

### Fasting & Feasting: Spiritual Disciplines & Activities

#### **Weekly Rhythms for Advent & Christmas**

Fasting, especially from food, is a common practice in historical Christianity. Fasting is *not* dieting or purging. Fasting is saying, "No, not right now," to something that is *good* for the sake of pursuing God, and then to re-engage with that good thing at the end of the fast. Fasting is not giving up unhealthy things. Binging and purging urge us to overindulge, over-participate, overeat, and then reign it in and restrict afterwards. Fasting, which is followed by feasting, moderates and regulates intake by delaying satisfaction and gratification, refocusing attention on God and the blessings and goodness of God. Then, after the fast is over, we may participate in the feast set before us. **The fast of Advent leads to the feast of Christmas.** 

As we journey through Advent this season, engage in these weekly rhythms of fasting:

#### **FASTING**

Sundays of Advent - Fasting as Darkness Mondays of Advent - Fasting as Vacancy Tuesdays of Advent - Fasting as Hunger Wednesdays of Advent - Fasting as Empathy Thursdays of Advent - Fasting as Frugality Fridays of Advent - Fasting as Pause Saturdays of Advent - Fasting as Self-Denial

As we engage with Christmas and Epiphany, we encounter the reversal of the fasts with these feasts:

#### **FEASTING**

December 24 & 31 - Feasting as Light

December 25 & January 1 - Feasting as Sacrament

December 26 & January 2 - Feasting as Celebration

December 27 & January 3 - Feasting as Shared Space

December 28 & January 4 - Feasting as Generosity

December 29 & January 5 - Feasting as Rest

December 30 & January 6 - Feasting as Reconciliation

Engage in these fasts and feasts and their respective activities as you reflect on the scriptures listed each day of Advent and Christmas. Journal about what you learn and ponder, and about what is changing and being shaped in your soul.

The discussions of each fast and feast, included below, focus on the topic of hospitality, and how engaging in these rhythms can draw our focus into a greater practice of hospitality to those near us. Discuss this with someone close to you. Practice hospitality to those around you. You are invited into a deeper practice of not only these spiritual disciplines, but also into a deeper practice of hospitality this Advent season.

## Fasting in Advent Sundays before Christmas Fasting as Darkness

Activity: Pause

As we open this season of Advent, take notice of darkness. Perhaps where you live, you are entering winter soon, and daylight hours are lessening with nighttime darkness lengthening. If it is late spring where you live, winter's darkness is still in your not so distant past. What is darkness like? What characterizes it? Take a moment and write your thoughts:

In many situations, darkness can foster fear: monsters under the bed, propensity for increased crime, or simply not being able to see what might trip your feet in the dark. But darkness can focus your attention, too. When it is daylight, many things in a million colors can be seen - trees, mountains, flowers, people, animals, and buildings, to name a few. But when it is dark and light is limited, only a few things can come into focus at any one time. Darkness helps you to simplify your focus, to zero in on what is most important, most pressing. If you are walking in the dark by flashlight or torch, you can only focus on the next few steps in front of you. If you are camping in the wilderness, your campfire's flame and warmth only reaches so far.

When it comes to hospitality, darkness helps us focus, too. Candlelight dinners draw our attention to who and what is at the table. The darkness is transformed from cold to warm, from alone to close community. In this positive space, we can also experience hope.

Hope in the midst of the darkness does not diminish pain or suffering, but draws your attention away from chaos to focus in on what is most important, most pressing, most present before you.

Take inventory of the events and circumstances around you. What is going on in your life and world? Now, audit your response: where is the hope of Jesus bursting through painful or dark circumstances? Can you see it? What's happening?

Read today's scripture, as listed in the Devotional Calendar. Make note of observations. Read again. Ponder words or phrases that stand out to you.

At some point today when it is dark outside, turn off all the lights inside, except for one lamp or candle. What do you notice? What becomes important? With whom do you now share this space? Fast from light to let the darkness teach you to focus on the hope of Christ.

Journal about your thoughts, reflections, and questions.

## Fasting in Advent Mondays before Christmas Fasting as Vacancy

Activity: Purge

Because of entropy, everything around us, if left undisturbed, will eventually go into chaos or decay. Our souls become overcrowded and stuffed by a variety of things: busyness, wounds, unforgiveness, worry, anger, fear, and bitterness. We become so filled with darkness that we do not have space for others in our hearts or in our homes. It becomes difficult to sit with a friend in need when we are burdened without relief.

A part of hospitality is vacancy - there is empty space in the heart and home for someone else to occupy it for a little while. If the dinner table is out of seats - or doesn't have any seats in general or they cannot be or accessed seen in the midst of the mess - then there is no room for hospitality.

