

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**June 6, 2021, The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Pentecost/9<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, Labyrinth Sunday**

**WALKING WITH GOD**

*“If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God.” --4-year-old Asa*

Today I want to talk with you about walking, as I have done every two to three years for many years.

I'd like to start by asking you to remember something that some of you may remember from yesterday, and others of you will need to reach back 40 or 60 or 80 years to remember. I invite you to remember going for a walk with your mom or your dad, or a favorite relative or neighbor. Can you remember what it was like to reach your hand up so you could hold their hand?

Do you remember how tall they seemed?

And how safe you felt when their big hand wrapped around yours?

Do you remember what it was like to walk with someone who loved you, cared for you, and wanted to know what you were thinking while you walked together?

There is a Benedictine retreat center I used to go to in Duluth, MN. They have a plaque at their beginning of their labyrinth that with a quote from a four-year-old named Asa. After Asa finished walking the labyrinth with her family, she was asked by one of the Sisters why other people should walk the labyrinth. And this very wise four-year-old said: “If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God.”

Today I want to talk to you about walking with God,

Today I want to invite you to walk our labyrinth in much the same spirit in which we walked with the grownups in our lives when we were younger.

God longs for us to take the time to be with God.

God longs for us to reach up our hand and hold on to God.

God longs to be in conversation with us.

God longs for us to make time for God.

And the Labyrinth creates a time and a place and a way for us to walk with God, which is a way of praying.

I'm inviting you to practice the same trust I witnessed in a woman at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City years ago. There was a larger than life-sized sculpture of the Pieta in a back corner of the cathedral. A Pieta is a statue of Mary, holding the body of Jesus after his crucifixion. This statue was on a tall base, and one of Jesus' hands hung down near the base of the statue. For some reason the older woman there in the darkened corner caught my eye. I watched as she slowly reached her hand up and held on to Jesus' hand, with a simple childlike faith and clearly a need for comfort, and then bowed her head and prayed.

This morning I'm inviting you to make an appointment to put your hand into God's hand, by making a plan to come over to the church and walk our Labyrinth.

As we talk about walking with God this morning, I'd like to encourage you to keep the two scripture readings in mind.

Walking into a labyrinth creates a time when God can show us the pathways and plans God has for us, as God said through Jeremiah (29:11-14a):

“For surely I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord...”

When we make time to walk the labyrinth,  
we are creating a place where God can reveal these plans to us.

In addition, in Matthew's gospel (7:7-11) we hear Jesus say to us: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."

The labyrinth is a wonderful place to take a walk with God. Walking the labyrinth is a walk of faith. It is a walk that commits us to make time for God.

It is a walk that may change us every time we take it.

It is a walk where we can ask, search and knock.

It is a walk where we can listen.

People have been walking with God on labyrinths from the earliest years of Christianity, and thousands of years before Christianity. Labyrinths have been found at the sites of many world religions. Some of the labyrinths are between 4000 and 5000 years old, and were clearly used as spiritual pathways for ancient world religions. The placement of the labyrinths marked holy spaces for many ancient peoples.

The earliest Christian Labyrinths began showing up in churches and church yards in the early 300's A.D. They began showing up in churches in Europe during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. During the years of the crusades, it became too dangerous for Christians to travel to the Holy Land, so they would symbolically walk to Jerusalem using the labyrinth; seeing the center of the labyrinth as Jerusalem. They also used the labyrinth as a tool for meditation and prayer in much the same way that we do today.

The most famous of these 12<sup>th</sup> century labyrinths is the one found on the floor of the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France. The design of that labyrinth is the pattern for our labyrinth across the street. It is not the only pattern that labyrinths take, but it is one of the most recognizable.

Now one of the most important things to remember about labyrinths is that they are not mazes. They are not there to confuse you, or get you lost, there are no twists and turns that will lead you to dead ends.

Instead, you walk in on the same path you walk out on; it is all the same path.

People that walk labyrinths speak of this path being symbolic of the pathway of life, or the path of faith.

Because you can trust the path you can walk it without looking where to go next.

This frees up your heart and mind to focus on God. It gives you time to focus, to pray, to listen, to be with God.

If you look at your bulletin cover you will see what is called an 11-circuit labyrinth, so named because there are eleven turns to the center. This is the pattern of the Chartres labyrinth and ours.

As you look at this picture on your bulletins, I want to speak to those of you who are unable to walk the labyrinth across the street. There is another way to walk, and that is by letting your fingers do the walking. This labyrinth begins down at the bottom of your page; you can see where there is only the one opening.

