medieval people believed in very literally – through our own actions, but only through God's grace, through our faith in Him, and through our trust in God's word.

These three principles became the foundation of this new Protestant theology:

Grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone!
Sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura.

Fasting as a religious ritual no longer played a role.

Thus, Protestantism became a religion relatively sparse in rituals.

For good reasons, fasting no longer had particular significance.

In Protestant circles, only small rituals persisted – such as abstaining from meat on Fridays in memory of Good Friday.

A New Relevance

In recent decades, however, it has become increasingly clear – also among Protestants – that religion is not just a matter of the mind.

People want to feel their faith and express it through rituals – not to earn merit with God, but to express their trust in Him.

Fasting, in the sense of interruption and inner reflection, has regained relevance.

Because the idea of fasting is becoming more significant, there has been a Lenten campaign in Protestantism for the past 40 years.

People do not just give up chocolate or nicotine, but are invited to fast with their minds: to question their daily routines for seven weeks, take on a new perspective, and rediscover what really matters in life.

This is not classical fasting from food, but a fasting from certain behaviors.

This year's theme is: **“Take a Breath – Seven Weeks Without Panic!”**

Conclusion

Now I'll do something typically Protestant: as you may already know or have noticed, our faith life is not shaped by fixed rules of behavior, but by interpreting our faith and its expression in light of the time and circumstances we live in.

And that's what I'll do now:

I believe that in today's overheated and overdriven world, we all know how much we need this interruption – this pause found in abstaining and fasting.

Even in secular, non-religious contexts, fasting and detox programs are increasingly offered.

Often, these are primarily about individual physical or mental self-optimization – less about the well-being of the community.

Still, this development also reflects an awareness of how important it is for us humans to cultivate a culture of interruption – of stopping – especially because the resources of our planet are limited, just like our own lives.

And that's another reason why fasting is important: to face the one truth of our existence – that we are all finite.

And that we must use the time we have...