

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church, Mount Vernon, WA
May 5, 2024, 8:00 and 9:30 a.m. Holy Eucharist – Rite II
Dan Niven & Elizabeth Mahoney

Walking

DAN:

Solvitur ambulando. That's Latin for "It is solved by walking."

For sixteen years, the first Saturday in May has been celebrated as World Labyrinth Day. And for more than one hundred years, the first Saturday in May has been celebrated as the Opening Day of Boating Season. And because this year the first Saturday in May fell on the 4th—you might know where I'm going with this—yesterday was also International Star Wars Day. If the implied popular reference is not immediately clear, I'll describe a comic strip I saw yesterday, in which a guy wearing a trucker hat is having a conversation with Jesus.

In the first panel, the guy in the hat says, "God helps those who help themselves." Jesus replies, "I never said that."

Second panel. Hat guy: "God never gives you more than you can handle." Jesus: "I never said that, either."

Third panel. Hat guy: "May the 4th be with you." Jesus: "Ha, ha, I wish I'd said that."

Yesterday, Rebel Alliance and Jedi Order flags flew from the yardarms of our nautical flagpole at home. And Michael Boss noted the "Mos Eisley Port Authority, Tatooine" ballcap I was wearing...but I'm getting way off track.

The main idea of The Labyrinth Society's World Labyrinth Day is to "Walk as One at 1," walking a labyrinth, tracing a finger labyrinth, or—in Elizabeth Tucker's case yesterday (and several others earlier at the event)—learning how to *draw* a labyrinth at 1:00 p.m. local time, all to help create a rolling wave of peace passing from one time zone to the next around the globe.

A few weeks ago, I realized that for the first time in several years, I could conceivably Walk as One at 1 in community *and* still make it back to Shelter Bay for the Yacht Club's Opening Day ceremony, staying in Vice Commodore Elizabeth Mahoney's good graces. So, I approached Fr. Paul about the possibility of this church hosting a World Labyrinth Day celebration, which I would organize. Fr. Paul welcomed the idea, and as we were chatting I mentioned that labyrinth friends outside this congregation occasionally inquire if I've done any labyrinths here at St. Paul's, and my answer has been, "No one's asked." I recall Fr. Paul's reply being a direct, "*I'm* asking." And I think it was in his next breath he offered me an invitation to preach about labyrinths the next day. Today. I didn't see that coming but welcomed the idea.

A few days later, as ideas began to germinate—many more than would be feasible to cover in this setting—I asked Fr. Paul if there was anything in particular that he would like me to speak about. He invited me to consider how the labyrinth has informed my spiritual walk. Good. Guard rails. Focus. But wait.

During one of several collaborative labyrinth projects I've undertaken with Elizabeth's and my dear friend Mary Ellen Johnson, I admitted that I've never had a significant spiritual experience on a labyrinth like the one Elizabeth will share in a moment. I offhandedly mentioned to Mary Ellen that perhaps I'm still chasing it, and maybe that keeps me in the game. When we continued the project two weeks later, Mary Ellen stated that she had figured something out. She observed that we labyrinth folk—those of us who make labyrinths part of our regular practice—gravitate toward one of three categories: labyrinth facilitators, labyrinth tenders, and labyrinth designer/builders. We rely on one another, and I've played each of these three roles at different times over the years, but the third category is where the sorting places me most often. And I've come to fully embrace that.

I attended labyrinth facilitator training in 2005 with the Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress, spiritual pioneer, and founder of Veriditas. Her weekend intensive workshop took place in Leffler House at Saint Mark's Cathedral, and she opened with, "How many failed meditators do we have in the room?" Many hands—mine included—sheepishly crept upward. Lauren continued with a glint in her eye, "You may be failed stationary meditators; let's talk about walking meditation for a couple days." I was hooked, and I've never looked back.

There will be opportunities to walk labyrinths following this service, and if the idea of doing so causes you any anxiety, that may be because I haven't yet described the difference between labyrinths and mazes, regarding how each word is typically used in contemporary North American parlance. Briefly, labyrinths like the ones we have here on the ground this weekend—and the art currently on display in the narthex—include a path that meanders, often to a center, indirectly but you'll get there. Mazes, on the other hand, include puzzling choices and dead ends. In other words, you lose yourself in a maze; you find yourself in a labyrinth. Labyrinths are contemplative, calming, and balancing, and can be used in many ways and settings. Feeling better?

I invite you to take home any of the explanatory literature in the parish hall, on the left as you go in, and Elizabeth & I will be on hand to answer any questions. In labyrinth circles, we often close with, "See you along the path." I look forward to meeting *you* there, and now offer the microphone *on* that path to Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH:

I know that you are expecting to hear about my experience about discovering and walking the labyrinth (and you will), BUT when Fr. Paul asked us to preach on this topic, I thought about Jesus' ministry, walking with His disciples and teaching along the way.

