

# Walking the Labyrinth

## a Holy Week Meditation Guide

by Eileen R. Campbell-Reed

*Editor's note: Last year before Holy Week, the members and leaders of Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee constructed a labyrinth on the church grounds. This can be done in many ways. Some people have used rocks to outline a path. Others have painted lines on a large tarp to use inside a large room. The labyrinth can vary in size, but should be big enough for people to be able to walk to the center and back out, perhaps meeting each other coming and going. [See the art on this page.]*

*Eileen Campbell-Reed wrote the following meditations for folks to use as they walked the labyrinth every day during Holy Week. She made copies available at the entrance to the labyrinth in a plastic display case like those that realtors use. Since it was written for last year, the lectionary readings are for Year A.*

### Introduction

The suggested scriptures for daily meditation during Holy Week are taken from Revised Common Lectionary (Abingdon, 1992). You may want to read and reflect on the passage prior to beginning your labyrinth walk. The words of meditation may help you reflect on the scripture, and the words under “walking the labyrinth” may guide your reflections as you make the circuit. It is fine for more than one person to walk the labyrinth at the same time. It may help to observe the following guidelines:



- Be mindful that persons may be praying or reflecting deeply as they walk, and so respect both the quiet and the space of each person;
- Move at your own pace, and let others pass in silence if they are walking at a different pace;
- You may want to take a journal for recording your insights and thoughts after walking the labyrinth and reflecting on the questions for the day.
- May your holy week be enriched by taking time to reflect while walking the labyrinth in the days ahead.

## 1. Palm Sunday

Scripture:

Matthew 21:1-11

### Meditation

We will never know fully the mind of Jesus. Yet as we look at his life portrayed in the Gospels, we are compelled to wonder what must have been going through his mind as he approached Jerusalem, the city where prophets died. Did he anticipate a showdown with the religious establishment? Surely amid this waving of palms and cries of hosanna, he must have wondered if the reign of God was truly at hand. Maybe love was going to win the day! Were Jesus and his followers swept into the holy city on waves of hopefulness?

Ironies abound in the gospel stories of Holy Week. Poignant among them is the fickle nature of the crowd, which changes its cry in one short week. Even more heartbreaking is the turn of events that ended in a very dark day indeed. Yet we know something about walking through a day or week that quickly shifts from celebration to grief. A Thanksgiving celebration interrupted by heart pains becomes a trip to the emergency room and bypass surgery. A car ride from the ball game turns into a devastating wreck and then a funeral when someone drives drunk. A march for peace becomes a riot and a jail sentence when demonstrators are mistaken as criminals. The Highway of Hosannas turns into the Via Dolorosa—the way of suffering.

We may not know the mind of Jesus, but we may trust the presence of God to walk with us through devastating moments and dark nights of the soul that disrupt and change our lives.

## Walking the Labyrinth

Today, as you walk the labyrinth, imagine you are present at the first Palm procession. Put yourself into the story and see the crowds around Jesus walking toward Jerusalem on the way to the Passover festival (see John 12). As you walk along, are you ahead of him or behind? What shouts come from your lips? Are you a follower, a reluctant watcher, or a studious observer of Jesus of Nazareth?

Notice, as you enter the city, the impact of the processional. What is all the turmoil about? What turmoil has been part of your life lately? What turmoil have you witnessed in the lives of others? Where do you sense God's presence in these circumstances? As you continue through the labyrinth, ponder this question from the crowds with reference to your own life: "Who is this Jesus and what difference does my answer make?"

### Prayer

O God, in this Holiest of Weeks, guide my path, fire my imagination, and open my heart to the deep and penetrating questions of life.

## 2. Monday of Holy Week

Scripture: John 12:1-11

### Meditation

Feet. When they are well they help us stand, walk, run. They offer a way to exercise our freedom, carry us to amazing places, cross the paths of wondrous souls, and take us to places of service and love. Yet, feet can also kick in anger, stomp away in hurt, march to war, or trudge slowly in grief.

When the feet of Jesus drew near to the place of his death, they slowed and rested. His dearest friends came to his aid. Martha comforted and nourished him with home cooking. Lazarus smiled deeply the smile of the recently dead and revived. Mary brought out her most extravagant gift and poured it on the feet of her teacher and friend. I'm sure each gift carried with it a gentle prayer of love.

## Walking the Labyrinth

As you walk the labyrinth today, concentrate on your feet as you walk and pray. Pray first in thanksgiving for the body you have been given—whatever its limits—that serves and cares for you. Thank God for the places, the people and the paths which your feet have crossed. Then turn your prayers toward those in need. Ask God for your own needs. Pray for those who cannot walk on their own, who walk only in places of suffering, poverty or despair.