Using your finger, you can trace your way through the labyrinth and carry on many of the same spiritual practices that outside walkers use. This past Christmas my friend Judy in Duluth gave me this wooden labyrinth that can be walked by running your finger along the path. If you like walking the Labyrinth this way I can help you find a wooden Labyrinth.

As you continue to look at your bulletin cover, you'll notice that the form of the cross very clearly divides the 11-circuit labyrinths into four quadrants.

In the center of the labyrinth is a 6 petaled flower with several meanings. It is often called a rose, and is a symbol for Mary, the mother of Jesus. In addition, in some traditions the rose is a symbol for the Holy Spirit.

There are also some who say each petal of the flower representing one of the six days of creation. The center of the labyrinth is a place of rest, and so represents the seventh day.

There is another thing I want to point out about walking the labyrinth. It is not for everyone. It is one of many forms of meditation and prayer. For some of you it may become a weekly habit, for others of you, you may find communion with God in another way.

I found as I began walking labyrinths over 20 years ago that it took a few times to feel comfortable. But now I can't imagine not taking this walk of faith.

In fact I walked our Labyrinth early this morning, surrounded by sunrise and bird song.

There is no right or wrong way for walking with God in the labyrinth. Though there are three basics movements to walking that you may want to use: releasing, resting and returning.

I encourage you to begin each labyrinth walk with a prayer, asking God to be with you as you walk. It is up to you how fast or how slow you walk, or skip or dance. As I said, there is no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth.

Let me also say that you may choose to walk alone, or with a friend, or your spouse or partner, or with your family, or a group of friends.

Once you've prayed at the beginning of your walk,

**RELEASE:** The first movement is the walk to the center, this can be a time of focusing on a question, or a joy or a sorrow, or a person you are concerned about. It can be a time for praying, for reflecting on a passage of scripture, for asking forgiveness, or grieving, or celebrating a milestone in your life or your family's life, or just being with God in silence. The walk in allows us to "**release**" and let go of our distractions by telling God about them.

**REST:** When you arrive at the center it is a place of "**resting**" with God. You can take all the time you need in the center; it is a quiet and peaceful place for you and God to be together. You might choose to listen, to continue praying, or to let yourself feel the presence of God with you.

**RETURN:** Then on the way back we are "**returning**" bringing with us the insights, the peace, the answers that we may have found during our walk in.

There is a lot more information that is attached to the end of your bulletins that I'm not going to focus on today during the sermon. I hope you will take time to read it and to continue to learn more about labyrinths and the many ways you can walk them.

Personally, I walk the labyrinth when I'm seeking an answer to prayer,  
 I've walked when I'm grieving,  
 I've walked after leading worship at a funeral,  
 when I'm working on my sermon,  
 I've walked to release bottled up stress,  
 when I'm feeling overwhelmed and need to refocus on God,  
 sometimes I walk just because I need to feel close to God and be reminded of God's love for me.  
 sometimes walking is a time to praise God for a joy in my life,  
 sometimes I sing while I walk...but not too loudly,  
 sometimes I listen to someone else singing hymns,  
 sometimes, like this morning, the labyrinth is part of my morning walk.

The gift of the labyrinth is that I can trust the path as I walk it, and know that God is walking with me as I spend time there.

It is my hope that after worship today, those of you who so choose, will make an appointment with God to walk the labyrinth, and then put it into your calendar with all the other things you are going to do this week, or next week!

Please feel free to call me with your questions and if there is any way I can help you with your walk. The best way to experience the labyrinth is to use the labyrinth, in person at the church, or letting your finger do the walking on your bulletin cover.

Today I invite you to make an appointment with God, to go for a walk with God, because:  
God longs for us to make the time to be with God.  
God longs for us to reach up our hand and hold on to God.  
God longs to be in conversation with us.  
God longs to speak in our lives.  
God calls to us to know that we are loved, we are cared for,  
and God is listening to hear our voices and our hearts.

The Labyrinth is there for the walking, offering us a time and a place for all these things and more!

Won't you take 4-year-old Asa's advice this week?:

"If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God!"

## **HANDOUT:**

*If you want to know God better, you should take a walk with God. --4 year old Asa*

### **The Labyrinth**

The labyrinth is an ancient sacred path found in all religious traditions, the most famous being the 11-circuit labyrinth laid in the Cathedral of Chartres, France in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century. The labyrinth is a winding pattern, not a maze, leading to the center and back out again reminding us of life's journey. A maze is meant to trick us, a labyrinth guides us on a trusted path. It is meant to be walked as a form of meditation and its purpose is to connect us more fully with God, ourselves, one another and all creation.