Whether or not you host dinner parties in your home, you have opportunities to allow others into your shared space. Do you have room for hospitality this Advent season? You might, but, you might not. This is not something to be ashamed about - it's something to recognize, and spur us into action.

Are you ready to create some space and purge? Is Jesus calling you into deeper simplicity so that you can engage with a deeper community? Are you ready to create some deeper space for hospitality? Take an inventory of your life, using the questions below. Be honest - this is for you.

Rank	your score 0 (overcrowded) to 5 (vacant/hospitable space).
	My Schedule/Calendar
	My Home/Living/Work Space
	My Heart - there Emotionally for Others
	My Body - overtaxed and exhausted
	My Quickness to Forgiveness/Grace

Now that you've taken an inventory, it's time to do something about it. Select the lowest number you listed above, and let's get to work. How can you trim, clean, purge, unclutter, heal, pray, or forgive in order to create more space?

Now, in this space of vacancy, ask the Holy Spirit to pour over you a sense of hope, love, joy, peace, and light. When we are burdened and living in emotional, spiritual, or physical chaos, it is very difficult to and to practice hospitality. What act of hospitality can you now take from this place of vacancy?

# Fasting in Advent Tuesdays before Christmas Fasting as Hunger

Activity: Crave

What do you crave today? What is something you desire? We often crave foods - salty, sweet, savory, or comforting. In certain seasons we crave specific things, too. Teenagers crave autonomy. New parents crave sleep. Grievers crave the presence of the one lost. We hunger for what is not yet in our vicinity, what is not yet or not longer here.

We crave food and sleep as remedies for depleted energy. We desire individuality in community, as we crave to know others and to be known by others. We hunger for hope, love, joy, peace, and light in a weary, dark, unjust world.

But we can also crave, desire, and hunger for unhealthy things. We crave because of addiction, or as a coping mechanism, or as a means of escape. All blessings have shadow sides in overabundance and overindulgence. And sometimes we just find ourselves participating in dark and dangerous activities because of a million reasons and decisions that have led us to this sinful place. We focus our pain and comfort on things, activities, or people instead of healthy outlets and processes.

Yet all cravings, desire, and hunger teach us, though, that there are better things ahead.

Written in the depths of every human soul is the realization that the world as it is not as it should be. Craving and hunger preach this message every day. *One day there will be no empty bellies, no empty homes, no needs, no poverty.* This is a message preached about hope - Hope in Christ for when he returns in final victory, hope about the renewal of the entire world, the righting of the entire Created Order. Chaos, war, pain, striving -- these will not occupy our minds and our space when Christ is the last and final victor.

Pause for a moment and reflect: What do you crave? What do you desire? What do you hunger for? Spend some time in prayer and tell God about these cravings, desires, and hungers. Lay it out and be honest with God.

Fast something today -- food, light, technology - something *good* you will miss, and when you miss this thing, pray. Ask God to use this craving to teach you about hope, about craving for Jesus to come again.

## Fasting in Advent Wednesdays before Christmas Fasting as Empathy

Activity: Listen

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy feels sorry for a person, animal, or situation. Sympathy is the emotion stirred up when exploitation is exposed on commercials so that donations can be mustered for the cause of the oppressed. Sympathy is that outside feeling of sadness or sorrow when your parents' friend's brother's wife dies. You feel bad, but it's more of an external or intellectual feeling -- it does not rock you to your core.

Empathy, on the other hand, hurts. Empathy feels *with* a person in emotional or physical pain, without projecting self's emotions or hardships onto the situation. Empathy uses self's past hurts to compassionately feel in the moment. Empathy connects, listens, shuts up, abides, and cries with. A potent Biblical example of this is to "sit in the ashes with" another person who is grieving, mourning, in pain, or otherwise going through a hard time. Being an "Ash Sitter" is NOT being a fixer, preacher, lecturer, or other non-empathetic solution. Ash Sitting just sits -- in the ashes of the situation -- mourning with, listening, and comforting with presence.

Have you had an Ash Sitter before? Who were they and what did they do (or not do!)? How did this person make you feel in your time of need?

The next time you or someone around you experiences sorrow, heartbreak, or tragedy, pay attention: who is an Ash Sitter? Who sits well and listens well? Perhaps you have a recent experience with pain and you can remember someone who sat well in the ashes. Notice *how* this person listened. Notice what they *didn't* do.

Job's friends, in the Old Testament book of Job, are notorious for being terrible ash sitters. Instead of listening and grieving with their friend Job in his time of great loss, they did not listen well. Skim through Job's story and make some notes on what you notice and observe.

