

## 2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

### Ash Wednesday Reflection

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#### Return to Me with All Your Will

*Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
    sound the alarm on my holy mountain!  
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,  
    for the day of the Lord is coming, it is near—  
A day of darkness and gloom,  
    a day of clouds and thick darkness!  
Like blackness spread upon the mountains  
    a great and powerful army comes;  
Their like has never been from of old,  
    nor will be again after them in ages to come.*

*Yet even now, says the Lord,  
    return to me with all your will. (Joel 2:1-2a)*

Ash Wednesday. Lent is beginning. Of the different seasons of the Church year, Lent is a challenging season to me. The triumphant Alleluias of Easter are gone. Trumpets of celebration are traded for trumpets of warning. The warmth of candles in December, of happy anticipation of Christ's coming during the Advent season is also missing. But like Advent and Easter and Christmas, Lent is a season we all recognize; unlike Pentecost or Epiphany, seasons that require constant reminders like "this is the 23rd Sunday of Pentecost". We know Lent. We know Lent is a season in which we are challenged, and it is upon us.

During Lent we are challenged to repent or to return our attention toward God, to focus on the Holy sacrifice of Jesus by refusing to preoccupy ourselves with worldly matters. We are challenged to notch up our self-discipline in order to "fight the good fight", to strive (in Arabic: jihad) toward more perfect living.

*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ ... that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. (Philippians 1:27)*

And as we hear in the Gospel lesson chosen for this day, we are instructed to rise to this challenge without drawing attention to it, quietly, in true piety:

*Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them;  
... whenever you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,  
so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

*... whenever you pray, ... go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.  
... whenever you fast, do not look dismal .... But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret. (Matthew 6:1-18)*

So this is our challenge. What discipline are you going to keep during this Lenten season? Good time to make good on New Year's resolutions! Most of us, it may just be me, have abandoned Lenten disciplines. Fear of false piety? Commitment to the doctrine of justification by faith alone? Or modernity, I mean our culture has changed, and our kids just don't learn it anymore. I bet most adults can say to children these days, "When I was kid, during Lent, we used to ..."

It wasn't long after I arrived in Senegal 15 years ago, that I began to have new experiences that have shaped my understanding of Lent today. For example, learning Pulaar, (spoken by the Fulani), I was introduced to the daily ritual of greetings. How are you? How is your day, or morning, or evening? How is your health? How is your tiredness? How is your family? How are your children? How are your parents? How are the people of your village? How is your work going? After a few months, just as I was getting used to these questions and various responses, I heard something I hadn't heard before, "*Mbad-daa e Korka?*" What did that mean? So I asked, and I learned that this was a greeting used during the month of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, and it meant "How are you doing with your fast?" It seemed to me that everyone was asking everyone that question, and so I started to include it in my greetings. When I did, sometimes instead of getting the regular "Peace only" response, people asked me "*Ada hoora?*" – Are you fasting? Hmm? Scratch my head. No. Immediately, the arguments against fasting came to my rescue, but God saved me from foisting on my Muslim friends all the reasons why I wasn't fasting and made me realize that all the question demanded was a yes or no answer.

Every year, casual encounters in Senegal taught me something about fasting. One day Gasama was fasting and I asked him if Ramadan wasn't over. He explained that yes it was over, but that he missed a few days of fasting during Ramadan because he was sick, and now he was making up the missed days. Abdoulaye didn't play a very good game of tennis the other evening. I thought I was playing exceptionally well until I realized that my opponent hadn't eaten anything since before dawn and we were in the third week of Ramadan. At work one day, Malik told me we weren't going to have lunch that day, because all the women who cook rice in the neighborhood weren't cooking. Dem was telling me in August that his wife went back to the village. When will she be back? Sometime after Ramadan, she wanted to be with her family during the important month.