The Labyrinth is a place of prayer. It is not magical; it is not designed to give you a peak mountaintop experience. The Labyrinth provides a means for finding inner space, allowing us to listen to God. There is not a right way to walk the Labyrinth; the Labyrinth is simply a tool. It is helpful to many, but may not work for everyone. It may take several times of walking the Labyrinth to get acquainted with this spiritual tool.

The Labyrinth ties us to our daily experiences. The path leads towards the center, but then moves us to the outer edges. The pathway runs in one direction, and suddenly, we twist and turn another way. Sounds like daily life, doesn't it? Life is going well, then suddenly things change. Times are difficult, but then we receive an insight that allows us to look at our lives and God from a whole new dimension. The shape of the Labyrinth helps us to make a connection with our daily experience.

The Labyrinth helps us to let go. As we prayerfully seek Christ's guidance in the symbolic walking of the path, we may be offered a chance to truly lay our hearts open before God who is the searcher of our hearts. Too often our understanding of prayer stays at the level of thoughts and words we direct toward God, whether those words are printed on a page or offered spontaneously. The unpredictability of the Labyrinth's twists and turns helps us to relinquish our need to feel in control, and to help us acknowledge our dependence upon God.

### **PREPARING TO WALK TO THE LABYRINTH**

#### **3 BASIC MOVEMENTS**

The key to fully experiencing your walk is to remain open. There is only one path; you can trust the path to take you to the center and return you to the beginning.

There is no right or wrong way for walking with God in the labyrinth. There are three basics movements to walking: releasing, resting and returning.

**Releasing:** The first movement is the walk to the center, releasing or letting go of cares and stress, control and concerns. This can be a time of focusing on a question or issue or person that's concerning you, it can be a time for praying, for reflecting on a passage of scripture, of asking forgiveness, or grieving, or just being with God. The walk allows us to release and let go of our distractions.

**Resting:** When you arrive at the center it is a place of resting with God. You bring with you your

experience of walking to the center. Now you can take all the time you need in the center; it is a quiet and peaceful place for you and God to be together, connecting at a deeper level.

**Returning:** Then on the way back out of the labyrinth we are returning, bringing with us the insights, the peace, the answers that we have found during our walk in. We are returning to the day-to-day patterns of our lives, carrying with us our experiences with God in the labyrinth.

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR WALK**

There are as many ways of walking the labyrinth as there are walkers. Here are a few suggestions:

**Gracious (Grace-Filled) Attention:** Let all thoughts go. Allow a sense of attention to the moment to flow through you. Be aware of your God walking with you.

**Ask a Question:** Focus on a question you have been asking yourself, or a decision you are making. Walk with a listening heart.

**Use Repetition:** Repeat a mantra, word or phrase, or sentence of Scripture over and over.

**Offer Prayer Concerns:** Bring to mind persons or issues for which you wish to pray.

**Honor a Benchmark:** A birthday, a life-style change, an anniversary, a memorial can be the focus of your walk.

**Body Prayer:** Move spontaneously and freely as your body wishes. Find your own rhythm and way of being on this walk.

**Sing** your way around the labyrinth. Singing hymns and songs that help you focus on God.

### **PRAYERFUL WAYS OF APPROACHING YOUR LABYRINTH WALK**

**Openness:** God, what do you want me to know, what do you want to show me?

**Intercessory Prayer:** Praying for another person or a situation.

**In honor of a significant day or transition:** A birthday or anniversary. Thank God for a new opportunity in your life. Remembering the anniversary of a loved-one's death

**Use a prayer phrase:** Repeat one of God's names that has particular meaning for you, or a spiritual word that has significance for you.

**Reflection:** Reflect on your life or something significant that is concerning you right now.

**As a new approach to an old problem or memory:** "God, I need to talk with you and gain new insight or commitment about this situation..."

**Walking with a question that is important to you:** Identify a central question in your life. Reflect and ask God questions such as: What is my next step? What am I seeking? What are my spiritual needs around this question?

**Focus on Jesus walking with you:** Let us this be a time of walking together without seeking answers or asking questions, instead focusing on the companionship of this time together.

(A portion of the text is from Jill Kimberly Harwell Geoffrian: Loving God with All of Who You Are: Labyrinth Learnings for Life.)