

Rector's Note – 2.23.23 -- This is the fast I want.

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

I'm calling a fast – for myself and for you if you would like to join me. I do this with a bit of trepidation, as I'm not really good at fasting. I'm doing it a bit spontaneously because before this morning I was planning on giving up snacks for Lent.

I need to fast and pray about gun violence this Lent, because this morning while reading the paper I hit a painful limit, and something in me insisted, "this is the fast that I want."

Perhaps it was fatigue – the weariness that comes from the long days that start Lent, or the tipping point that comes with just so much bad news in the headlines every morning. But an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer about two teens who were injured by gunfire at 3:30 in the afternoon just down the street from a memorial for slain Temple police officer Christopher Fitzgerald was just too much. The paper was two days old. I was catching up on news that I routinely miss or ignore or browse by. So my tears were sudden and belated and they caught me off guard.

What can be done? I thought bitterly. What more should people of faith be doing, when everything we've been doing – the marches, the t-shirt shrines to gun victims, the artwork displays, the letters to elected officials, the calls for us to do something, do not seem to move the people who can slow the flow of firearms in the Philadelphia region.

It made yesterday's long effort of imposing ashes seem like just so much dust. What do these gestures mean when so little changes? I thought of the damning words of Isaiah 58: *You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.*"

This is the fast I want, Isaiah kept saying as I wondered if I should just calm down and get on with my busy day. But he persisted. *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

What good is giving up food and turning to prayer in the face of so much violence: violence at the hands of police, violence toward police, random gun fire that takes children as casualties, assassinations at high schools and gas stations?

Let me be clear that the Lenten fast is not an act that is meant to be enough. The fast of Isaiah is not meant to get instant results, it's not utilitarian; it's meant to change hearts so that they can better serve the will of God.

What is the fast that God wants of me, in the face of the bleeding headlines and the ongoing pain of the city I live in and the suburb where my church is? I think that at this moment God wants me to fast from my disconnection and to turn my Lenten intention toward life.

Isaiah would likely say it this way: stay the scrolling of your thumb and the turning of the page, refrain from looking away and do not turn away the call for healing in your community.

So this will be my practice this Lent if you would like to join me: Every Thursday at noon I will fast from my midday meal. Instead I'll spend my lunch hour in prayerful reflection and in writing about gun violence in our community, what my intention can be, and how I can respond. And I'll post it on Facebook, so you can join me in the effort if you like.

Or at least, I'm going to try. It will not be enough. But I'm hoping that it will help me to move to another level of understanding and action against the cult of death that is so repugnant to the Lord of Life that I believe in. Lent is the road to our story of his own bloody death. And Holy Week will take us right to it. Easter is the belief that things change because of that sacrifice.

If I believe that then I have to be willing to work for an end to the violence that is killing my neighbors and my community members, and is damaging the souls of all of us who look away. This is believing in the promise of Easter. Without that Easter hope, it's all dust and ashes.