



## Labyrinth: Christian spiritual tool or New Age gimmick?

### Editor's Reflections

One of the first issues of Hungryhearts news that I edited featured an article on the labyrinth. That article inspired one of the (mercifully few) letters of complaint I have received. The letter writer asked to be removed from our mailing list, and asked, "What next? Rain sticks?!"

Clearly, to that reader the labyrinth seemed a New Age gimmick that had no place in Presbyterian spirituality. Others, however, appreciated the article and have found the labyrinth to be a powerful prayer experience.

Since that first article appeared in 1996, the labyrinth has continued to grow in popularity, becoming almost an icon of the contemporary climate of spiritual seeking. As its use has become increasingly widespread, questions and concerns have been raised about the labyrinth — questions that touch upon theology and historical tradition, Reformed understandings of prayer, and the appropriation of practices from other cultures and religious traditions for Christian use.

In just the last few months, Presbyterians attending several national gatherings have had opportunities to walk a labyrinth — at the General Assembly in Long Beach, California, where a canvas labyrinth owned by Los Ranchos Presbytery was set out adjacent to the Prayer Room; at the Peacemaking Conference in Orange, California; and at the Triennial Gathering of Presbyterian Women held in Louisville, Kentucky, which

offered not just one but three different labyrinth experiences. In a quiet room in the Convention Center you could walk a canvas replica of the most famous labyrinth — the one inlaid in the sanctuary floor of Chartres Cathedral in France — as well as a newly created scaled-down version of that same design. Hardier souls willing to brave the July heat could mosey a few blocks north and walk a simpler classical pattern that had been mown into the lawn at the Presbyterian Center. (And lucky souls found that the best time of day to walk the outdoor labyrinth was in late afternoon, when it was shaded by a nearby tree!)

The labyrinth also is being introduced as one of the spiritual practices in our new denominational curriculum, Covenant People, where it is set in the context of the story of Abraham and Sarah, and the unexpected twist their life held.

The Office of Spiritual Formation has found the labyrinth to be a useful tool, but we also believe that the questions being raised are both legitimate and significant, and that addressing them will be helpful—both for those who embrace the labyrinth and those who spurn it.

As always — and perhaps even more than usually — I am eager to hear your responses.

May your journey of faith be a pilgrimage rich in surprises, yet drawing you ever nearer to the heart of your soul, which is Christ Jesus.

Kris

# Labyrinth

The Office of Spiritual Formation supports the spiritual growth of Presbyterians in a variety of ways, but most of the specific tasks of our ministry tend to fall into the following three categories:

- to recover and discover a vocabulary of spiritual formation — a shared, effective language with which to speak of the spiritual life;
- to develop a fully articulated theology of the work of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Holy Trinity; and
- to reclaim and develop a repertoire of practices that help to deepen our relationship with God in Christ, commonly referred to as spiritual disciplines.

It is within the framework of this third task — reclaiming a rich repertoire of spiritual practices — that the labyrinth has emerged as one of many tools for deepening the life of prayer.

## What Is It?

The labyrinth is an ancient tool for prayer and meditation, consisting of a winding path that begins at the periphery and leads to a central space, and then out again by the same path.

Although the words “labyrinth” and “maze” are sometimes used interchangeably, there are critical differences between them. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has no blind alleys or dead ends.

Remember those mazes on the backs of restaurant place mats, and how frustrating it was to try to find the way to the center? A labyrinth is a different experience. It will not frustrate, because it is not a puzzle to be solved. You cannot get “lost” or make a mistake because there are no choices to be made once you have made the decision to start walking. By following the path you always end up either in the center of the labyrinth or back at the entrance.

The graphics on page 3 are courtesy of <http://www.angelfire.com/tn/SacredLabyrinth>



## Hungryhearts

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## *Where Did They Come From?*

Labyrinth-like patterns have been uncovered by archaeologists in a great variety of ancient and contemporary cultures. They have been carved into rocky hillsides, etched into stone, and painted on ceramic vessels. Some of the simplest and most ancient patterns have been discovered in the Mediterranean and in Celtic lands, and commonly are referred to as “Classical” or “Cretan” labyrinths (figure 1).

