

***Ash Wednesday meditation – “The Way of the Labyrinth”***  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – March 2, 2022**

*From dust you have come, and to dust you shall return* will be the sobering words that are said as we smudge the sign of the cross with ashes on your forehead this evening. I always felt that we Protestants are still on the fence with this whole Ash Wednesday thing. We do it at night and go home, hoping that nobody will see us. Maybe we’re just trying to take Jesus seriously when he says that we aren’t supposed to practice our piety before others. I always thought that the Roman Catholics who got the cross in the morning and go through the day with people wondering what is that dirt on your forehead... they have a lot more courage... I understand that Guthrie Spears used to ride the train into New York City and offer the sign of the cross to any who would receive it. He was a trail blazer for sure!

I’m dubious about this dark way of beginning the season of Lent. It’s hard to look death in the face, to acknowledge that it’s only a matter of time before this body is literally nothing more than dust and ashes. It’s been said that we’ve been in a season of Lent ever since the pandemic hit us in March 2020. We’ve had to give up so much and gone through so many kinds of losses. Do we really need to do this?

In the Rule of St. Benedict, the monks are urged to remember their mortality: “Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die. Hour by hour keep careful watch over all you do, aware that God’s gaze is upon you, wherever you may be.” Benedict understood that recalling death changes us. If you ever come into my study here at the church, you will see a skull. It’s a *memento mori*, which in the Latin literally means, “Remember that you must die.” The skull is a stark reminder of death that I have found helpful because it reminds me that each day is precious, and I best not squander it.

The recent and rapid demise of our brother Steve Benko, the growing climate crisis, the chilling war in Ukraine (particularly the not-so-subtle nuclear threats) on top of the long road of COVID are just a few of the vivid reminders that death, even mass extinction, is ever near to us, and will come to take us when we least expect it. We are simply acknowledging the truth of that hard reality tonight, because it is the only way back to the new life, indeed the resurrection life in which we put our hope and celebrate at Easter. Tonight then, paradoxically marks the beginning of the road to new life. The truth, even as harsh as it may be, will set you free. Lent, of course, is the old English word for Spring. This season of Lent is meant to be a time of renewal and rebirth, of journeying toward resurrection life.

I like what Tish Harrison Warren wrote in her Sunday *NY Times* article... “Karl Marx famously called religion the opiate of the masses. He meant that faith could have a numbing affect, quelling hard questions and hampering the work of justice in the here and now. He has a point. Religion has at times been used as an excuse by some to not work for change and to embrace a pie-in-the-sky quietism. Still, in my own life, any numbing effects of religion don’t hold a candle to binge-

watching *Netflix* with a pint of *Ben & Jerry's* and a bourbon on the rocks. Like morphine, the pleasures of consumerism and creature comforts dull my notice of life, death, longing and the pressing struggles of this world.”<sup>1</sup> The upshot of this is that the more wealth and distractions we can afford, the more numb to the realities of raw life and death we become. We can waste years of our lives. Thomas Merton put it this way, “People may spend their whole lives climbing the ladder of success only to find, once they reach the top, that the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.”

I’ll be talking more about the nature of wilderness wandering on Sunday, but tonight I thought it would be helpful to explore the general theme of the Way as we make our pilgrimage through the next 40 days of Lent. Thankfully, if you do the math, the forty days does not count Sundays. Sundays are mini-Easters and times to eat, drink and be merry. The rest of the time is to figure out new ways for God to transform us more into the people we are created and called to be by God.

It all begins with the confession of sin. And my favorite definition of sin is simply “Not the way it’s supposed to be.” It begins with the assumption that we are all on a journey in life, at different places on the road of our lives, and Lent is a time to reorient and make sure that we are headed in the direction that will optimize generativity and new life. There are spiritual disciplines that help us to focus more. The Native Americans called this a “Vision Quest,” and would fast and pray and try to seek out wisdom of the Spirit. We fast, pray, read scripture and give alms to the poor. These are ways that we change our patterns of life to be more open to life-giving pathways. Jesus assumes that his disciples will practice spiritual disciplines. Notice, he says, “Whenever you give alms...” “Whenever you pray...” “Whenever you fast...”

