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So too when we hold fast in faith, we will be able to endure anything, no matter what monsters that threaten our faith. But if we do not keep the faith, we will be unable to endure what is to come.

If we refrain from regular worship, if we refrain from fellowship with this body of Christ, if we refrain from bringing our thanks and requests to God, that will not strengthen us. If we buy into the value of independence which our culture sells us, if we rely only on ourselves, that will not strengthen us.

Christianity *inverts* the values of this world. When we are weak, when we suffer, when difficulty strikes — that is when our faith is strengthened — so long as we keep it!

That is what we learned from Satan's Temptation of Jesus. For forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, Jesus fasted. Then the tempter came. Satan tempted Jesus with food, with the care of angels, and with the kingdoms of this world. But the price that Satan asked him to pay was terribly, monstrously high. Satan wanted to break Jesus' relationship with his Father, to make him doubt and destroy his identity as the Son of God, to place his identity and his mission in Satan instead of in God.

Jesus did not give in or give up. Jesus was starving, parched, bodily fatigued. But was he at his weakest, as his body appeared, or was he at his strongest? His fasting for forty days and nights had prepared him for Satan's monstrous temptations. After all that, what was a little more hunger, a little more fatigue, a little more suffering?

Jesus was indeed at his strongest. So, too, fasting prepares us, helps us to desire Jesus and what is from Jesus, and helps us to pray as we ought.

One of the most striking places we see fasting is in the book of Jonah. You know the story, how Jonah wants to escape his calling, and ends up in the belly of the fish. And after being there for three days and three nights, he is vomited onto the dry land, and he finally makes the journey to Nineveh to preach.

It's a three day journey across Nineveh, but before the end of the first day, the news has traveled: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown." The King *believes* Jonah, declares a fast, has his people dress in sackcloth and ash. The king, his people, and their livestock all put on sackcloth, sit in ash, and fast from food and from drink.

The king and his people were promised *nothing* if they repented. But they knew they had been evil, they believed God, and so they turned from evil.

You know how the rest of the story goes, too. Forty days later, Nineveh was not destroyed after all, but was saved from judgment by God.

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When things don't make sense, that itself — that irrationality, that confusion — is a symptom of the Fall, a reminder that things are *supposed* to make sense, that things are supposed to be ordered, are supposed to be good. We understand intuitively that suffering, evil, death aren't things that are supposed to happen in this world — and neither is confusion and meaninglessness.

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The giving of the law is intrinsically connected to rest. This, when we allow ourselves to see it, is really not a surprise. When we have gone *against the law*, when we have *sinned*, we become bothered, anxious, pricked by our conscience, ill-at-ease, *and rest escapes us*. When we sin against God or neighbor, it affects us — our body, our mind, our soul. The further and deeper we allow ourselves to rebel against these ten commandments, the more we are not liberated, but enslaved, made captive, and the more we give up rest.

Perhaps you begin to see why Jesus had to rest in the grave on the Sabbath, to win for us true Sabbath rest.

But what about the other number in this passage? What does forty days and forty nights call to mind? At Exodus 24, there's only one other passage this far into the Bible that has 40 days and 40 nights: the Flood. And so, we ask — how is Moses' time on the mountain — the giving of the Law — connected to the Flood? What was the Flood about? Judgment. And Salvation. Judgment of the world for its evil; Salvation for Noah and his family from God. Just as in the waters of the great Flood, the world will be judged by the law. But is there anyone who will be saved by the law? Only one. Who is the only one who fully keeps the law?

Matthew 12. The Pharisees seek a sign. The first thing to say here is that there is no shortage of signs, miracles, healings, and authoritative teaching of Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us that all of the books in the world could not contain the things that could have been written about Jesus. So there were signs that Pharisees could have seen, and did see. But it's not enough for them; it will never be enough for them.

So Jesus tells them of the only sign that matters: the Sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights, so, too, the Son of Man—Jesus—would be in the belly of the earth for three days and nights. Just as Jonah's three days in the belly of the fish had saved Nineveh, so, too, Jesus' three days in the belly of the earth will save *his people*.

3 Days. Death & Resurrection.

Nineveh listened to Jonah. Will anyone listen to the *greater* Jonah—the Son of Man—our Lord Jesus himself?

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More to our present concern — how will we respond to God during these forty days of Lent? Will we be strengthened in our faith through fasting from whatever ails us, whatever eats at us, whatever threatens to pull us away from our Lord Jesus?

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Fasting is not only about food, and it is not about dieting. We may indeed need to fast from food or from drink, though we may more pressingly need to fast from shopping, scrolling, TV, the news — and any other comfort, pleasure, or desire that threatens our faith in Jesus. Let him alone be our comfort, our desire, our delight.

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For Christ the Lord is worthy of all worship and praise and glory and honor and majesty, now and forever.

Amen and amen.

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Vespers Homily, Lenten Season, February 25, 2026

Matthew 12:38-50 | Numbers & The Sign of Jonah

+ Justin David Baker

Pastor, Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church

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Exodus 24:12-18

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 And he said to the elders, "Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them."

15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

The giving of the tablets of the law.

Moses goes to the mountain, and the cloud covers it.

On the seventh day, Moses receives the Law (and Moses is with the Lord).

A devouring fire.

Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

1 Kings 19:3-8

3 Then he was afraid, and he arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there.

4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he asked that he might die, saying, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my fathers." 5 And he lay down and slept under a broom tree. And behold, an angel touched him and said to him, "Arise and eat." 6 And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water. And he ate and drank and lay down again. 7 And the angel of the Lord came again a second time and touched him and said, "Arise and eat, for the journey is too great for you." 8 And he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

Context: Elijah destroys the prophets of Baal; Jezebel puts a death warrant out for him.

Ready for death.

Angel nourishes him, twice.

He journeys forty days and nights to speak to God on the mountain.

There is a remnant in Israel.

Matthew 12:38-50

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. 40 For just as Jonah was three days and three

nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. 41 The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. 42 The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

43 "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. 44 Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. 45 Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation."

46 While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. 48 But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Our Practice of Holy Communion

St. Paul writes: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* (1 Corinthians 11:27–28, ESV)

Not one of us is worthy *on our own merit* to receive our Lord Jesus.

Nevertheless, he bids us to come to him all the same (Matthew 11:28-30).

And so, trusting his great mercy, *anyone* may come to him *in faith*, having examined oneself according to this confession:

All who are baptized in the name of the Triune God, believe in the real presence of Jesus in the bread and the wine of Holy Communion, and are repentant of their sins are welcome at the Lord’s Table.

All others may come forward for a blessing, signaling this by crossing your arms over your chest.