When I walked the streets of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Capernaum, and Nazareth...walked the Mount of Olives and the Mount of Beatitudes...walked along the shores of the Dead Sea and sailed the Sea of Galilee, I was overcome with a special sense of awe and wonder to realize that I walked where Jesus and the disciples had walked.

During His lifetime, Jesus did a lot of walking. As a young boy he walked 80 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem with his parents to celebrate the Passover Feast. His public ministry focused upon walking throughout Galilee and through Samaria to Judea. Jesus had a "walking-ministry." Jesus called his followers to walk as he walked. As the disciples followed Jesus, he taught them and all who would listen as they walked along. Walking with Jesus means action. He called His disciples to a life of work. He called them to be involved. He called the four fishermen to be fishers of men...to leave the Sea and walk with Him. So, walking with Jesus meant to make progress...to have an active lifestyle. The word "walk" or a form of it occurs about 400 times in the Bible. The implication in this journey with Jesus and God seems clear to me...the Christian life is an active one.

The Greek word for walk is *peripateo* which also figuratively means "to have our being, to order our manner of life, to make progress or to live."

The disciples learned to pray, witness, and heal by watching Jesus. The disciples learned how to live a life of holiness by walking and talking with Jesus. Jesus walked to live a life of holiness. Jesus walked in humility. Jesus walked in love and compassion. Jesus walked in the Light of God's Word.

I am a self-proclaimed failed pray-er and meditator. Being still and quiet did not work for me; my mind was just too loud and chaotic. Passive prayer was a big NO! So, I attempted numerous approaches to grow in my faith. I failed at Contemplative retreats and praying with friends. I failed at Bible study groups and praying the Rosary. I failed at Scripture memorization and reciting traditional prayers. I felt that I was a failure in my faith and my spiritual growth. What was I doing wrong? Why can't I feel God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit when I pray?

My religious experiences of my childhood and early adulthood crushed my faith. I felt numb and apathic about attending church or practicing any faith. I was not open to the power of the Holy Spirit in my life...until one New Year's Eve 22 years ago at St. Mark's Cathedral in Seattle. When I first walked a labyrinth, I was unaware of its purpose or intent. I was recovering from abdominal surgery and was in considerable pain. I got behind someone walking heel-to-toe...soooo slow! I thought to myself, "What am I doing here? Why did Dan bring me to this weirdness? This is so stupid!" As I finally reached the center, I experienced confusion, wonder,

and disbelief. I felt God with me. I retraced my steps, walking off the labyrinth, beginning to realize my pain had lessened, my breathing had slowed, and I was feeling a warmth of companionship that I had never felt before...the presence of the Holy Spirit.

After walking the Chartres canvas labyrinth that cold New Year's Eve, I was transformed...physically, spiritually, and emotionally. What had happened to me? It took me just moments to realize that God...the Holy Spirit wanted to teach me a lesson of patience and acceptance. I had to let go of my feelings of apathy. I was opened to feel the Holy Spirit. I was called to venture into the unknown power of the Divine. I discovered my way to pray, to feel God's Light. Walking a labyrinth is sometimes called walking meditation or Body-Prayer. This form of prayer is comfortable and natural for me. I had found my way to experience God.

I had to veer and change direction! Just like the path of a labyrinth. Walking that labyrinth, gave me permission to move within a path without thinking where I was going. Walking that labyrinth gave me permission to be open to my thoughts and breath. Walking that labyrinth allowed my suppressed feelings to surface. In short, it was a powerful experience, similar to birthing my daughter. I felt power and energy flowing through my body, my mind, and my spirit. I felt changed...whole!

I learned that walking with God is an intense experience that is never casual or passive. I learned that walking with God, I could be inspired by His presence in my life. I learned that walking with God means a growing knowledge of Him. I learned that walking with God means that I don't walk in darkness but walk in and with His Light. God is walking with you, and you may not even know it. God is there for you. God is walking by your side in every circumstance that comes your way. God will never leave you or forsake you. Through Him, you are the hands and feet in your workplace, home, school, and community. To quote Episcopal priest and labyrinth facilitator & educator Lauren Artress, "To enter a labyrinth is to choose to walk a spiritual path." Walking with God is a journey not a destination. My path of faith has twists and turns just like walking the labyrinth and it has certainly been a journey worth taking. With a life of intention, we can walk the path of goodness, righteousness, truth, and love.

It was this experience that led Dan and me to actively seek out labyrinths to explore and walk. The act of walking a labyrinth awakened the potential for the healing of my mind, body and spirit. For me, labyrinth walking is a powerful bridge between meditation and daily life. This practice helps me to be present in ordinary activities. It centers and grounds me when busyness can overtake me. This labyrinth journey has brought us new friendships, closeness of shared interests and personal growth as individuals and a couple.

Almighty God, I want to thank You for Your Son...for sending Him here to walk with us on our journey of Life. Help us to walk with You each day, to experience Your peace, Your Love and Your Protection. Amen.