

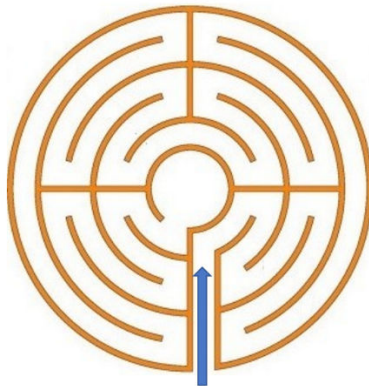
Week 1: February 18 – 24

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:9-15

Path of Discipleship: Into the Wilderness

This first week of Lent, we will be journeying through the first quadrant of the labyrinth, contemplating how this part of the path can relate to the beginnings of the early Christian church, and also to our own spiritual journeys.

Day 1 (2/18): *You enter the labyrinth fresh and excited for the journey. The path is straight and smooth and you are moving quickly and unobstructed towards the center.*



In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus is baptized. The early church also experienced a spiritual new beginning and rebirth in the opening of Acts 2, with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Christ on Pentecost. Acts 2:42-47 describes the life that existed among the early believers during that time. Old Testament prophecies had just been fulfilled in an amazing manner, and "all who believed were together and had all things in common... and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

How might this blissful, peaceful, productive, and optimistic period in the early church correspond to the symbolic journey on today's portion of the labyrinth path?

Is there a time in your life when you feel that you were in a similar portion of your spiritual journey?

What emotions do you associate with that period of your life?

How have you changed since then and what brought about that change?

Prayer for Day 1: Lord of new beginnings and exciting journeys, thank you for all of the opportunities that you have laid out in front of us. Please help us to glorify your name in all that we do and demonstrate our gratitude to you daily, not just in our prayers, but in our thoughts, words, and actions as we go forth on our journeys each day. Amen.

Day 2 (2/19): *While heading straight for the center, you encounter the first resistance on your journey. A wall stands between you and the center, and your path changes direction. You are still close to the center, though, and at least are not moving any further from it.*



In Acts 3, we follow the apostles as they fruitfully continue the works of the early church, healing a cripple in the name of Jesus and proclaiming the truth and power of the resurrected Messiah in the temple in Jerusalem. Acts 4, however, begins with Peter and John being arrested; seized while proclaiming the Good News in the temple and held overnight to answer to the authorities in the morning – most assuredly not how they were hoping for the day that started so miraculously and successfully to end.

After spending a night in custody and being repeatedly threatened by the chief priests and elders the next morning, they returned to their fellow followers of Christ, where “they raised their voices together to God” (Acts 4:24). They prayed for boldness in the face of adversity and found encouragement in the scriptures of the Old Testament, specifically Psalm 2:1-2 in this case.

How do you find strength in adversity and boldness to hold to your faith when you find it threatened?

The apostles were very familiar with the scriptures of the Old Testament, being able to call upon applicable verses for inspiration when needed. What verses can you make yourself familiar with now so that you have them close at hand when needed? (For additional ideas, consider the devotional materials that are available in the narthex.)

Prayer for Day 2: God of strength and comfort, we praise you for the guidance and reassurance that you have given to us through your words and thank you for the blessing of living in a time and place where we have ready access to those words written in a language that we understand. Please help us to always remember that it is you to whom we should turn in times of confusion and discouragement, but also in times of excitement and joy. Amen.

Day 3 (2/20): *Another wall, another unexpected turn in your path. Only, this time, it is taking you away from the center. In fact, now – for the first time in your journey – you can't even see the center from where you are. You face only the darkness and unknown of the periphery of the labyrinth.*



Despite some struggles, both internal and external, that were encountered by the early church, it continued to grow and advance as “many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles” (Acts 5:12). However, those successes led them also to a sharp and brutal turn of events, as they increased the vehemence of their opponents.

One of the first church deacons, Stephen was “full of grace and power, [and] did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). The grace and power with which he served Christ led him to be falsely accused and arrested for blasphemy. During his inquisition by the Sanhedrin, Stephen also relied upon scripture from the Old Testament for strength and defense – as had the apostles before him – in this case recounting numerous passages of Genesis, Exodus, and Deuteronomy.

Immediately following his testimony, Stephen was summarily and viciously dragged from the city and stoned to death.