Thank God for those who walk on faith and not sight alone. Ask yourself these questions: How shall I walk in

paths of service? Where will my feet take me? What gifts—small or extravagant—do I have to offer? How will I know when a cause, a person, or a need is worthy? For what are my own feet anointed? To what am I called this holy week?

### Prayer

O God, may gratitude for your extravagant gifts to me inspire my actions and overflow my heart in service and compassion.

## 3. Tuesday of Holy Week

Scripture: John 12:20-36

### Meditation

The life of faith is one of mystery. Sometimes Jesus speaks in riddles. And important questions go unanswered. Only when something dies does it bear much fruit. To be lifted up means to die on a cross. Love your life and make it a god, and you'll lose it. Accept your death and let go of life, and it's yours in abundance. Who is this Son of Man anyway? And what is he saying?

Despite the riddling language about the life of faith, which sounds like a mystery wrapped in an enigma, some deceptively simple direction is given by Jesus: Walk in the light. Now. We don't know when darkness might be coming or overcoming. So get moving while there is still light.

## Walking the Labyrinth

The labyrinth looks like a maze, a series of tricky turns and passages. In reality there is only one way in and out. It is deceptively simple. As you walk it today, put your mind and heart in touch with the mysteries of life and faith...the wonder of birth...the inscrutability of death...the unexpected twists and turns of your path. Ponder the paradox of accepting death in order to live life to its fullest...the way suffering and trouble are sometimes a path to joy and meaning...how life is a strange mixture of light and shadow.

### Prayer

Lord of mystery, paradox, and shadowy light, teach me to walk in your ways and embrace the fullness of life.

## 4. Wednesday of Holy Week

Scripture: John 13:21-32

### Meditation

Through the ages lent has typically been a season of confession, repentance and purification from sin. Early followers of the Way of Christ often used the season to

prepare new believers for an Easter morning baptism in which they came out of the water facing the rising sun.

The story of Judas tempts us to divide the world into those who are good and those who are bad: those like Judas who need repentance and those like Peter who lean close to Jesus. But wait! Peter betrayed Jesus, too... later that very same night, after Jesus was arrested. All of the twelve eventually ran, hid, denied, and betrayed Jesus—leaving him to die alone, except for a few women gathered around the cross. Even they were reported by Mark to have fled at the sight of the empty tomb.

All of us have betrayed someone dear in our lives. We've let down a friend or acted in self-interest or desperation rather than compassion or courage. This season of repentance and purification is not designed as a time to dwell on our shortcomings, but rather as a time to let them go, to make amends, to move forward into a new beginning. Scholars agree that even Judas may have acted in the interest of ushering in the new reign of God, but he missed his opportunity for repentance and reconciliation. Surely we can and must learn from his mistakes.

### **Walking the Labyrinth**

As you walk the labyrinth today, prepare yourself for Easter by reflecting on the need in your life for confession, repentance and purification. As you walk into the labyrinth, focus on confession: with each step offer your life for examination by Christ's loving gaze. See it as God sees it. Confess your shortcomings, betrayals, and hurts as you walk along. When you reach the middle of the labyrinth, shift your focus to repentance, which can be understood as turning in a new direction. Spend a few moments there experiencing the mercy, love, and forgiveness that Christ freely offers. As you start away from the center, focus your attention on the purification that is yours in Christ. Revel in the joy of starting anew. When you emerge from the labyrinth you will be facing east. Thank God for the gift of baptism and new life, and turn your hear toward the coming Easter.

#### **Prayer**

O God, there is a wideness in your mercy. Make room for me there.

## **5. Maundy Thursday**

Scripture: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

#### **Meditation**

In John's Gospel the upper room gathering of disciples is placed on Thursday, so that Jesus becomes the new "lamb that was taken to slaughter" on Friday, fulfilling the Passover

festival and the promise of God's deliverance. In the fourth gospel, Jesus offers only one commandment: a new command to love (13:34-35). It is from the Latin word for commandment, *mandatum*, that we get "Maundy" Thursday.

In John's recounting of this important evening the disciples gather not only for a Passover preparation meal, but also to be served one last time by Jesus, who washes their feet. The task of offering hospitality through washing the dusty, dirty feet of travelers was usually reserved for the lowest among the household servants. Jesus embraced the role and took up towel and basin in order to ritualize the one new commandment that he gave that night. Love each other in ways so clear that everyone will know you are my disciples. Love as I have loved you.

#### **Walking the Labyrinth**

Remember as you walk the labyrinth today that you are God's creation, sent by God to this life. You are no greater than the One who sent you, and the One who sent you loves you so much that even washing your feet is not too much to ask. For servants, students, and messengers are not greater than their masters, teachers and senders. We can do no other than to love those to whom we are sent, those with whom we learn and walk and live.