In Christian history and practice, the labyrinth is most famously associated with Chartres Cathedral in France, where an eleven-circuit labyrinth was inlaid into the floor of the sanctuary in the thirteenth century (fig 2). It was used by believers as a way of symbolically participating in the great pilgrimage to Jerusalem.



Figure 1:  
Classical 7-Circuit Labyrinth  
(Cretan or Celtic)



Figure 2:  
Chartres Labyrinth

Labyrinths can be permanent or temporary. Many modern labyrinths are portable — painted on high-grade canvas that can be rolled up and transported. Others have been laid out with lime on a lawn, or with nylon cord and tent pegs. They have been marked with stones, and seashells, and even cans of soup collected during a food drive.

Whatever their pattern or size, however, all labyrinths have a meandering path that unfailingly brings you to the center and back out again, but which is nonetheless a path that is full of unexpected turns and changes of direction.

## *“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”*

In Christian practice, the labyrinth is not designed to produce a spiritual peak experience, but to provide inner space for listening to God. It is to be a tool for prayer, not an idol.

John Calvin wrote that “prayer is properly understood as an emotion of the heart within, which is poured out and laid open before God, the searcher of hearts.” He also reminded us that Jesus himself taught us to “seek a retreat that would help us to descend into our heart with our whole thought and enter deeply within.” [Institutes, III.xx.29]

Too often, however, our understanding of prayer stays at the level of thought, rather than engaging our whole heart. “Prayer” has become synonymous with “prayers” — words we direct toward God, whether those words be printed on a page or offered spontaneously.

Living, as we do, in a post-Enlightenment culture, we have learned very well how to use our rational minds. But how do we learn to pray with our hearts? How can we, as Calvin urged, draw our thought down into a deeper level of our awareness and wisdom?

## Ways of Knowing

In 1983, Harvard University professor of education Dr. Howard Gardner published a pioneering work about the many ways in which human beings receive and process information — now known as “multiple intelligences.”<sup>1</sup> Moving beyond the earlier categories of “verbal” and “mathematical” intelligence (as measured by standardized tests), Gardner has suggested eight distinct categories of intelligence:

- Linguistic intelligence (“word smart”);
- Logical-mathematical intelligence (“number and reasoning smart”);
- Spatial intelligence (“picture smart”);
- Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (“body smart”);
- Musical intelligence (“music smart”);
- Interpersonal intelligence (“people smart”);
- Intrapersonal intelligence (“self smart”);
- Naturalist intelligence (“nature smart”).

When prayer is viewed through the lens of multiple intelligences, it is clear that there cannot be one single form of prayer that will always be fruitful for every person. Practices that are meaningful for people high in “linguistic intelligence” may be less meaningful, or even counterproductive, for people high in musical intelligence, or spatial intelligence. We simply receive and process information differently — including information about God and our intimate relationship with Christ.

Prayer then becomes a much larger landscape of practices, including ancient and venerable practices dating back to the time of the Old Testament and the early church. Consider, for instance, the variety of postures used during prayer, which included not only sitting but kneeling, prostration, and (most commonly) standing upright with arms extended upwards.

## Walking Prayer

Presbyterian theologian Craig Dykstra observed at a recent symposium, “You can know things on your knees that you can’t know sitting in a chair.”<sup>2</sup> You can also “know” things while meditatively walking the circuitous path of a canvas labyrinth, which you can’t know sitting still. The very action of walking serves to still our thoughts, allowing space for God amid the usually jam-packed confines of our minds. The rhythm of walking is conducive to prayerful contemplation. The unpredictability of the labyrinth’s twists and turns helps us to relinquish

our need to feel “in control” and to acknowledge our dependence upon God. The certainty of reaching the center inspires us to trust in God’s providence. All of these things can serve to draw us into a genuine experience of prayer — of allowing our hearts to lay “open before God.”

### A Story

In 1998 a conference on spiritual formation was held at First Presbyterian Church in Orlando, Florida. During the course of the

event, participants had the opportunity to walk a labyrinth that had been set up in the church’s gymnasium, and then to talk about their experiences together.