In this incident, we see a gathering of respected civil and religious leaders take what is supposed to be a formal and legal forum and allow it to turn into what is essentially a lynch mob. In our own day and age, it is easy to look at this event as distant history, in a bygone and less enlightened era. How accurate is that assessment? How have we improved as a society? In what ways are we still frighteningly similar?

What can the modern-day church do to ensure that we glorify Jesus and honor the sacrifices of Christian martyrs like Stephen by not allowing our society to revert to this mob mentality?

Prayer for Day 3: God of justice and wisdom, when things don't seem to us to be fair in this world, we too often get discouraged and can even find ourselves doubting our faith. We praise and thank you for your infinite wisdom and the knowledge that all things happen according to your will. Please help us to be beacons of your love in this world and always strive for justice in our society, using the gifts and blessings that you have afforded us to benefit others. Amen.

Day 4 (2/21): *Just after straightening out from the last sharp turn away from the center, you take just a few more steps and yet again find yourself in another sharp turn into the expanding wilderness of the labyrinth path.*



The day of Stephen's martyr also began a severe persecution against the early church and its members. This brutality was led by a Roman citizen named Saul, who scattered the followers of the church throughout the countryside and "was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

Because of their faith and efforts to spread it to others, members of the early church were faced with the constant threat and presence of violence and other means of persecution. How and when have you been treated poorly or unfairly because of your beliefs or efforts to spread them?

In those situations, what mixture of emotions did you feel?

The apostles, after having been flogged for their work in the name of Jesus, "rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (Acts 5:41). Were any of the emotions that you felt during the above situations pride or reassurance that the opposition that you were meeting was because you were making a righteous stand in the name of the Lord?

Can you prepare yourself now to be ready to respond with pride, strength, and determination the next time your beliefs are

challenged? Consider reading Ephesians 6:10-18, “so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil... for our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh.” This passage gives an insight into the way that the apostles and their contemporaries in the early church viewed their struggles and how they drew strength in their faith not only to endure and survive, but to persevere in their efforts to advance the message of Christ.

aWareness Wednesday: For people with mental health issues living in the U.S., the average delay in receiving their first mental health treatment is more than 10 years from the first onset of symptoms. Why do you think that is? What do you think could help people in need of those services receive them sooner? What could you or Calvary do to facilitate that?

Prayer for Day 4: Lord of diversity and inclusion, we are weak and prone to xenophobia of many kinds on many different levels. We have turned with intolerance and indignation from people, behaviors, and ideas which were different from our own. As we ask forgiveness for that, we acknowledge and thank you for the fact that you have created all of us in your image and ask that you please grant us the strength, peace, and wisdom to focus on the similarities that we share with our fellow members of your grand creation. Please help us to always be conscious of and reactive to opportunities where we can be of assistance to others who may need to feel love, compassion, or acceptance. Amen.

Day 5 (2/22): *As you once again find yourself in another turn outward, away from the center and doubling back towards the bleak direction from which you had just travelled, you look over the wall to your left and see what appears to be a different path. You can't reach it from your path, but it looks greener; less travelled, less muddy.*



While looking over the wall, you see other travelers travelling on that other path. They seem happier and, behold, they are moving towards the center, while you continue to slip further away! Are they better than you? Why is their path so much better than yours?

The last of the Ten Commandments instructs us not to covet what is not ours, yet it is often the one which we violate first, and likely the most often. In what ways can you find familiarity in this part of our journey through the labyrinth and relate it to times in your life?

How can you use the concepts of the labyrinth to bring a perspective to your life that may bring you peace and comfort regarding your life and what surrounds you? Consider this question especially as we continue on this Lenten journey.

Prayer for Day 5: Lord of divine guidance, as we encounter other people in the labyrinth of our life, please help us to neither covet their journey nor find disdain for them because of it. Help us to humbly and gratefully understand that we are all in different parts of our journeys at this time, which does not make any of us any better or worse than the other. Rather, let this be a reminder to us that we are all equals, traveling on the same ground within your beautiful creation, only seeing the world one snapshot at a

time through the limited and temporal perception of our human eyes and minds. Please open our hearts so that, through faith in you, we may rejoice in the beauty of your grand design even when its form and purpose may not be discernable to us at the time. Amen.

