

Day Three

Labyrinths and Spirals

In the thirteenth century, walking was the usual mode of travel, and it offered time for reflection and conversation. In a preserved letter from Saint Francis to Brother Leo, Francis sums up their conversation on the road from Assisi to LaVerna, which is about one hundred and thirty miles. “In whatever way you think you will best please our Lord God and follow in his footsteps and in poverty, take that way with the Lord God’s blessing and my obedience.”²

Today, we have designated labyrinths as places for reflection and prayer. At the same time, the growing interest in pilgrimages—especially walking the Camino of Santiago in Spain—testifies to our desire to walk and pray, to walk and converse without time pressures.

Generally, a labyrinth is a circuitous path that leads to a center. Its design is found in many ancient civilizations, on walls, coins, or in fields. Labyrinths found new interest in the work of an Episcopalian priest Lauren Artress, who discovered a labyrinth in the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in England. In medieval times, when it was too long and dangerous to travel to the Holy Land, pilgrims could visit one of the great cathedrals and walk the labyrinth as their prayer.

Today, many churches, hospitals, schools, and spiritual centers have labyrinths on their property. Their presence encourages people to make a meditative, prayerful walk to the center. Walking helps focus one’s mind and provides an openness to standing or sitting in the center of the Labyrinth. Often people will walk with an intention or question on their heart on their way to the center. The center space provides a time and place to rest, pray, and think, while walking out is an opportunity to release, let go, or make a resolve.

Advent provides a holy tradition of preparation and the labyrinth invites people to slow down, place one foot in front of the other, and walk slowly toward the center. An Advent labyrinth walk helps one let go of long lists and a constant flurry of activity. (A resource to help you find a labyrinth near you is included at the end of this chapter.)

While serving a church in Southern California, we scheduled an early evening labyrinth walk. We placed candles at the places of turning and around the edges. We invited a guitarist to play Christmas music while the folks walked prayerfully toward the center. The growing darkness, the candles, and the music created an environment of quiet contemplation.

Before the creation of the outdoor labyrinth at the church, we offered an evening of prayer by walking a spiral that we laid down inside the church. I got the idea from a church in Washington that used evergreen branches to form a spiral path leading to an open space in the center. We placed candles in cored apples and invited participants to place their apple along the path and to offer prayer. We left the spiral up for a week between Sundays and invited people to come anytime to walk and pray. The apples let people know that

prayers had been offered.

It is good to know that prayers have been offered as we walk the paths of life.

The prophet Isaiah encourages us to trust and not be afraid, for God is our strength and salvation. Whether we walk a labyrinth, a spiral, or just take a long prayerful walk in a neighborhood or along a stream or in a forest, a walk can be a fruitful time of reflection on the Holy Child who comes to us where we are.

**The Living Nativity Copyright © 2018 by Larry J. Peacock
All rights reserved**