One woman in particular was very powerfully moved by her labyrinth experience. In fact, she said, this was the first time in her whole life that she felt she had been able to truly pray, despite years and years of effort at setting aside a regular “quiet time” for devotional reading and prayer. With tears in her eyes, she explained that she had Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), and that this brain condition made ordinary “quiet time” impossible for her. But walking the labyrinth allowed her both the activity of “doing something” and the interior space to become inwardly still and meditative, to listen for the voice of God underneath the incessant buzzing of her mind.

*Prayer  
is properly understood  
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John Calvin

## *But Is It Reformed?*

There is no denying that the most famous Christian labyrinth is a pre-Reformation construction in a cathedral that continues to be part of the Roman Catholic Church. There is no evidence that Calvin or other notables of the Reformed tradition were either familiar with the labyrinth as a spiritual discipline or practiced any other variety of “walking prayer.

The word labyrinth, however, is used several times in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin uses the metaphor of the labyrinth (*labyrinthus*) in sections dealing with *The Knowledge of God the Creator*, *The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ*, and *Means of Grace: Holy Catholic Church*. He most often seems to use the word “labyrinth” interchangeably with “maze,” which he uses twice.<sup>3</sup>

A summary of Calvin’s thought as it pertains to the labyrinth might be that we live in “the labyrinth of the world” and are guided and brought near to God by the “thread of God’s Word,” as illustrated in the following passages.

### **I.vi.3 Without Scripture we fall into error**

(Knowledge of God the Creator)

. . . It is therefore clear that God has provided the assistance of the Word for the sake of all those to whom he has been pleased to give useful instruction because he foresaw that his likeness imprinted upon the most beautiful form of the universe would be insufficiently effective. Hence, we must strive onward by this straight path if we seriously aspire to the pure contemplation of God. We must come, I say, to the Word, where God is truly and vividly described to us from his works, while these very works are appraised not by our depraved judgment but by the rule of eternal truth. If we turn aside from the Word, as I have just now said, though we may strive with strenuous haste, yet, since we have got off the track, we shall never reach the goal. For we should so reason that the splendor of the divine countenance, which even the apostle calls “unapproachable” [1 Tim. 6:16], is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.

### **III.vi.2 Motives for the Christian life**

(The Way We Receive the Grace of Christ)

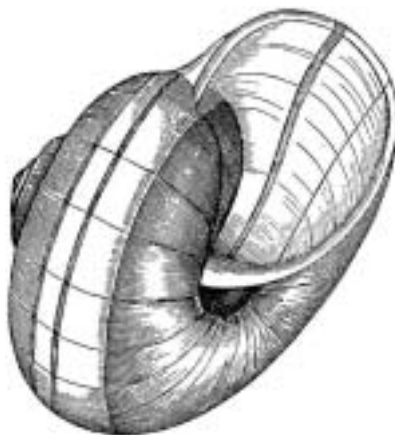
Now this Scriptural instruction of which we speak has two main aspects. The first is that the love of righteousness, to which we are otherwise not at all included by nature, may be instilled and established in our hearts; the second, that a rule be set forth for us that does not let us wander about in our zeal for righteousness.

There are in Scripture very many and excellent reasons for commending righteousness, not a few of which we have already noted in various places. And we shall briefly touch upon still others here. From what foundation may righteousness better arise than from the Scriptural warning that we must be made holy because our God is holy! [Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16]. Indeed, though we had been dispersed like stray sheep and scattered through the labyrinth of the world, he has gathered us together again to join us with himself. When we hear mention of our union with God, let us remember that holiness must be its bond; not because we come into communion with him by virtue of our holiness! Rather, we ought first to cleave to him so that, infused with his holiness, we may follow whither he calls.

## *Prayer in the Reformed Tradition*

Reformed worship and prayer, moreover, are not to be rigidly confined to historical precedent. The Directory for Worship speaks of Jesus' own pattern of bringing new meaning to existing religious practices (*Book of Order* W-1.2004a), and the early church's use of new symbolic language to communicate the new reality of life in Christ (*Book of Order* W-1.2004b).

