



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Walking to the Well Psalm 23; John 4:5-14

Have you noticed how much movement there is in the biblical story? Adam and Eve are hardly settled in the Garden when they eat the fruit of the forbidden tree and must pack up and leave. When their son Cain kills his brother Abel his life is spared, but he is forced to wander the earth. Humans decide to exercise their growing ingenuity and build a tower to God, but God thwarts their plan and scatters them, spinning them throughout the earth.

A new, more personal chapter begins when Abram and his wife Sarai are invited to leave their home in Ur and journey to a new land. Again, they wander, first to Egypt, then back into Canaan. Their grandson Jacob flees back to their homeland in Mesopotamia after he cheats his brother and tricks his father. Eventually he returns home, grows a family and establishes a prosperous life. When famine strikes, Jacob and his family move to Egypt to survive, thanks to the kindness of his son Joseph. The Hebrew people prosper in Egypt but are eventually forced into slavery. God hears their cries for help and raises up Moses to free them from bondage. They escape and wander in the desert for forty years before finally entering the Promised Land and claiming it for themselves.

The Israelites become a settled people, but disobedience leads to the exile of many of the people to Babylon. When they are allowed to return, they rejoice and rebuild the city of Jerusalem, reclaim their faith, and swear their allegiance once again to God.

Another twist in the biblical story occurs when a young couple, Mary and Joseph, journey to Bethlehem to register for the census tax and their first son is born. Because his presence threatens King Herod, the family flees to Egypt for safety before returning to their home in Nazareth several years later. When Jesus is thirty years old, he is baptized in the River Jordan, journeys immediately into the wilderness, and then begins his ministry traveling throughout Galilee but always moving toward Jerusalem. After his death and resurrection, his disciples take the Gospel far and wide, spreading throughout the earth. When you look at the broad sweep of the biblical story, there is a great deal of movement.

There are numerous times, however, when all movement stops and important things happen. The encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well is one of those occasions. Jesus had been moving from place to place teaching and healing. He and his disciples were hot, tired, and hungry when they came to the Samaritan city of Sychar. While the disciples went into town to buy food, Jesus waited at the well known as one that their ancestor Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Soon a woman came to draw water and Jesus asked her for a drink. It was unusual for anyone to come to the well in the heat of the day. Most of the women would have come early in the cool of the morning to get water and exchange the latest news. As Jesus soon revealed, this woman likely did not get along with the others. There was some shame involved. She had had five husbands and was not married to the man she was with. Had they died? Had they divorced her for some reason? We do not know, but we can surmise that she probably took a number of back alleys and lanes rather than the main street to get out to the well. Her life was full of movement to avoid other people.

Jesus and the woman both interrupted their journeys and stopped at the well to get refreshment. During their conversation, she wondered why he, a Jew, would ask her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink of water. Jesus replied that if she knew who he was, she would ask him for a drink and he would give her living water which would never cease. Recognizing that he was different from all other men she knew, she begged him for this living water and ran to tell the people of the city that she had met the Messiah.

Movement and insight: these are two important aspects of the biblical story. They are significant experiences in our story for our life is truly a journey and it is often when we stop and ponder our experience that we understand where God is and what God is doing in our story.

A labyrinth is a means to experience both movement and insight. I read the other day that the Labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral in France, perhaps the most famous labyrinth in the world for both its beauty and its age (it is about 800 years old), is built over a well—the Well of Saint Modeste. For ages the well has been a holy site. Once it was situated on top of a hill. Now, with time and changes in topography, it is one hundred and ten feet below the cathedral floor. The woman who wrote about this well, wondered about its use through the long centuries. Who was refreshed there? What wars did it see? What peace did it experience? What love was confessed at its rim? What secrets do its deep waters hold? The questions led her to contemplate

what lies beneath the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral and what does it mean for those who walk and pray its worn stones.¹

We might ask ourselves what lies beneath our new labyrinth. Given what we know about the geology of this area and the fact that we are so near the Tar River, it would not be surprising to find out that some aquifer of cold, clean water flows underneath this property. We do know that long years ago animals of all kinds walked this ground. Native Americans hunted and lived here. In more recent history, we know that numerous homes were once situated on our property and children played where our labyrinth now sits. The Skeels Building, once a home and then a kindergarten, became our first sanctuary and educational facility. The garden just outside our windows heard the prayers and hymns of the faithful, the laughter of children and adults, the noise of construction, and the peace of silence. Some of our loved ones are inurned adjacent to the labyrinth, and children still play all around.