Day 6 (2/23): *Another turn outward, leading to yet another dark and even more distant corridor. This is the furthest that you have been from the center, and your situation seems to be getting worse all the time. Will things ever improve?*



The Epistle of James was written to early Jewish followers of Christ to encourage them to grow in the new Christian faith. The letter begins by addressing the hardships and trials that Jesus had foretold would face true believers. James tells his readers that, “whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

A secular parallel to this advice can be found in the often-quoted statement from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: “That

which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” When facing times of trial, have you ever been told that quote in an attempt at consolation? Did it make you feel better? Why or why not?

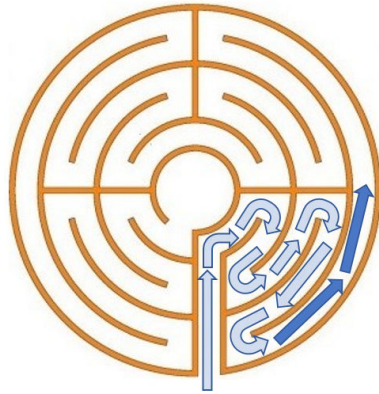
Fortunately, James did not end his advice there. Knowing that times of trial can feel overwhelming for the person being tried, he continued his letter with instruction for followers of Christ, stating both where to turn for help and in what mindset it must be done. Immediately after instructing them that the importance of trials is in developing the endurance “so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing,” he continues to let them know that “if any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given to you. But ask in faith, never doubting” (James 1:4-6).

When in your life have you found yourself lacking? What were you lacking? At that time, did you feel that it was appropriate to turn to God to fill that need or desire in your life? Would your thinking be different in a similar situation today?

Prayer for Day 6: Blessed father, provider of endurance and wisdom, when we find ourselves in the darkness of the trials of this world, sometimes it is hard for us to be able to look or feel beyond our own fear, doubts, and suffering. Please give us the ability to remember to turn to you when we are in need and the faith to ask you for assistance, which we will always need as we continue to strive towards spiritual maturity. Thank you for being the loving and eternal provider of love, mercy, and comfort. Amen.

Day 7 (2/24): *This is literally the longest stretch yet, as you continue on a path through the darkest periphery of the labyrinth, still trudging forward, but not getting even an inch closer to the center. Is it pointless to even continue trying? Why bother expending the effort if you are just “spinning your wheels,” and*

seem to be constantly struggling to move forward but never making any progress?



The Path of Discipleship for this week of Lent is “Into the Wilderness.” In this week’s Gospel reading, we read a short account of Jesus’ time in the wilderness, where he spent 40 days being tempted by Satan (Mark 1:12-13). This is reminiscent of the 40 years that the Old Testament Israelites spent wandering through the wilderness (Exodus 12-40).

In yesterday’s devotional, we discussed the concept that trials produce endurance and endurance produces maturity. How did the 40 years in the wilderness change the Israelites? Why was it important for them to endure the hardships of that era?

In what ways do you think that the 40 days in the wilderness may have changed Jesus? What differences can you identify in the writings about him before and after that time in his life?

How have your trials and hardships affected you? Have you matured because of them? How so? Has your faith grown because of them? Why?

The Gospel of Luke concludes the telling of the temptation of Jesus by stating that “when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). Unique

to that Gospel, the end of that sentence can have a significant impact on the consideration of this ordeal. Should this be considered a *singular* event – a one-time test that Jesus had passed and could now continue on to begin his ministries – or should this be looked at as a *single* event out of many that marked and guided the mission of the Messiah on this earth as he travelled from his baptism to the cross?

What are the implications of this on your life? Have you “battled demons” in your past? What were they and how did you know you were being tested? Do you think that each victory that you have won is complete, or do you need to be prepared to “go down that path” again? If so, are you ready? What can you do to ensure that you are?

Prayer for Day 7: Heavenly Father, you knew us before you formed us in the womb, yet there are times when we feel lost in the twists and turns of our lives and we allow ourselves to lose faith in the fact that you are all knowing, all powerful, and all loving. Forgive us for our times of weakness when we feel alone and fail to strengthen our hearts with faith in you and your fatherly plan for us and our lives. Help us to always bear in mind that we have never gone and will never go anywhere where you have not chosen to send us. Even in the times when we may not be able to see the beauty and completeness of your grand design, please help us to find peace and resolve in the knowledge of your love and wisdom and faith in the glory of your will, which *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.