The Directory also affirms the incarnational nature of prayer: "Prayer in personal worship may be expressed in various ways. . . . One may wait upon God in attentive and expectant silence. . . . One may contemplate God, moving beyond words and thoughts to communion of one's spirit with the Spirit of God. . . . One may take on an individual discipline of enacted prayer through dance, physical exercise, music, or other expressive activity as a response to grace." (*Book of Order* W-5.4002)



The Old and New Testaments also bear witness to the importance of physical space and place, not because of their inherent sacredness but because they are the locations of divine encounter. "Particular locations became recognized as places where people had special encounter with God, so they arranged space in such a way as to remember and enhance that meeting." (*Book of Order* W-1.3020b)

A labyrinth then, may be a place of prayer that is an arrangement of space in such a way as to invite and express God's presence through enacted prayer.

## *A Contemporary Tool for Prayer*

As a tool for spiritual formation, the labyrinth allows us to offer up to God the reality of our lives, trusting in God's immense love and grace. Not only our 21<sup>st</sup> century world but also the very life of Christian faith is a labyrinth — full of unexpected turns and twists, requiring us to step forward in faith, confident that Christ — our Way, our Truth, and our Life — is at the center of the very universe and at the heart of our life in God. As we prayerfully seek Christ's guidance in the symbolic walking of a circuitous canvas path, we may be offered a chance to truly lay our hearts open before God, who is the searcher of hearts.

## For Further Information

Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path:*

*Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool.*

New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1995.

Douglas Burton-Christie, "Into the Labyrinth:

Walking the Way of Wisdom," in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, Vol. XII, No. 4, July/August 1997, pp. 20-28.

Lynn Penny, "The Labyrinth: Take a Walk on the Spiritual Side," in *Horizons*, July/August 1998, pp. 4-8.

Melissa Gayle West, *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth.* New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2000.

*In prayer,  
through the Holy Spirit,  
people seek after  
and are found by  
the one true God  
who has been revealed  
in Jesus Christ*

Directory for Worship

## Web Sites

Labyrinth Enterprises, *source of portable canvas  
labyrinths and information*  
[www.labyrinthproject.com](http://www.labyrinthproject.com)

The Sacred Labyrinth.

[www.angelfire.com/tn/SacredLabyrinth/](http://www.angelfire.com/tn/SacredLabyrinth/)

Veriditas, *the labyrinth project of Grace Cathedral,  
San Francisco*

[www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/index.shtml](http://www.gracecathedral.org/labyrinth/index.shtml)

## Notes

1. See Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983; Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice.* New York, NY: Basic Books, 1993.
2. Quotation from Craig Dykstra made during a conference at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, September 1998.
3. Citations of Calvin's use of the word "labyrinth" based upon the Index in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960. List of citations in the *Institutes*: Labyrinth: I.v.12; I.vi.3; I.xiii.21; III.ii.2-3; III.vi.2; III.viii.1; III.xix.7; III.xxi.1; III.xxv.11; IV.vii.22. Maze: III.ii.31; III.xx.14.

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the Body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.

*Office of Spiritual Formation  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

## *Some Suggestions for Walking a Labyrinth*

Walking the labyrinth can be a time of simply opening yourself to the Presence of God without any particular “agenda” in mind, or it may be part of an ongoing discernment process during which you seek clarity around a particular question or concern, and especially to recognize God’s will. In the latter case, you might walk the labyrinth while holding a specific intention or question in mind.

- Before entering the labyrinth, it is helpful to spend a few moments sitting quietly at the periphery, allowing yourself to become stilled and attentive. If there is music being played, you might invite the music to draw you into a place of prayer. Or there may be candles lit that remind you of the presence of Christ the Light of the World. The rhythm of your breath also can help you become quieted, as you notice its tidal flow in and out of your body, remembering that the word for “breath” is the same word for “Spirit.”

- When you are ready, step onto the canvas and enter the path. Many people pause before their first step and offer a prayer or intention.