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sanctify a fast;  
Call a solemn assembly; gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation; assemble the aged;  
gather the children, even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy. (Joel 2:15-16)*

The month of fasting in Senegal and throughout the Muslim world is a family affair, something like the American Thanksgiving. Of course, you might say, and you would be right, Ramadan is a whole month and Thanksgiving is only one day. But at the end of each day, as the sun slips over the horizon, families come together to break the day's fast. It is a time of celebration, with special foods like dates, and frowns if you arrive late after the food is ready. Growing up in Pennsylvania, I thought fasting was something like a hunger strike, but I learned fasting was a daily dawn to dusk exercise that, done one month per year, might be good for your body. Not everyone fasts, not everyone should. People who are sick or who are traveling, women who are pregnant don't fast. Little Samba asked his parents if he could fast this year like his older brothers, but his parents replied no not until you are 16. The children, though they can see it isn't easy, want to be a part of it, a part of the fasting. Because the reality is that most people in Senegal do: Muslims during Ramadan and Christians during Lent. It is a part of the year's rhythm, like getting back to school. It dawned on me one year that the best time to drive across Dakar city is around dusk during Ramadan, when everyone has already arrived at the location where they are going to break the day's fast. For about an hour, there is no traffic. People are with their families or sometimes the families of their closet friends, and there is a sense of thanksgiving.

As I prepare this Lenten message, Ramadan is just ending. Because the Muslim calendar is lunar, Ramadan falls approximately one month earlier each year according to our calendar. This year Ramadan came in September, the hottest month of the year in Dakar, temperatures of 100 degrees and humidity over 90%. A few years ago, Ramadan coincided with the Christian Lenten season.

The majority of Christians in Senegal – less than 10% of the nation's population – are Catholic, and the Church's liturgical year is recognized. In fact, Senegal's national holidays include Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Ascension, and Assumption. As a French speaking county, Lent is known here as *Carême*. The word comes from a medieval Latin term *quaresme*, meaning a time of fasting and abstinence, which itself was a transformation of the classical Latin *quadragesima*, a reference to the "forty days" before Easter. Christians in Senegal celebrate the beginning of Lent with Ash Wednesday, going to mass and receiving the ashes from last year's palm branches on their foreheads. Every Friday night, the Catholic congregations pray the Stations of the Cross, which in French is *Le Chemin de la Croix* or the "Way of the Cross" remembering what Christ accomplished for us and how we were asked to follow Him. And, as the term *Carême* indicates, Christians in Senegal fast, some fast the entire time of Lent, some only fast Wednesdays and Fridays. One time Thérèse was fasting, but it wasn't Lent; it was Ramadan. She told me that sometimes the Christians in Senegal will fast along side their Muslim brothers and sisters.

What has marked me most about fasting in Senegal is how much it is a community event. On the street everyone is asking their neighbor how the fast is going. Families make special arrangements to be together to break the fast at the end of the day. Men and women, old people and even some brave children join in the event. Even those not fasting refrain from eating in front of those who are. Muslims and Christians practice the fast as a yearly ritual, sometimes even fasting during the other religion's fasting season, just for the sake of solidarity.

The season of spiritual discipline, whether Ramadan or Lent becomes less an individual's spiritual journey and more of a time of community and placing oneself in the midst of other believers. Instead of putting the accent on self-improvement, there is a call to see how our understanding of God will lead us toward fuller integration with the society around us. There is an expression here in Senegal, that I hear frequently when someone forgets to do something for someone, or someone doesn't have the right amount of change, or when someone has to go out of his or her way for the other. The expression is "*Nous sommes ensemble*" a French phrase that means "We are together." In the midst of life's difficulties and failures toward one another, it is this sense of togetherness and solidarity in the face of life's struggles, that brings forgiveness and builds community. That is what fasting is about as a community of believers.

Whether it be fasting or giving up one thing, increased family devotions or more services at the church, spiritual disciplines during the season of Lent build up our sense of community as children of God. When I read Paul's desire to commend himself:

*in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. (2 Corinthians 6: 4-10)*

I understand that our spiritual disciplines go beyond seasonal rituals and on to how we live out our life day to day as "the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). So let us pray during this Lenten season, that the newness of life we have through Christ Jesus will lead us to increased awareness of each other, so that we can share in life's difficulties, not only as families, but also as congregations, and not only as residents in one local place but as residents in the world. Let's rise to the challenge! Let us use all our will to return to the Lord our God.