In other words, Jesus assumes we need to do a vision quest or journey more often than we probably realize. That’s why for centuries the church does Lent. We pattern it off of the 40-day wilderness quest of Jesus. But here is the paradox that I hope some of us realize... The pandemic and the terrible threat of death, social distancing and forced isolation actually can be instructional. Any brush with death is a “clarifying moment.” We learn about ourselves, what’s really important to us, the value of each day, and that God is able to bring about something new and life-giving for us all, if we’re paying attention.

I’m not some labyrinth expert, and only in the last five years or so I’ve come to realize how powerful a labyrinth prayer walk can be. But the labyrinth is for those of us who need a vision quest but can’t take off days or weeks to go on an extended walk or pilgrimage. That’s why the most famous labyrinth was put into the floor of Chartres Cathedral over 800 years ago. The simple truth of the Way of the Labyrinth is that it reminds us that we are on a journey that sometimes takes us toward the center and sometimes leads us away, sometime brings us close and sometimes far, but in the end, we will find ourselves in the center with God... The Way of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tish Harrison Warren, “Ash Wednesday Forces Us to Confront Death, but It Also Offers Hope,” (New York Times, February 27, 2022).

Labyrinth teaches us that God is present to us wherever we are on the journey, no matter which way we are pointing or how close we are or far away, God is always there for us.

I had the luxury of a three-month sabbatical the summer of 2017, and part of my time was spent walking the 500 mile Camino Santiago in northern Spain. One of the more moving experiences after 28 days of walking was just after arriving to Santiago, having the realization that Santiago was not the end of my walk. I had to go further, another three days to Finnestre, the “end of the world.” It was symbolic for me, and strangely it was the animal Reepacheep in C.S. Lewis who was compelled to go to Aslan’s land on his own that inspired me... So, after having a good breakfast, I set out walking toward the coast and having so many days under my belt of hiking, I was in good shape but overconfident! For the way from France to Santiago, I had maps and a guidebook that helped me know where I was most of the time. For the last three days, I figured, what could possibly go wrong? It’s just three more days an 90 kilometers. Easy. Well, I took the wrong path and on the second day ended up hiking about 52 kilometers, or 32 miles. But about halfway there my two liters of water ran out. This was in July and hot and dry country, and I had met no one on the trail because, well, I was on the wrong path.

I started feeling frustrated that I ran out of water, and after so long had not found any towns or rest stops to get water. I was dry and started feeling afraid. I wasn’t worried about dying per se, but I knew that I was in trouble if I didn’t find water soon. I prayed for strength to go on. The path I was on took me down into a forest glen where there was a small chapel. I called out to see if anyone was there but got no response. But then the most amazing thing happened. There on a wall next to the chapel was a full water bottle. It had not been opened, and I called out again thinking maybe there was someone nearby who had left it there to explore around the chapel. No response. So, I drank that water in a few gulps. It was enough to get me another few kilometers along the path where I found a spring that the local farmers had tapped and created a beautiful rest stop for their animals and lost pilgrims! I filled my two-liter water camel-back and eventually made it to a coastal town, took off my pack and literally fell into the ocean with relief. The following day I was able to do a short 10 kilometer walk to Finnestre...

Months later, when I was back in Paris, one of Kim’s friends, Jill Geoffrion, a PhD who is one of the world’s renown labyrinth scholars and spiritual director, asked me, so what did you learn from that experience, Scott? She helped me realize that for me it was a parable of the rest of my life. That as I come to the end of life, I will come across territory that I haven’t traveled before, and it may feel like I’m lost. A map is helpful, but that no matter what, God will provide what I really need, and be with me to the end of my journey.

Friends, I encourage you to be open to the way of the Labyrinth in this season of Lent. Take time to walk and listen. God speaks to us in many ways. There’s no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth. We have a map, and though we are definitely in uncharted territory, God is with us and will provide what we really need. Let’s take this Lenten season to get walking and learn the Way of the Labyrinth.

*In the name of the One who is the way the truth and the life. Amen.*