

Ash Wednesday

Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is morally offensive to all people of good will. We begin Lent this year as an unjust war rages in a land far away yet disturbs hearts here at home. On Sunday Pope Francis renewed his request that we spend this Ash Wednesday in fasting and prayer, "A day to be close to the sufferings of the Ukrainian people, to feel that we are all brothers and sisters, and to implore of God the end of the war." The pope continued, "Those who wage war forget humanity. They do not start from the people, they do not look at the real life of people, but place partisan interests and power before all else. They trust in the diabolical and perverse logic of weapons, which is the furthest from the logic of God. And they distance themselves from ordinary people, who want peace, and who — the ordinary people — are the real victims in every conflict, who pay for the follies of war with their own skin." Pope Francis commanded the authorities, "put down your weapons! God is with the peacemakers, not with those who use violence."

Whenever we want God's attention, we pray, but we have another tool in the box of spiritual traditions: fasting. Fasting supports one's prayer. You can hear it in tonight's first reading from the prophet Joel. His people are on the verge of an enemy's invasion. They don't know what they've done to anger God, but whatever it is, they want to stop. Some people were rending their garments as a sign that even something as precious as clothing is worthless if it draws your attention away from God. But Joel told the people, "Rend your hearts, not your garments." Don't just change externals; change your life from within.

The prophet Joel calls for a fast. He asks everyone to observe it: elders, children, infants at the breast—even newlyweds. A bride and groom are to suspend the pursuits of personal pleasure to support their prayer with fasting; this will win God's attention. Joel repeats a description of God found frequently throughout the Old Testament, "gracious and merciful is he, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment." Joel reminds the people about the nature of God who holds power and uses it for the good.

Fasting is more common than we may realize. We fast spontaneously when some other activity is more important: We may skip a meal to be on time for a meeting or to pick up a child. Other times we do not eat because of some upcoming event in which we have a central role—a wedding, a performance, a confrontation, or the start of war. We fast when some other issue is more demanding than food.

Our fasting today—and throughout Lent—says that something is more demanding than food. To lay the foundations for peace, we need to do our part. We need to relinquish our reliance on weapons, our indifference to the plight of others around the world, our fascination with violence and pornography, our disregard for the environment, our endless pursuit of personal pleasure, our aggression against innocent people we encounter every day. The point of fasting is not to lose weight to look better, but to get the attention of God who is already gracious and merciful. By our fasting we show God that the sufferings of the innocent half a world away afflict us too. We are willing to change our hearts to bring them peace.

Wednesday, March 2, 2022