

Week 4: March 11 – 17

Gospel Reading: John 3:14-21

Path of Discipleship: Within the Light

For the fourth week of Lent, we will contemplate what lies at the center of the labyrinth in the context of the journeys that we have been exploring over the past three weeks.



Day 1 (3/11): The Path of Discipleship for this week of Lent is “Within the Light.” What does that expression mean to you in general? What does it mean to you in the context of having reached the light at the end of the labyrinth, after all of the struggles, darkness, and uncertainty of the twisting path that you followed to get there? How do both of those answers tie together?

In John 8:12, Jesus states that “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” What does it mean to you to follow Jesus?

“Follow” is an *action* verb. Would you describe your relationship with Jesus – the manner in which you follow him – as active or passive? What can you do during Lent this year that will help you to be more *active* in your discipleship of Jesus?

Prayer for Day 1: Dear Lord, who is at the center of all existence and provides light for all creation, we thank you for calling us to follow you and for providing us with the proper guidance and reassurance along the way. We confess weakness and ask forgiveness for any times when we have doubted your presence, wisdom, or love. Please help us to stay strong in our faith and to always trust in your divine providence. Amen.

Day 2 (3/12): On Day 1 of Week 1, when you first entered the labyrinth and started up that first straight stretch, you thought that you could see the center. Now, though, you realize that you could only see part of it – the rest was obscured by the walls because you were not yet ready to observe it in its entirety. You had not yet gone through the transformative journey that would prepare you for what you would find at the center. How different does the whole journey look now from the center?

“Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all” (1 Chronicles 29:11). The beauty of the things that we encounter every day is so much more beautiful when looked at together as one creation, formed out of love by a present, living, and loving God. This can serve as another reminder to us to approach others with love, caring, and understanding, for we are all co-travelers in this wonderful creation and some of us will always be in different parts of our journeys than others at any given time.

Prayer for Day 2: Heavenly Father, creator of heaven and earth, we praise you and thank you for your wonderful creation and blessing us with the gift of life. We also thank you for the daily opportunities to enjoy the beauty of your creation and for the ample opportunities that you set in front of us to demonstrate

our gratitude to you through showing love to others. Please help us to make compassion to others a priority in our life as followers of the God of all creation. Amen.

Day 3 (3/13): The path of the labyrinth is unicursal, meaning that, although it may have many twists and turns, it has only one path and one center. Each of our own spiritual labyrinths lead us on the path that God has designed specifically for us. Psalm 139:16 states that “Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.”

When we sin and try to stray from that path, we strike the walls on either side of us. When we hit them, they are painful. The more we fight the will of God, the more pain we inflict upon ourselves as we continuously rub against the walls in our disobedience. The injuries sustained from our encounters with the walls are self-inflicted, and represent the loving and fatherly discipline that God has built-in to each of our lives – they guide us ever closer to him, letting us know when we are starting to stray, and providing boundaries within which we are to stay.

This is another way in which love and submission to Jesus Christ and obedience to his teachings in turn gives us freedom – freedom from self-hurt through sin.

2 Peter 2:19 discusses the dangers of false teachers with the warning that “they promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for ‘people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.’” In that context, consider the following statement from Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology:

If I render obedience to sin, I am a slave to sin and lawlessness but I am "free" with respect to righteousness.

If, on the other hand, I render myself as a "slave" to righteousness, I become free with respect to sin.

In what ways are you "free" in this world? In what ways are you a "slave"? What is keeping you in that bondage?

Prayer for Day 3: Loving Father, thank you for leading us away from evil and offering us freedom from sin. We ask for forgiveness for our times of stubbornness and offer thanksgiving for your loving guidance that keeps us on the path that you have designed and designated for each of us individually. Amen.

Day 4 (3/14): When we feel lost and life seems hopeless, the unicursal path of the labyrinth demonstrates to us that, while winding and sometimes confusing from within, the journey is predestined through grace and its path is beautiful when viewed from the middle, in the context of God's love and divine plan as seen from above.

The beauty of the labyrinth is in the route of the path as a whole, and would be neither beautiful or even complete without the dark sections – the twists and turns that seemed so painful and pointless at the time, but which complete the image and give it depth. In a similar manner, the worldly struggles of humans strengthen us and give us depth in character and the opportunity to find strength in faith.

What examples can you think of from your life in which going through times of hardship ended up strengthening you as a person? Were some of them even a blessing in disguise that left you better off in the long-run for having experienced them?

aWareness Wednesday: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that only 44% of adults with diagnosable mental health problems and less than 20% of children and adolescents receive needed treatment. Friends and loved ones

can be the difference between someone getting the help they need or continuing to suffer on their own. There are different actions that can be taken depending on the nature and severity of the situation.