If someone were to watch your life closely, would they see a disciple who loves? As you watch your own feet taking the path of the labyrinth, first thank God for the servants who have been Christ to you, who have washed your feet literally or metaphorically. Then ask God to guide your steps to those who need your love and service. Ask Christ to show you those whose feet need washing.

#### **Prayer**

You sent me in love. In Christ you have taught me to love. Now help me to live as the beloved.

## **6. Good Friday**

Scripture: John 18-1-19:42

#### **Meditation**

These are among the most graphic and difficult scriptures to read in the New Testament. This man Jesus, whose judgments were always restrained by love, whose grace and mercy put his adversaries to shame, whose compassion extended all the way to the outermost margins of life—this man was swept into events beyond his control which swiftly ended his life. Was he at heart a prophet? A reformer? A rabbi? What could be attributed to his name? The religious leaders accused him of breaking the religious codes of the day, yet his purpose was simply to teach and to live the love at the heart of those laws.

Whatever his role and purpose, a collusion of forces from his closest circle of disciples to the occupying forces of the Roman empire—including the religious authorities of his day—converged during the frenzy of a religious holiday and brought the work and life of Jesus to a screeching halt.

We are left like the disciples to watch from the sidelines and wonder in frustration and anger at the injustice of it all. And we find ourselves asking: would we have been as useless as Peter, drawn to the trial in fascination and horror, yet denying any connection with our beloved teacher?

When we open ourselves to the drama of Good Friday, the important question seems not to be: What would Jesus do? We have that on record. The more important question may be: What will we do in response to the strange and horrifying events of the story?

### **Walking the Labyrinth**

Upon entering the labyrinth on Good Friday, ask yourself this question: What would I have done, had I been there to witness the events of Jesus' trial and crucifixion? Where would I have gone? What would I have said? With whom in the story do I identify? Attempt to answer these questions with brutal honesty. What do you learn about yourself?

Ask God's mercy on the Church, who through the ages has unduly placed the burden for Jesus' death on the shoulders of the Jews, while failing to see its own shortcomings as persecutor of the righteousness and crucifier of love. Ask God's grace for yourself that you may find a renewed courage for living in the face of life's many dangers, toils and snares.

#### **Prayer**

O God, on this dark and wounded day, grant us wisdom and grace to see ourselves more clearly.

## **7. Holy Saturday**

Scripture: John 19:38-42

#### **Meditation**

In John's Gospel there is no word about Saturday. The scripture at this point is silent. Certainly there must have been a great pall over the circle of disciples and close friends of Jesus. It was the Sabbath and a holy day besides. By law, they could do nothing. No one could even visit the tomb on such a day.

We, who relive this day year upon year, are left in silence to wonder...at the grief that surely must have belonged to the disciples...at the mystery of what may have happened on that silent day... at what God might be saying with the

language of silence. We are also faced with the silent gaps in our own lives, the harsh stillness in our own grief, and the mysteries of death itself hovering at the outer boundaries of our existence. We probably rather have the joy and noise of Easter, but its amazing significance is not much unless it proceeds from a shattering silence.

### **Walking the Labyrinth**

As you walk the labyrinth today, do so in utter silence. When thoughts assault you let them pass by without response. Hear the sounds of finitude and death in the hush of your steps and the stillness of your mind. Sink deep into this quietest moment of Holy Week.

#### **Prayer**

Lord, fill me with your deep mystery...deep silence...deep peace.

## **8. Easter Sunday**

#### **Meditation**

This may be the most difficult day of the Christian year for those of us who live comfortably with cynicism, scientific realism, or just healthy doubt. We know with certainty the hard realities of betrayal, death, grief, and injustice. Where we find ourselves uncertain is in the scores of theories about why Jesus died and what happened to him after that end.

However, without giving up our passion for realism, may we accept this invitation today: May we set aside our doubts and disbelief long enough to glory in the miracle of birth, to revel in the flowers blooming in the desert, to walk barefoot in the grass, and to join the shouts of children? May we rejoice that the story doesn't end in crucifixion, and death is denied the final word? May we simply celebrate that God's Beloved lives on in this community: the risen body of Christ? Alleluia! Sound the bells!

### **Walking the Labyrinth**

Walk in joy! Skip if you can. Walk with a friend. Sing as you go. Laugh and kick up your heels. For today is Easter and life is yours to celebrate and to shout thanksgiving to God for all its richness!

#### **Prayer**

O God, may I throw myself with reckless abandon into the glory of your goodness this Easter Day!

—Eileen Campbell-Reed is a freelance writer and a leader in many ways at Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville.