

## The First Sunday in Lent-Year B-The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 2.18.24

We are back at the beginning again. The beginning of Lent, but also this moment we've circled back to, time and again, since mid-December. The moment when Jesus stands in the water with John and, with the river rushing around them, the moment John scoops up a handful of water and pours it on him (or pushes him under) and Jesus hears that he is beloved. (A bird is involved, just as we had a bird here last week at the 8:00.) It's an all-is-right with the world and the universe-is-singing moment, filled with warmth and light and good vibes of being fully welcomed in, fully belonging. But Jesus doesn't even get the chance to dry off from his river dunking, take a warm bath, put on his fuzzy slippers and bask in the knowledge of being loved by God for one night. He is immediately pushed out, *driven* we are told, into the wilderness. *Driven* is not a verb that implies choice. This should be a flashing yellow warning light to all of us: watch out! This is what happens to those who seek to follow the way of Jesus. This is what it means to be beloved by God.

It's natural to hope that somehow we'll be protected from the harshness of the wilderness. Wilderness takes all sorts of forms, in the exterior landscape and in our interior landscape. Whether physical, social, emotional, it is a place of rawness, exposure, isolation, vulnerability, extremes, and uncertainty. (The exposure and vulnerability of the wilderness is perhaps why Satan—the embodiment of all the forces that draw us away from the path of compassion—seems to have strong sway in the wilderness.) The wilderness takes many forms and all I can say is that you know it when you're there. When you perhaps feel unmoored from all that has gone before, not sure what tomorrow might bring. When you are suddenly at a wild edge, in uncharted territory. The wilderness is the hardest of hard places to be and we can find ourselves in it unexpectedly. Just like Jesus. Everything is going along normally and then, suddenly, we're out in a wilderness for forty days—the biblical way of saying a really long, seemingly endless time. What seems to be true is that experiencing the wilderness is a given. Being beloved does not offer protection or escape from wilderness. Turning to the language of the psalm, it appears that the way through the wilderness (or the trackless desert, to use the words of the collect) is by adhering to the path of steadfast love.

During these weeks of Lent, this time set apart to explore or deepen spiritual practices that guide us along the path of steadfast love, the bulletin will have a labyrinth on it. It's meant to be an interactive bulletin. The image is just big enough for you to slowly walk your finger along the narrow path to the center. Try it with your index finger from your dominant hand and then your non-dominant hand. This is the pattern for the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth. The actual labyrinth—which I have never walked with my feet—was built from limestone in the 13th century. It is definitely not the most ancient of labyrinths. That designation might go to the Classical labyrinth path, which has been found among prehistoric rock art in Europe, some as old as 4000 years, and appears on pottery and objects found along the shores of the Mediterranean, and across the world, in North Africa and the Middle East, Indonesia, Java and Sumatra, Russia, the Southwestern part of the U.S, Mexico and in Brazil. (p. 8, *108 Ways to Use Labyrinths in Schools*)

Some Classical finger labyrinths are out on the table by the entrance to Campbell Hall, if you wish to pick up a copy to take home to use during Lent.

It's important to note, especially today, that a labyrinth is not a maze. A maze is designed to trick and even scare people. (If you've ever been to a corn maze during Halloween). To lead people into dead ends. You don't know what is around the corner and how (or if) you will find your way out. Fun for some, I know. It is easy to lose your orientation and your way in a maze, so mazes and wilderness times share a lot of the same characteristics. Meanwhile, labyrinths are designed so that you always know the way. In fact, whether you are walking a labyrinth with your feet or your finger, there is only one path in and one path out (it's the same path), and that one path always leads to the center. (p. 9 ff, *108 Ways*)

There are several important actions or movements in a labyrinth walk: first comes the decision to enter the labyrinth. This movement of *releasing* our hesitations and opening ourselves up to what we might encounter involves acknowledging that we are distracted much of the time by matters big and small. There is intention to go cross the threshold or door of the labyrinth, as the entrance is called. Right from the get go, this makes a labyrinth walk very different from the wilderness times that come to us, unbidden and unwanted. (There is a big difference between being driven into the wilderness and stepping across the threshold and into the labyrinth.) The second movement involves *receiving* what emerges while on the path. Insights might come from the walk in or out, or they might come from quiet prayer while you are in the center. Sometimes you have to stay awhile—maybe not forty days and nights, but awhile—to see what emerges. And the third movement is *returning*, that moment of preparing to leave the labyrinth, as you (or your finger) stand inside the labyrinth, pausing before you cross the threshold to exit the labyrinth. The returning involves asking yourself what you will take with you as you re-enter the world. Here are some quotes from others as they returned from walking the path of the labyrinth:

*At one point I was deeply moved as I encountered [a wilderness place] inside me; [an aspect of myself] I didn't really want to see. (The Healing Labyrinth, Helen Raphael Sands, p. 63)*

*It helps you feel better when you are mad. // My dog died two weeks ago and I have been very upset. After I walked the labyrinth, I realized my dog would live in my heart forever. (108 Ways to Use Labyrinths in Schools, Gael D. Hancock, p. 4)*

*It was a scary journey...I was comforted, however, by the presence of the other people doing the same journey. // You had to concentrate hard. I was aware that I rush at things while other people were much more deliberate - was this a message? A centering experience. (The Healing Labyrinth, p. 77)*

*The labyrinth taught me when you get knocked off your path by others to stay calm and continue, one step at a time. (p. 65)*

We aren't really told how Jesus made his way through that wilderness time to stay centered on the path of steadfast love, but perhaps it was through the actions of releasing/opening, receiving, and returning, one step at a time.

Anne Lamott had an essay in the *Washington Post* yesterday (with the insightful title, *A Superpower of Old Age: Powerlessness*) in which she quotes Ram Dass's wisdom: *ultimately, we are all just walking each other home*. As I think about Jesus in the wilderness, perhaps what stands out is that even there, especially there, he walked with God, along that path of love, home to that place of full belovedness. And that is what Lent bids us to do—whether we are in that cozy place with warm fuzzy slippers or out in the shapeshifting, trackless wilderness that takes so many forms: to walk home. Wherever we are—wilderness or not—we are not walking alone. We are with each other and God is walking, too. That's the covenant that God has made—in Genesis, in baptism—to walk with us. Like a labyrinth, the path of love always leads the way to the center, to home, to the place where all finally know they / you are fully Beloved.