If the situation is potentially life-threatening, get immediate emergency assistance by calling 911. If it is not immediately life-threatening, there are numerous other places to turn for help or advice, either for yourself or someone else. In addition to the Suicide Prevention Lifeline (available 24/7 at 1-800-273-TALK), there is also the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357), which is a confidential, free, 24/7 information service for individuals and family members facing mental and/or substance use disorders and provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations. Find more information at <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>

Prayer for Day 4: Lord of beauty, you work in wonderful and mysterious ways. Even when we are unaware of it, you are at work within us, helping us to mature and grow spiritually. We praise you for this and ask that you help us to always be aware of and grateful for your presence around us; everywhere and at all times. Amen.

Day 5 (3/15): There is a story of a wise 18th Century rabbi named Baal Shem-Tov who watched helplessly from a high hill as his town below was invaded by foreign troops on horseback:

As the rabbi saw many of his students along with the men, women, and children of the town being slaughtered, Baal Shem-Tov looked up to heaven and said, "Oh, if only I were Go."

One of his students said, with astonishment, “But, Master, if you were God, what would you do differently?”

The reply was, “If I were God, I would do nothing differently. If I were God, I would understand.”

That rabbi’s faith in and knowledge of God gave him the perspective and wisdom to trust in the divine providence of the Holy Father. How do the lessons contained in that story relate to the lessons that can be learned from the study of our labyrinth?

That story was recorded in a book by Robert Schuller titled *Turning Hurts into Halos*. How does that title relate to the discussion in Day 2 of this week about the necessity of the transformative journey in being able to perceive the value of the center?

There may be tough times along each of our paths, but Jeremiah 29:11 reassures us that there is a loving and divine plan for us with the words: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

As we struggle to keep that perspective during times of hardship, we can take solace in the instruction from Joshua 1:9, which tells us: “I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” as well as in 1 Corinthians 10:13, which Paul tells the members of the early Christian church: “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

Prayer for Day 5: God of eternal wisdom, we praise you for the wonder and completeness of your divine plan for us. Please forgive us when we doubt you and help to keep us steadfast in

our faith and trust in you. Help us to always remember that we do not understand the intricate details of the workings of your creation and that we know all that we need to when we read and believe Proverbs 3:5-6, which instructs us to “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” Amen.

Day 6 (3/16): The center of the metaphorical labyrinth contains the figurative light that emanates from that one central point and allows us to see and navigate the twists and turns of the outlying pathways.

This week’s Gospel reading contains a verse that so perfectly and succinctly sums up that light: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

This week’s Gospel reading also refers to this powerful, eternal life-giving gift as “light [that] has come into the world,” by which good and evil may be judged and “in order that the world may be saved by him.” It also points out that “all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God” (John 3:17-21).

In his Letter to the Romans (12:9-21), Paul discusses behaviors that are known as “Marks of the True Christian,” which he describes in part as:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in

suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In these verses, we see a great collection of many themes that are consistent with teachings from the other verses that we have examined over the past four weeks. In the passage above (from Romans), what five instructional themes do you think are most applicable to your spiritual growth?

Prayer for Day 6: Lord of eternal light, you call us to run from what is evil and cling to that which is good. You also give us guidance to know the difference and light to guide the path of our journeys. We thank you for that and ask that you help us in our efforts to follow that guidance and stay within the light that you have designed for us. Amen.

Day 7 (3/17): Nearing the end of our time in the center, we must prepare to re-enter the labyrinth's corridors, where we will again encounter people of all walks of life who are in all different phases of their journey through life.

Being now graced with the knowledge of the light of God, it is important to start this next phase of our journey with a mindset of service to others. Jesus told us to love one another (John 13:34). Both the Old and New Testaments provide directives regarding the fact that this commandment is not just for our friends, family, and "neighbors" in the traditional sense:

“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34).

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13:2).

What can you do to step outside of your comfort zone and your usual circle of contacts in order to be able to fulfill the instructions contained in these scriptures? In the context of the journey through this life that we are all undertaking, how might considering a new definition of what makes someone a “neighbor” help you to do this?

Prayer for Day 7: Lord of new beginnings, we thank you for the opportunity to serve you by spreading your glorious word to others. As we go about our daily lives, please help us to make that mission a priority and also to remember that part of that mission is to show love and compassion to all of your creation. When we deal with people who are in an uncomfortable situation, struggling with difficult issues, unwelcomed, depressed, overwhelmed, or otherwise feeling lost in the world, please help us to remember that we have also been through times and situations when we felt those same emotions and to treat them with kindness. Help us also to remember that each person’s journey is different and to not make assumptions about others, but rather to approach each person as a unique and beautiful individual who has been created in your image. Amen.