- You may walk as slowly or as quickly as is natural for you. Feel free to pause at any time, and especially as you reach the turns in the path.

- If others are on the path with you, feel free to step off the path and go around them or let them step around you. Sometimes you will meet someone going in the opposite direction. Again, walk around one another. You may acknowledge each other with a smile or a touch as you pass, or maintain your inward focus by refraining from eye contact.

- Time spent in the center of the labyrinth has been described as a time of seeking awareness of God’s presence, healing, and clarity. It also can be a space of self-offering.

- As you are ready, begin to retrace your steps on the outward path, carrying with you any insights or blessings you have received.

After you have walked the labyrinth, you may find it fruitful to continue your prayer through journaling, drawing, or simply sitting in stillness for awhile.

### *Virtual labyrinth “walking”*

If you don’t have access to a labyrinth, you can still engage in a “labyrinthine” prayer experience. It may be as simple as taking a meandering walk, or you may try one of the following.

### *Finger labyrinth tracing*

Using the patterns in this issue or another labyrinth design, follow the path with the tip of your finger. Trace the pattern slowly, pausing at each turning.

### *Pew labyrinths*

Take a “labyrinth walk” in your sanctuary, walking among the rows and aisles of the pews in an order that moves in and out, and toward and away from the chancel — which will be the “center” or your labyrinth walk. As you reach the communion table, stand or kneel in prayer. Retrace your path, either exactly or generally.

*Eternal God,  
you call us to ventures  
of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrodden,  
through perils unknown.  
Give us faith to go out with courage,  
not knowing where we go,  
but only that your hand is leading us  
and your love supporting us;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Book of Common Worship



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## Prayer in Motion: Walking the Labyrinth

by Otto Zingg

When my wife and I were in San Francisco last June, a friend suggested we go to Grace Episcopal Cathedral to “walk the labyrinth” there. We knew next to nothing about labyrinths except the vague understanding that they were some sort of maze. But we were game to try something new.

The labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, on a woven fabric spread on the floor just inside the main entrance, quickly revealed to us that a labyrinth is not a maze. A maze usually has walls or hedges that function as blinders, and a number of dead ends. Walking a maze is a contest to see if you can find your way out of being lost.

Walking a labyrinth, by contrast, is prayer in motion. Physically, a labyrinth is a large circle with a single path that winds back and forth, moving alternately toward and away from the center, covering every quadrant and ending up in a central circle,

Following the instructions posted near the entrance to the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral, as we moved into the labyrinth we focus on releasing -- letting go of the roles and responsibilities that define our lives. Once at the center, as the instructions suggested, we spent time in meditation, opening our hearts to the illuminating presence of God and the healing powers of the universe. On the way back outward from the center, we tried to feel in our bodies that we were carrying God's grace back into the world of our relationships, our work, and our other involvements.

When we returned to Centerville, Ohio, I shared this experience with several members of Heritage Presbyterian Church, who encouraged me to create a similar labyrinth on our own church grounds. Upon reflection we decided that the least expensive way to do this was to mow a circular path in the extensive lawn. It was the first time I have used a push mower as an artist's tool, but it worked! At the center of the labyrinth is a circle where we placed a simple rock, occasionally adding other symbols such as a bowl of water, a chalice, or a candle.

In July, elders and deacons walked the labyrinth as a way of preparing themselves spiritually for the discussions and decisions of their meetings. One deacon shared the experience this way:

*“As I was walking, I could see my ultimate destination — the center. I came close to it several times, but then the path curved and led me farther away. To me, that symbolizes life. I'm always in a hurry to get somewhere, and I think I know what I'm supposed to be doing, until God throws me a curve. And he's the only one who knows my destiny.”*



Another member of the congregation -- a woman, who is going through a painful separation after years of marriage -- has found walking to the center of the labyrinth to be a healing experience. As she walks, she is able to be in touch with her broken dreams, anger, and pain-, to honor those feelings and to release them at each turn in the path. She reports, however, that she is not yet ready to retrace the path outward again, perhaps because her former world has evaporated and a new one has not yet taken shape. A man whose life in recent years has been one of difficult struggles that include divorce, a situation of addiction in his family, and having no steady work for three years, was moved when he came upon a bowl of water in the center of the labyrinth. In discussing his experience later it became clear that the water represented to him the tears of God. He went away with the assurance that God is with him in his moments of deepest heartache.