What lies beneath and around our labyrinth is the life of our ancestors and the hope of our future—the very wellspring of our faith. It is sacred ground, made holy by all of the feet who have traversed it in the service and search of faith.

There is nothing inherent in a labyrinth which makes it a sacred space. Labyrinths have been around for thousands of years, used by people to imitate the journey of life and to provide focus for contemplation of life's deeper questions. A labyrinth is not a maze which has dead ends, traps, and tricks to confuse the one trying to walk through it. Instead, a labyrinth has one entrance and exit. It is a continuous path which leads to the center and back to the beginning. Its paths, turns, twists, switchbacks, and parallels all serve to concentrate our larger experience of the journey of life into a smaller, more manageable space. For Christians who walk a labyrinth, the reward of the journey is that the center reminds us of the presence of God who walks each step of life's journey with us.

You might think of the experience of walking the labyrinth as similar to that of the woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well. There was a journey, a series of twists and turns that brought her to an encounter with Christ himself who then invited the woman to dip into the well of grace and invite others to do the same. The labyrinth allows us space and solitude to contemplate our

¹Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion, *Praying the Labyrinth* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), 74-5.

lives, our journey, our hope and to discover that God is always waiting for us at the center of life.

There is, perhaps, no better or familiar text to contemplate when walking the labyrinth than the Twenty-third Psalm. We all know it by heart. We go to it when we are sad or alone, fearful or uncertain, joyful or at peace. When you think about it, movement is evident throughout the psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he *leads* me beside still waters.
He restores my soul:
He *leads* me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I *walk* through the valley of deep darkness,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

There is movement and insight and encounter with God. God provides all that we need, nurtures and protects us, even throws a banquet in our honor when our foes are at the door. In the midst of the movement of life, we discover that we are always at home with God.

Our labyrinth is a gift to us, and we are grateful. I encourage you to walk it. Walk its paths toward the well of God's grace. You may not have a profound spiritual experience that will forever change your life. You might simply become aware of how much you have to share with God. Then again, you may discover that you have fallen into the well of God's grace and are free to drink deeply of the new life he offers. Either way, your life will be enriched and your faith will be more vibrant. May God grant us all a safe journey, a holy rest, and peace at the last as we drink deeply from the well of his grace. Amen.

June 23, 2013

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

There are times, O God, when it seems as if the world around us is caught in a haze and we cannot quite grasp where we are going. Constant wars, tragedies we cannot understand, even the violence of nature blur our vision and sap energy from our spirits. And then in moments which we can only describe as divine, the haze is lifted, our energy returns, and we see clearly that you are still with us. Our hope is renewed, our confidence returns, and our resolve is strengthened to live out the Gospel in all that we do. We thank you, O God, for remaining with us and enabling us to see the world, not only through our jaded and fearful eyes, but through the eyes of your compassion and grace.

We thank you that though wars rage throughout the earth and conflict persists on all levels, you still come to us with the offer of peace. We are grateful that when tragedy upends our lives you reassure us that life is still held in your hands. We continue to be amazed that when illness creeps in upon us you have already prepared doctors and nurses, aids and therapists, hospitals and clinics, medications and treatments that can be beneficial to our health. We are awed that when life presses in upon us you are already beside us to push back the threats and help us find a way to wholeness once again.

Continue to open our eyes to the beauty and wonder of your world. Continue to open our spirits to the presence and work of your Spirit all around us. Continue to open our hearts to the calling of your heart to trust you and give ourselves wholly to you. Continue to help us find you at the center of our lives and all of life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.