

There is an increasing focus in our culture on what some call *mindfulness*. Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are, aware of what we are doing, and not be overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. It really is a form of self-discipline. I think mindfulness requires an element of intentionality in which one is directly focused on some object or situation. As we begin this Lenten season, we are invited into a forty-day journey of mindfulness, to be mindful of where Jesus is leading us, and to embrace an intentional way of living and being in this world.

If given a choice, most of us are not going to be intentional about choosing a path in life that is filled with difficulty. However, I must say that spiritual depth and growth happen as we mindfully respond to the trials, troubles, temptations, testing, and fear that arise in life. For many of us, it is in those times of challenge that we truly learn dependence on God. In such times we find that God graciously provides for all our needs in all of life's seasons.

As we begin this forty-day Lenten journey and meet up with Jesus this morning, we find him in the wilderness. We find he has been "led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the

devil.” Note that the Spirit does not just *drop Jesus off* in the wilderness to fend for himself. He was **led** by the Spirit. The Spirit continues to abide **with** him and enable him to grow stronger through this season.

Jesus is in the wilderness, experiencing what will be a challenging forty days in a place that would seem barren and empty. And, in that place, the devil appears and tempts Jesus. Now, I can imagine Jesus is in a state, both mentally and physically, of utter desperation. He hasn't eaten for weeks. He is likely hallucinating. He is probably thirsty and tired, and feeling empty and powerless. He might even feel as though he is about to die; vulnerable and alone, gaunt, and weak. But Jesus responds to these temptations with a sense of intentional mindfulness, rooted in the foundation of scripture and faith. First, Jesus is tempted with food, and Jesus says, “one does not live by bread alone.” Then, Jesus is tempted with power over all the kingdoms of the world. And Jesus answers, essentially saying, “I worship God, not power.” And finally, the devil tempts him to prove who he is by throwing himself down, and Jesus refuses by saying that we should **not** be in the business of trying to test God, or make God prove **anything** to us. Jesus passes every test by interpreting **scripture, not** by the Letter of the Law, but by the **Law of Love**.

Now, you and I are not Jesus. As we enter the wilderness experiences of our lives, I think we are far **more** susceptible to temptation. We are very likely to be tempted by evil when we are weak and tired and hungry and alone and uncertain and, maybe most of all, *fearful*. You see, fear, uncertainty and facing the unfamiliar create so much anxiety within us. Right now, the world is ridden with fear and anxiety and stress, and it **does** feel like a wilderness experience. Studies show that when people are under stressful conditions – like the anxiety of losing wealth or status, like illness, like worry over the decline of the middle class, like poverty, like inflation, like facing the horrors of war – people feel powerless, and they are less likely to love their neighbors and care for others. When you and I are in the wilderness of perceived powerlessness, we adopt tendencies to scapegoat, to blame, to become more tribalistic. So, it should come as no surprise that we are **most** apt to be tempted by power when we are feeling **powerless**. When there are circumstances and situations in our culture that we do not like, we are tempted to control those facets of culture by trying to eradicate them, by doing things like banning books and banning the honest teaching of our own history as a nation. We are tempted to believe that our comfort level and safety is more secure if we move to a new place where there is little racial, ethnic, or economic diversity, where

others not only look just like us but also think just like us. We are tempted to believe that we can control an insecure economy by hoarding our own wealth, and by excluding and demonizing various groups of people like immigrants, welfare recipients, or **any** considered “other.”

The wilderness can **appear** to be a place of scarcity and, quite frankly, we are more likely to be tempted by evil when we see the world in terms of **scarcity** rather than **abundance**. We are most likely to be tempted when we see people in the world as objects to be feared and despised rather than as **God’s own beloved**. And so, we exploit the worst stereotypes we can think of about each other, so that we can no longer **see** one another; so that we can no longer see **God** in one another. And yet, Jesus reminds us: “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only **God**.’” Which, as we know, simply means this: ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.***

Just maybe, we need to look at the wilderness in a different way, look at it from a different perspective. Just maybe these trying times, these wilderness experiences in life, provide for us times when we can truly be **mindful**, times when we can become more **dependent** upon God, times when we can really learn and become transformed. Just maybe, these

experiences provide a time in life when we can adopt a posture of mindfulness, a time when we can focus more intentionally on God's love to us and God's love for this entire world. And, just maybe the wilderness experiences of our lives teach us to become more vulnerable and more human. Rachel Held Evans, in her book *Wholehearted Faith*, says something about this and the lessons we might learn in the wilderness.

She writes:

Maybe one of the lessons is that the wilderness is a place where we can't rely on the familiar, which can seem like a hardship but might also be an invitation – an invitation into the reality of our existence, an invitation into the truth of our vulnerability. After the Israelites had survived their long journey through the wilderness, they were reminded that it was the place “where you saw how the Lord your God carried you,” Deuteronomy says, “just as one carries a child.”

Just maybe, as we presently live through a wilderness experience, a time when war is creating enormous fear and anxiety around the world, just maybe we can take this time to become more mindful of how deeply God loves us and how deeply God loves this world. And, just maybe, we can be reminded that we **are** beloved children of God and reminded of the God who lovingly **carries us** through this experience. And, just maybe, we can become more mindful of how we, too, are continually called to carry, to carry and bear God's redeeming, healing love in this broken, hurting world.

As we begin this season of Lent, we begin with Jesus **in** the wilderness of life. Jesus' intentionality and his receptivity to God's **grace** show us the way to turn **toward** God, rather than away from God during **our** trials and temptations and the pain of life. And, during this forty-day Lenten pilgrimage, if we choose to intentionally focus on God's love to us, to be **mindful** of God's presence to us, and receptive to the overwhelming **grace** of God, we **will** encounter a faithful God who not only carries us, but also leads us **through** the wilderness to **new life**.