

The Pilgrim's Posture

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12
Psalm 84:1-8

Are you familiar with labyrinths? Have any of you ever walked one before? Labyrinths are basically giant circles on the ground that have a single path winding through the circle in until it reaches the center. It isn't a maze with dead ends so you can't get lost, but the path is much longer than you might think, and depending on the creativity of the designer, can form a complex pattern. The walker winds along the path until reaching the center and, when ready turns and follows the path back out. It's a meditative practice not meant to be walked quickly. It isn't about finding one's way through the maze because you can't get lost. It's meant to be contemplative. It is an ancient spiritual practice meant to illustrate our journey of faith as we travel through this life.

I don't know about you, but I am a goal driven person, a linear thinker. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The first time I walked a Labyrinth was at the Richmond Hill retreat center. Their labyrinth is huge, at least it felt that way to me. I started my walk thinking it would be an excellent way for me to pray through my discernment for the priesthood, which was why I was in Richmond. And boy was I surprised at how much mileage could fit into that single circle. It went on forever. Through that experience, I certainly felt the metaphorical reality hit home. I don't know why I was in such a hurry except for the fact that I am always in a hurry. But every time the path started getting closer to the center circle and then veer back away from it, I felt the frustrated. The goal of the practice and my internal priorities were at war. I felt the embodied reality of a quote I once read from Louis L'Amour, who said "The trail is the thing, not the end of the trail. Travel too fast and you have missed all you are traveling for". I don't know if Louis was a Christian, but I think he understood the ways of God better than I did in my first

encounter with a labyrinth. Have you ever noticed that God, who knows the end of the story, is much more interested in our journey itself.

One of the most interesting things about the magi's story is something that tells us a lot about God. They followed a star all the way from the East. We don't really know, but there is speculation that they came from modern day Iran, as far as 1000 miles away. That star took them to the exact location of the holy family, the very house. But not before they went through Jerusalem asking where Jesus could be found. They followed a star with the precision that "stopped over the place where the child was" so we know they were following it closely. Yet, it did not lead them directly there OR they didn't trust the star's guidance after 1000 miles and decided to finally ask for directions. Either way, these pagan astrologers felt compelled to follow a cosmic sign for nearly a year across the desert to show reverence for something beyond their religious and social expectations. And with the degree of accuracy we expect from our GPS, it either did not lead them immediately to Jesus or they wavered in trusting that it would. We do not know the answer to that question. But either way, it proves that God shares Louis' opinion about our journey through this life. The fact **that** these people left the safety and comfort of their homes to follow the leading of God is the important thing, not the directness or speed of their route.

Today's readings paint us a picture of this life that elevates the experience of pilgrimage. The definition of a pilgrim is one who journeys or wanders long distances to holy sites or for religious reasons. Pilgrims are defined by their travel, not by their destination. Participating in pilgrimages, whether through labyrinths or pathways like The Camino de Santiago, have long been part of the Christian tradition. From our earliest days, Christians have recognized this type of journey as an important part of our identity as children of God traveling through life on this earth. Life involves moving through unfamiliar experiences in sometimes threatening places, without complete clarity about the route. Pilgrims

demonstrate the faith of traveling beyond the reaches of their abilities, in expectation of something beyond their knowing. We can all be pilgrims, if we share that mindset.

The story of the Hebrews is one of constant pilgrimage as they moved through the consequences of their disobedience to God and were repeatedly brought back. Jeremiah's prophecy reminds the people that the pilgrims of God, who trust and follow God's leading will be gathered from the farthest distances, and that their path will include everyone, even the disabled, the elderly, and the children. It will be straight so they will not stumble, and he likens their journey to a dance in which the young will rejoice and the old will be merry. The Psalmist says that "Happy are the people whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way". **Their** happiness isn't because they walk only on pleasant pathways. In fact, he comments on the desolation of their path through desert valleys. But he says that it is in the desolate places that God's pilgrims find fresh springs and pools of refreshing water.

Today, as we remember the life of our beloved Joel Attwood, we are grateful for his example of a pilgrim who traveled his path well. Anyone who knows Joel's story knows that his journey was not a straight line. He trusted God to guide his path, he took risks, and he encountered God in unexpected places. Those encounters shaped Joel's heart. I did not have the privilege of knowing Joel in his prime, but still, with all his limitations, every time I met Joel his smile radiated the love of Jesus and every time he saw me, he told me about Bangor seminary, his mission work, and his practice of prayer. Joel was a man whose life was set on the pilgrim's way! May our experiences with God on our journeys so shape us.

Tomorrow is Epiphany. It is the feast day that reminds us of God's surprising revelation of Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God, and the availability of the gospel to everyone. Until the magi came to honor Jesus, the Jews assumed God's messiah was only for the people of Israel. The first epiphany was that God's love knows NO outsiders. The season of epiphany

is all about encountering God in unexpected places and surprising ways. Pilgrims start their journey with the expectation that God will show up. They just don't know how or where or when. But their faith leads them to, as the Psalmist says, "climb from height to height" in full assurance that from that precarious spot, "God will reveal himself".

Paul prays that the Ephesians will have the eyes of their hearts enlightened.

Enlightenment is a type of epiphany. It's a surprising encounter with unexpected truth.

Paul's prayer is that our epiphanies will strengthen our hope and trust in our future inheritance. I may have been impatient as I walked the labyrinth at Richmond Hill, but I knew eventually I would make it to the center and back out again. Trust in our future hope with God is a powerful motivator that builds endurance for hard times. None of us know what exactly this life has in store. We don't know what the twists and turns of our personal pilgrimage may entail, but we do know the end of the story. As Christians we have confidence in Christ's victory, in our bodily resurrection with Jesus and everlasting life with all the saints. Jeremiah likened his people's pilgrimage to a dance. Faith makes it possible for us to dance our way through life's labyrinth with joy. Paul prays that our epiphanies will include the shocking reality of God's power available for us as we pilgrimage. Paul experienced a lot of adversity and weakness during his earthly pilgrimage, but his experience proved God's power was sufficient to overcome all the obstacles he faced.

This week, as we step from Christmas into Epiphany, let's consider the way we are experiencing our personal pilgrimage. Are we seeing others with the humility and kindness of fellow travelers winding along a pathway towards God? Are we feeling expectation for God to show up? Are we confident that God is journeying with us, even when our pathway feels like a steep climb? What might happen if we allowed complications and setbacks to feel less like frustrating impositions and more like invitations into encountering God? Can we reimagine roadblocks and impediments as sacred places for encountering God? We

know where our journey ends. Can we slow down enough to enjoy the path itself or open ourselves by faith to experience epiphanies of our own? The magi took a long road. Can we follow their example of faith?

May our faith be strong enough to begin 2025 as pilgrims.