

Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany-Year A, February 8, 2026

By Jennifer Irving

All week I have had the words God speaks to Isaiah ringing in my ears:

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?

As I have shovelled the driveway (yet again), watched another episode of terrible tv, played my daily New York Times games (not just the Wordle anymore—now I play Connections, Strands, Pips, the Mini, Sudoku, Spelling Bee and sometimes even the regular Crossword), I have been hearing the question “Is this the fast I choose?” I keep asking myself... are these choices I am making about how to spend my time drawing me closer to God?

Usually, I think of “fasting” during Lent. Fasting during Lent hasn’t always been the tradition in the United Church of Canada (I think it was more of a Catholic thing to do) so it wasn’t until I went to University that heard about fasting (one of the people who became my closest friends throughout my time at Emmanuel College had grown up in the Catholic church so she introduced me to quite a few things I’d never really heard of) So my first year at school, during Lent I became Vegan—now I’d been a vegetarian for 10 years or so, so I didn’t think it would be that big of stretch to give up eggs and dairy as well. Oh my goodness, was I wrong. I thought about God every time I sat down to eat. Which, I think is a fairly successful fast—a practice that helps us draw closer to God... and you might think that doesn’t fit the fast God chooses – to loose the bonds of injustice and let the oppressed go free – but if one is drawing closer to God and thinking about their faith, then it stands to reason they are more likely to hear what God is calling them to do and start sharing bread and seeking justice?

Then, when I was on my internship in Prince Edward Island, I decided that during Lent I would give up watching TV. Can you even fathom it? I mean, Survivor was on!! Don’t panic, I let myself watch TV on Sundays (because every Sunday in Lent is a little Easter—they aren’t included in the 40 days of Lent—did you know that? Luckily I did.) But, even with that loop-hole I experienced this huge opening up of time every day. I had hours every evening suddenly empty that could be filled with other pursuits—I couldn’t believe how much I accomplished for good. Another fairly successful fast—a practice that freed up time that I could fill with doing what God was calling me to do.

Back at Emmanuel, for my final year, friends suggested that instead of giving something up for Lent we choose a different fast—probably inspired by this passage from Isaiah—to make a special donation to Mission and Service each

Sunday in Lent so that we could literally help break every yoke. This practice of fasting not by “giving something up” but by “taking something up” is yet another way to do what God is calling us to do. In fact, those who met this week for our lectionary bible study all thought it would be a wonderful idea to invite the congregation to bring a particular item for our Little Food Cupboard each Sunday in Lent this year. In so doing, we choose the fast God desires! So, look for that in the bulletin next week! Or, perhaps you are feeling called to take up something else this Lent?

Or perhaps, the only way you can imagine yourself having the energy to do anything for God is if you take some time to recharge your battery doing absolutely nothing but lay on the couch eating Cheetos, sleeping and watching bad tv. Our light can't break forth like the dawn if it is burnt out. This too can get us closer to the fast God chooses.

Because it is Black History Month, I want to say a little bit about the way that I see the United Church of Canada living out the fast God chooses as it works toward becoming an anti-racist church.

I was inspired by the display many of us went to see at Trinity United Church last week. The truth of our history as a denomination is that we have not always done a good job of being anti-racist, in fact, through the years, we have been part of the systemic oppression of black people—we even had segregated congregations!

When Wilbur Howard was 29, he became the first Black person to be a minister in The United Church of Canada. Sadly, no churches wanted a Black minister, so Wilbur didn't get to work at a church until he was 53. Even though Wilbur was talented and called by God, people only saw his skin color. Sadly, this is still the case today as spoken of by a black minister who is a friend and colleague of mine, Whitton Daley in this video:

<https://youtu.be/1XLp-e4y6Z0>

The temptation is there to throw ourselves down on the ground and cover ourselves with sack cloth and ashes as we lament the harms we have done. Instead, we choose the fast God wants. We seek justice and show mercy. We actively engage in anti-racism work. We keep working to break the yokes that hold us back from being the community of loving partners that God calls us to be.

It is when we continue to choose to fast in all these different way that embody the fast God chooses that our light shines like a city on a hill and we become the light of the world. Thanks be to God!