Look up Brene Brown on Empathy (found here: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369]w">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369]w</a>). Watch it again, this time taking a notice of what stands out to you most.

Now ponder this: what makes someone a good, empathetic listener? What is one thing you can implement or remove from your listening skills to be more empathetic?

Empathy makes room for hospitality. If the people in your shared space know you can listen well, you can build deeper and deeper trust and connection. And when you do, you get to demonstrate the love of Jesus to those around you.

## Fasting in Advent Thursdays before Christmas Fasting as Frugality

Activity: Save

Frugality is not being stingy. Stingy people do not give or spend of what they have because of *pride*, *greed*, and *fear*. Frugal people do not give or spend because of *planning*. The motivations are different. Frugality allows for carefully planned "yeses" - the many "nos" are also part of the plan. Perhaps a better way to describe frugality is "not yet" - the "yes" is coming, but it is still on its way.

What does frugality have to do with hospitality, you might ask? Well, frugality is one aspect of fasting - saying no to something good for a time. But frugality creates margin in the financial budget and the calendar so that you many invest in hospitality later. If there's no financial wiggle room, no time margin, then hospitality will be a hardship, not a joy.

One of the easiest ways to create such a margin is to save or to swap. Consider these saves and swaps:

- SWAP: Instead of going out for an activity, do it at home, such as making coffee or meals.
- SWAP: Use reusable items instead of throw-away items for plates, cups, flatware, straws, paper towels, and take-away containers.
- SAVE: Reduce your purchases of unneeded items. Make a list of what you purchase and put it in one of two categories: Needs/Survival and Wants/Bonuses. Reduce purchases in the second category.
- SAVE: Start your monthly budget by first subtracting your tithe and giving to the church, then the amount you are setting aside to save. Live within the rest of this budgeted amount. Seek additional advice from someone in your church who is wise financially.

When we set aside money to save up funds for something, we delay gratification and satisfaction. When we say "not yet" to comfort, fashion, or easy access, we get just a taste of the much grander and most holy aspect of the Incarnation: self-sacrifice. Jesus did not consider himself so distant from us so as to think of us beneath him, but Jesus came to us, in our skin, at our level, to be among us, to redeem us (check out Philippians 2:6-11).

Today as you decide what to save, consider when Jesus set aside all of the glories of heaven to live here on the earth, to partake in our lives, and to ultimately set in motion our freedom and healing from sin, death, and hell.

# Fasting in Advent Fridays before Christmas Fasting as Pause

Activity: Sabbath

Take a deep breath. And another. Pause. What's going on around you? Is today chaotic? Confusing? Wonderful? Normal? Something else? Journal your thoughts about today:

Let today be a pause. The work, anxiety, and stress will likely still be there tomorrow. If it is a situation you can resolve easily, do it. If not, set it aside. What can you do today, instead, to rest?

Sabbath is a regular, weekly break from the normal grind so that you can focus on your relationship with God, rest, worship, and recharge. Many Christians think Sabbath is Sunday. Our Jewish friends celebrate Sabbath Friday night through to Saturday night. But here, we are examining Sabbath on Fridays. Perhaps, in your weekly planning, you will sabbath Saturday or Sunday - and that's fine. But take a moment and start thinking about Sabbath right now.

How can you do these things today, or this weekend?

- Worship Corporately in Church?
- Worship Individually by yourself?
- Play?
- Pray?
- Exercise?
- Read the Bible?
- Read for fun?
- Create?
- Celebrate?
- Limit Screen Time
- Practice Hospitality?

These are not supposed to be a list of to-dos that need accomplished, but a list of invitations into something sacred and holy. The Holy Spirit is with us in our work and everyday lives, but the Holy Spirit can speak louder and clearer when we have fewer influences bombarding our sacred time with the Lord. Carve out some Sabbath time today, even if you will more fully participate in Sabbath on a different day.

# Fasting in Advent Saturdays before Christmas Fasting as Self-Denial

Activity: Serve

Serving and being served are both gifts - spiritual gifts as well as gifts of grace offered to one another. As guests in a friend's home, we are honored with the gifts of friendship, of breaking bread, of sharing an elaborate meal, and of enjoying good company together. We witness what it might look like to serve others with a radical kind of hospitality.

Serving, however, includes a significant element of being last -- last to be served, last to get in line, last to eat. It includes other things, too, but some of these are more difficult: self-denial, caring for the needs of others before yourself, watching out for others in their times of vulnerability. Every moment is not like this -- because self care is important, like putting your air mask on first in the case of an airplane emergency or making sure you practice good hygiene every day. However, those moments of service, of putting others' needs first and yours last -- these moments teach us about hospitality.