After our local newspaper published an article about our labyrinth with an accompanying photograph, we got inquiries from diverse groups who wanted to know if they could arrange to walk the labyrinth. An agency that provides support for abused women requested the use of our church building and labyrinth for their annual board meeting. I also invited a clergy support group to experience the labyrinth at one of our meetings. This came at a time when I was feeling discouraged about certain aspects of my ministry. I found that moving around the circular paths with my friends and colleagues was not only personally supportive, but also resulted in a rejuvenation of spirit.

Labyrinths of all kinds date back some 4,000 years in human history. Often the designs were thought to mirror the spirals found in nature. The earliest Christian labyrinth was found in a basilica in Algeria dating to the fourth century, and was designed in the classical Roman style in which the path follows an identical pattern in each of the four quadrants.

Medieval labyrinths were less linear. The path wanders through all four quadrants and creates the feeling of mystery. Not knowing where the path leads next, the walker must let go of the need for predictability and be open to surprises.

All labyrinths, however, were not traced with the feet. On the wall of St. Lucca Cathedral in Italy is a labyrinth only eighteen inches in diameter, dating from the ninth century. Worshipers would trace its path with their fingers as a way of quieting the mind before worship.

The labyrinths at Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco and at Heritage Presbyterian Church are modeled on the one set into the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France, which was constructed between 1194 and 1220 C.E. and used as a prayer practice for two to three centuries thereafter.

After centuries of neglect, the spiritual practice of walking the labyrinth has been revived by Dr. Lauren Artress, Canon for Special Ministries at Grace Episcopal Cathedral. Dr. Artress feels that this practice offers us a way to reclaim our bodies for the faith journey.

Indeed, it is integral to our incarnational faith that we include our bodies as well as our minds in our prayer practices. We are called to love God with our whole selves.

Whether it be a yoga class that deepens our physical awareness, the practice of *tai chi* that enables us to experience God's grace in our own bodies, or walking the labyrinth as a form of body meditation, the incorporation of some form of body practice enables us to bring our full aliveness into the cosmic dance of God

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*The Rev. Otto Zingg is pastor of Heritage Presbyterian Church in Centerville, near Dayton, Ohio.*

### *For Further Information*

To learn more about the labyrinth at Grace Episcopal Cathedral or to order their kit for painting a portable labyrinth, call the Cathedral at 415-776-6611. See also: *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. by Lauren Artress (Riverhead Books, 1995). *Approaches to Prayer A Resource Book for Groups and Individuals* by Henry Morgan, ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1991). This book also describes the spiritual practice of walking the labyrinth, including instructions, as well as a vast variety of other classical and contemporary spiritual disciplines.

### *Reflection Questions*

Walking a labyrinth has much in common with the ancient practice of making a spiritual pilgrimage. In both experiences, we are encouraged to leave behind our customary activities and preoccupations, to cultivate a sense of expectancy, to be open to a possibly transforming encounter with “the holy,” and to bring the blessings of that experience back to our everyday lives.

Have you ever made a trip of some kind that turned out to be a “pilgrimage,” whether or not you had that intention in mind at its outset? You might want to jot down some thoughts of impressions from this experience in your prayer journal, or share the story with faithful friend.

In what ways could attending Sunday worship be similar to making a pilgrimage or walking a labyrinth? Think of how you might prepare yourself by “releasing” what needs to be left behind as you walk or drive to church (preferably in silence). Arrive at church a bit early to spend a few moments in quiet solitude in “the center” (the sanctuary or chapel). Be attentive to the ways in which God is seeking to encounter you during the service, perhaps in the words you speak or hear, perhaps in nonverbal ways. As you return home, imagine how you are carrying with you a blessing received, and how you might hold on to this blessing in the coming days.

