

End or Beginning or End

Text:
Matthew 4:1-11

A sermon preached by
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Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



“I’m at the end of my rope.” “I’m on the edge.” “I’m just barely hanging on.” “This is the end of the line.” How many English idioms are there that try to describe that point when someone feels like he or she is out of options and stuck in a bad situation? Many. It’s a place where we each find ourselves at one time or another.

Jesus had just visited John and been baptized in the Jordan River, says Matthew, when he was “led up by [God’s] Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Jesus was at what we call the beginning of his ministry yet he need to sort some things out so he journeys into the wilderness and to find a clear path out the other side.

“What we call the beginning is often the end ... and to make an end is to make a beginning.” (T.S. Elliot)

Jesus at the beginning of his ministry found himself, I suspect, at what felt like an end. Being tempted to test God is not an easy task, resisting the temptation no doubt took all the energy and focus that that he could gather and pushed him “to the edge” and “to the end of his rope.”

It’s where we find ourselves again at the beginning of Lent. This past Wednesday was Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, a season for reflection and self-examination, a time for fasting and focusing and forgiving. Lent is that period in our Christian calendar when we can rededicate ourselves to what is important to our spiritual health, a time to look a little more closely at our faith perspective and sort through those questions that can allow us to grow. And perhaps the most important growth that can happen during Lent is renewal. All of our Lenten reflection and searching and questioning can cause a great renewal to well up within each of us and within ourselves as a faith family as well.

We are at the end of our ropes – the weather has been beating us down over these past few months. We’ve been digging out only to be snowed back in again. When the total snow accumulation exceeded my height, I knew I was in trouble.

We’ve been slipping and sliding our way along the sidewalks and streets. We’ve been bundled up against the winter winds and rain and snow and cold. I don’t know about you, but I’m over it all. For me it has been a trying winter – not just weather-wise but spiritually and emotionally draining as well as I felt battered by faith questions and doubts and frustrations. “This is the winter of my discontent.”

I need Lent. I need these 40 days to renew. As we head toward another celebration of the Resurrection I want to make time to recover and reflect and reboot. And this year we have an opportunity to use the labyrinth as a prayer resource on our Lenten journey.

The Labyrinth is an ancient path. It is a path that is known to have existed for over 4000 years, a path that has resonated with people in various countries, cultures, faiths and beliefs throughout the world. It is a beautiful path that, in various ways, supports the reflective seeker on life's path. This ancient spiritual pathway is known to have been embraced by Christians since the fourth century as a support for prayer and contemplation.

The twists and turns of the labyrinth path touches the twists and turns in our lives as the winding path helps us unwind and slow down and be mindful of our thoughts and the feelings of our hearts. We live in a time of fast pace and frenetic living so slowly and deliberately walking the labyrinth is a challenge to us. But maybe it's a challenge that we all need to take to heart. Be grateful for the 'quiet time' and opportunity to just 'be' as you journey along the labyrinth. Following the path offers the restless mind an opportunity to be inwardly observant, to pay attention to feelings, to explore challenges and to be open to new thoughts and ideas.

In your bulletin this morning you have a handheld finger labyrinth which you can take home with you. Inside the card are some suggestions about using the labyrinth and prayer. Trace the path through with your finger or a stylus or a closed ball point pen. Use it weekly or daily or simply whenever you can make the time for it. Use it as you prepare for the day that is about to start or to bring rest to your mind and body at the end of the day.

In addition to that handheld labyrinth, we have set up a full-sized walkable labyrinth downstairs in Thomas Hall. Use it the same way – to pray and meditate, to refocus and renew. It will be available on Sundays from 9 am to 1 pm, on Tuesday evenings during our Lenten study, on weekdays between 9 am and 3 pm when the Church Office is open, and if you call we can make it available at any time you might need to use it.

We introduced it on Ash Wednesday during a beautiful time of worship with Hope, Plumblin, Union UMC, Temple Lutheran, and St. Faith Church. People began exploring it and praying it and

it brought about a tremendous calming effect for the 40 people gathered here.

There is no right way or wrong way to use this sacred path. Inside the hand labyrinth you will see the three general movements that are often associated with the practice – releasing, receiving, returning.

Take a look at it with me ...

The First Movement: Releasing (Confession)

Place your finger (or stand at the full-sized one) at the opening of the labyrinth. Pray silently or aloud a prayer of confession. When finished, slowly move your finger or walk forward along the path, move at your own pace toward the center. Let the words of the prayer stay with you. Quiet your mind as you move through the labyrinth. Make room for emotions and stirrings that arise. What needs to be changed, forgiven, cleared, confronted, or healed in your life? Offer these situations to God as you move forward.

Second Movement: Receiving (Centering)

When you reach the center, rest there for a moment before you read a scripture reading for the day. When you are ready, read the passage slowly, as if you have never read it before. Center on God's Word and be open to what God reveals to you through the reading.

Third Movement: Returning (Intercession)

As you travel back out of the labyrinth realize that you are on the same path. Use this movement for intercessory prayers – pray being mindful of people and circumstances in the world that are in need of your prayers. Hold each one in your heart for a part of the journey outward.

The difference between a maze and a labyrinth is important to remember. A maze is designed as a puzzle which challenges you

to find your way out -- it wants you to struggle and sweat and possibly fail. A prayer labyrinth is not that at all -- it is designed as a simple yet intricate path which can easily be followed. It is a sacred path that enables people to set down burdens, open their hearts and minds and walk humbly with God. Walking a labyrinth is like making a pilgrimage to a holy – a willingness to step aside from everyday life for a while and dedicate some time to be really present to God in prayer and contemplation.

- ... there is the journey itself - a little disorientating at the beginning perhaps but, as progress is made on the path, there is a sense of releasing tensions and letting go of distractions.
- ... on arrival at the centre - time can be spent in prayer and reflection listening to the whisper of God, receiving fresh thoughts and welcoming God's blessing.
- ... on the return journey - there is recognition of new feelings, new thoughts or insights.

The hope is that by using the prayer labyrinth you might experience a new sense of peace, joy, resolution, direction or thanksgiving and as the labyrinth path comes to the exit the pilgrim steps out and is re-connected with their everyday life again.

Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness was something of a labyrinth journey for him. He was able to lay aside for this time the burdens of the everyday and to allow God to guide him in his struggles with temptation. And he journeyed out the other side prepared for the confrontations which he almost certainly knew he would face in his challenges to the existing power structures. He knew that what he faced would require all of his focus and that God would journey with him. The 40 days gave him the ability to say yes to the tasks ahead.

Here is our opportunity. Walk the labyrinth. Trace the labyrinth. Pray the labyrinth. And let us together journey through these next

40 days preparing ourselves for the rest of the ministry that God lays out ahead of us.

Amen.

Abingdon Abbey Prayer Labyrinth