Who is in your shared space - your places of hospitality? To whom do you serve? If you're a parent, this might be your children. It might be your aging parents, your roommates, your spouse, your neighbors, coworkers, or grandchildren. There are plenty of people we randomly interact with, as well, such as those at the store, places of business, and church. How can you serve these with radical hospitality? How can you be last, even for a moment, to share with those who share your space?

Serving someone else is one of the easiest ways to practice hospitality. Yet it might also be one of the hardest, since serving someone else takes self-denial in order to put someone else first. Consider someone in your life: your spouse, a housemate, a family member, a neighbor, a friend, or a coworker. How can you serve them today? Perhaps one of the following:

- Write them a letter of appreciation.
- Do a chore or task for them.
- Brainstorm a few more specific tasks:

Serving someone else is not about getting attention, but about showing love for the other person.

All this week, we have been discussing hope and hospitality. Reflect on this week about these topics. What have you learned?

Of the activities and reflections, which have been easy and enjoyable? Which have been more difficult and challenging?

#### Christmas Eve - December 24, Seventh Day of Christmas - December 31

### Feasting as Light

Activity:	: Flame

Light all five of the candles of Advent. Reflect on their meanings: Hope, Love, Joy, Peace, and Light.

Now reflect on all of the meanings of the word light. What things are lit? What does light mean?

Light dispels darkness. Light fosters hospitality. Gatherings happen in the light. In the light, we can come face to face with one another, and see all of the goodness and glory in the other who stands before us.

As you look at the five candles lit today, who shares this light with you, both actually and metaphorically? Pray for these: those in your home, those in your church, those in your city and community, those in the church around the world, those in the persecuted church.

How is the light of Christ active and at work in your life? In your church? In your community? In the church around the world? Research to see where the Church is growing and how the Holy Spirit is moving around the world. Journal about these positive experiences.

Next, spend some time in prayer, asking God to shine light on your own life. With whom can you welcome
into your space and share the light of Christ? Write their names here:

Pray for these people you listed above. Then make a plan to demonstrate the light of Christ to them. Discuss this plan in the space below, then do it.

#### Christmas Day - December 25, Eighth Day of Christmas - January 1

### Feasting as Sacrament

Activity: Bake/Create

Sacraments are sacred acts. Recognized sacraments of the Church range from two to three to seven. The two common sacraments among all Christians are Baptism and the Lord's Supper, sometimes called Eucharist or Holy Communion.

But many things can be sacred acts shared with others, or sacramental acts that are holy moments of shared fellowship with the Holy Spirit and with others. The moment is made holy by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the presence of those with whom you share the moment.

Bake, cook, or otherwise create something edible today. Perhaps this is a yummy holiday or Christmas treat, a regular meal, or simply a loaf of bread. If baking and cooking are not your skillsets, buy something from the store or a restaurant. Either way, share this crafted item with someone. Make note of the effort and intentionality that is involved in your acquisition of this edible item. What did you have to do to make or buy this shared snack or meal?

Now eat, drink, and enjoy this item together as a sacrament, a sacred act. This is a holy moment, not an ordinary moment. Savor the time as well as the item you are sharing.

As you partake, ponder why this shared meal, snack or treat is or could be a holy moment. What is also shared in this time, aside from food? What happens in your friendship and relationship with this person as you share some food together?

Observe in a granular way: what do you do when you share in this way that you might not do if the shared food was not present? What kind of care do you bring to this meeting with your friend, child, or spouse that is added because you made or bought something just for this occasion? Journal these thoughts and reflections. Discuss them with your sacrament sharer.

What does this sharing as a sacred act teach you about hospitality?

### Second Day of Christmas - December 26, Ninth Day of Christmas - January 2

### Feasting as Celebration

Activity: Share

Celebration is one of the most life-giving activities in which we can participate. We celebrate the Eucharist, also known as Communion or the Lord's Supper. We celebrate milestones and birthdays. We celebrate accomplishments, degrees earned, and anniversaries. All of these are worthy activities.

Celebrations are shared, bringing together friends, family, or friends who are family. Celebrations create memories for us, drawing us together to worship, play, pray, and eat. Celebrations are a very good thing.

Celebration reminds us that this life is not all pain and suffering. Celebrations remind us that God is good, and victorious over sin, death, and hell. Christmas and Easter are the most Holy Celebrations after the long, patient suffering and waiting of Advent and Lent.

Celebrations are the very good of the Sixth Day of Creation (Genesis 1:31). Celebrations are the "Peace! Be still!" to the chaotic waves and winds around us (Mark 4:39). Celebrations are the angelic declaration, "Do not be afraid!" (Luke 2:10) and the Messianic declaration, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). Celebrations speak of redemption and Resurrection. Celebrations are good.

What do you celebrate today? With whom do you celebrate?

Our celebrations do not have to wait for the big things like graduations and birthdays. We are invited to celebrate every good gift that comes from God (James 1:17). What gifts have been given to you today? How can you celebrate these gifts? Journal and reflect, and then do it! Celebrate today! Share this celebration with someone else.

### Third Day of Christmas - December 27, Tenth Day of Christmas - January 3

### Feasting as Shared Space

Activity: Embrace
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With whom do you share your space? Fill out the list below:

Who shares your home on a regular basis, like your spouse, children, or roommates?

Who shares your home as a guest or visitor?

What about at work or school, who is always next to you? Who has a nearby desk, locker, office, or workspace?

With whom do you share your lunch? Your break times? Your recreation time?

Who do you pass on your walking or driving commute? Who sits next to you on the bus?

Who are the people who share your space for a temporary moment, such as the employee at the register when you shop from a store or order from a restaurant?

With whom do you share your space? Who else should be on this list?

Once you have filled out the above blanks, review them. Now, grab a different colored pen or pencil and answer the questions again, but include the people who might take more intentionality to include because there is some sort of tension in your relationship.

How can you embrace these listed above in a spirit of hospitality? How can you be intentional that your shared space isn't just occupying the same space, but using this time together to demonstrate the hospitality of Christ? Reflect below.

# Feasting in Christmas Fourth Day of Christmas - December 28, Eleventh Day of Christmas - January 4 Feasting as Generosity

Activity: Give			

Generosity does not always mean giving money. Generous people have currencies in many denominations: time, finances, listening, space around their table and in their home, and their skills and talents. Brainstorm some of the "currencies" you have below: With whom can you be generous today? With what can you be generous? How can your generosity be an act of hospitality, of demonstrating the love of Christ by freely giving without expecting anything in return? List these people below: Pick one or more act of generosity, and do it. Reflect after your act(s) of generosity. How did it go? What happened? What did you learn? What do you celebrate? What would you like to do differently next time?

# Feasting in Christmas Fifth Day of Christmas - December 29, Twelfth Day of Christmas - January 5 $Feasting \ as \ Rest$

Activity: Sabbath

In similar ways that you rested and sabbathed during Advent, also sabbath and rest during this season of Christmas. Pause. Take a break. Cancel the busyness and restlessness for today, and spend time with God in silence, solitude, prayer, reading Scripture, walking in nature, and in resting. Create and recreate today. Play and pray. Enjoy a sport, play some music, partake in art. Let this be a day of restoration for yourself and those in your home.

Work shall come again tomorrow, as will toil and strife. Cease the striving for today, and simply enjoy the presence of God. Spend time journaling about what you will do and have done today to participate in Sabbath.

What were the highlights of today?

Draw or sketch something amazing from today:

# Feasting in Christmas Sixth Day of Christmas - December 30, First day of Epiphany - January 6 Feasting as Reconciliation

Activity: Welcome

Finally, as the last feast of Christmas, let us participate in reconciliation. With whom do you need to reconcile? Perhaps it is personal reconciliation with a friend, family member, or coworker. Perhaps it is systemic reconciliation within your community, people group, or country. Perhaps it is with others who are quite different from you in appearance, language, understanding, worldview, or other identity.

Reconciliation does not always mean agreement, but it does mean hospitality and kindness.

Reconciliation welcomes others who are different from oneself and seeks resolution. Assimilation or assumption of differences upon self does not necessarily mean reconciliation has happened. This sort of appropriation is sometimes, even oftentimes, as harmful as not seeking reconciliation in the first place.

Reconciliation meets face to face with the present differences, and embraces, welcomes, and celebrates the differences that are good while seeking to bring about goodness in the differences that are harmful. Perhaps the change needs to happen in you. Perhaps the change needs to happen in the other person. But reconciliation is always a pursuit, always a journey towards the other, with the purpose of unity in diversity.

Let's first own what is ours and take responsibility for it. What needs to change in you so that reconciliation can come about? What are your own rough edges, and your sinful actions and attitudes?

Next, what needs to change in you as you pursue to welcome those around you? What are your natural biases that become roadblocks between you and others? Prayerfully surrender these to Jesus.

Now, take more steps towards reconciliation by embracing those who are different toward you. Keep in mind this is a process and will not be accomplished today. Keep leaning into this act. Keep pursuing others who are different from you. And all the while, ask God to change you, to shape you, and to mold you to have a heart more and more like the heart of Jesus.