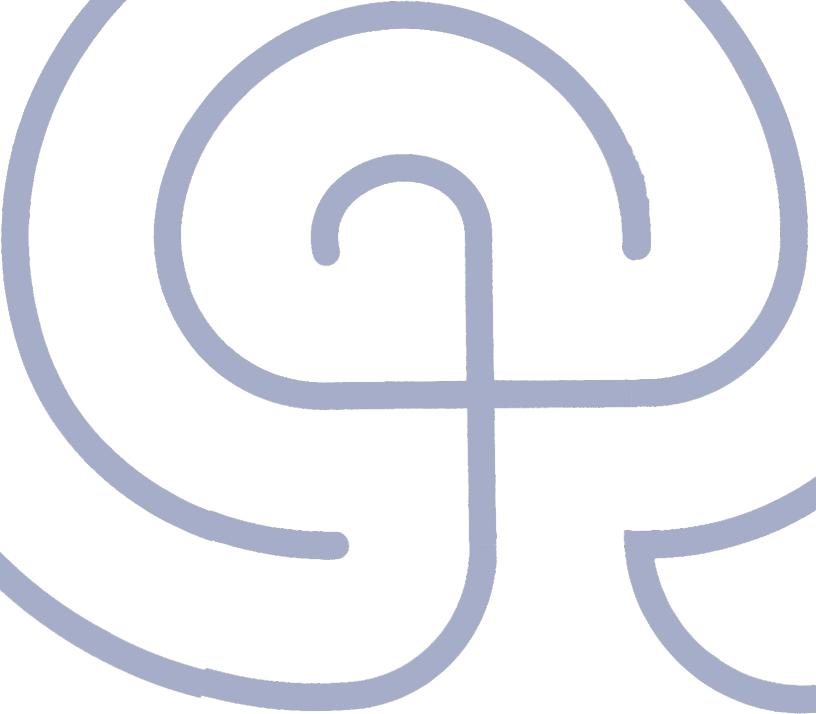


# WALKING THE LABYRINTH



A GUIDE TO GET YOU STARTED



# WHAT IS A LABYRINTH?

There are many ways to walk a labyrinth. Please use this little booklet to learn and experiment with labyrinth walks. Know that none of the methods suggested here are the “right” or “correct” way of walking a labyrinth. Your experience while walking it will be singular, as you are singular, unique and beloved by God.

**St. Stephen’s also hosts labyrinth walks on the fourth Thursday of every month, at 7:00 PM in the sanctuary.**

A labyrinth isn’t a maze. It has a single circuitous path that leads into its center, and that then leads you back out into the world. Lauren Artress, author of *Walking a Sacred Path*, writes: “The labyrinth is a spiritual tool meant to awaken us to the deep rhythm that unites us to ourselves and to the Light that calls from within. In surrendering to the winding path, the soul finds healing and wholeness.” To walk the labyrinth is to journey to the center of existence. Not a solo journey, but one we walk with God.

St. Stephen’s labyrinth is a variation on the “classical labyrinth,” of the kind that could be found throughout the ancient world and dates back at least 3,500 years. The design of these labyrinths evolved out of the spiral unfolding of natural things - think fiddle heads on ferns or shoots unfurling from seeds. Appropriate for our space, with its plants and windows that look out on the natural world.

# BEGINNING YOUR LABYRINTH WALK

The spiritual path of Western Christianity is often thought of as consisting of three primary stages: purgation, illumination, and union. You can think of your labyrinth walk as following this framework.

## Purgation

To walk into the labyrinth is to surrender control. You are on this path and no other until you reach the center and then come back out again. To purge is to release, to quieten, to empty out. Entering the labyrinth requires a willing surrender of the needs, wants, anxieties, and ambitions that can create such a clamor in our souls.

## Illumination

The center of the labyrinth is a place to pause in prayer, to discover clarity, to receive wisdom. St. John of the Cross describes this sense of illumination in this way:

*“Now that the faculties are no longer attached to the discursive mind or troubled by the spiritual anxiety that used to bind the soul, her interior delight flows more abundantly than it ever did before...without the labor of the intellect, she now finds within her the most serene and loving contemplation and spiritual sweetness.”*

## Union

To walk out of the labyrinth is to deepen your communion with the holy. The insights that you've gained are integrated into your everyday life. The compassion that you've felt can be brought into your day to day choices. Often, you will feel a certain freshness and a definite sense of hope on the outward path.



It may be that you experience something else when you walk the labyrinth, or that the mental model of the threefold path doesn't appeal to you. Please don't let this worry you. There are many ways to walk the labyrinth. The important thing is that you are here, in all your unique beauty, and are seeking a deeper appreciation of yourself, your world, and of God.

# WAYS TO WALK

There are many ways to approach a labyrinth walk. Here are just a few, many of them suggested by Lauren Artress:

## Gracious Attention

The passage through the labyrinth becomes a form of mindfulness. Pay attention to the sounds that surround you - the noise of the street, the rustle of leaves in the courtyard, the mechanical sounds of the building. The sounds of your own footsteps. Pay attention to the movement of your body. Pay attention to the play of sunlight or cloud over the windows and the floor. And pay close attention to whatever is happening within you. What emotions are you feeling? How is your body expressing those emotions? Can you be attentive without judging? Can you let images, memories, or thoughts move through your mind with out judgement or encumbrance?

## Discernment, or Asking a Question

Spend a few moments journaling your thoughts before you begin your walk, or share them with a friend. What unspoken questions are weighing on you? As you enter the labyrinth, don't look for a yes or no answer, but let the question live in you, in all of its complexity. Sometimes it helps to imagine many different outcomes to a choice you might make. If you do this, know that the actual outcome is

probably unknowable from the point of view of the present moment. Sometimes it helps just to listen to the question, and let it reveal undiscovered hopes and desires.

## Praying a Repetitive Word or Phrase

Repeating a word or phrase can calm the soul and give peace to the mind, especially in moments that are full of fear and anxiety. A line from a psalm or other passage of scripture can reveal deeper meanings with each repetition. As you walk, you simply say this word or phrase over and over again, either silently or out loud. One of the oldest repetitive prayers in Christianity is the Jesus Prayer. The traditional Jesus Prayer is this:

*Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*

One contemporary rendering of the prayer reads:

*O Jesus Christ, Creator of the Universe, fill my mind with your peace, and my heart with your compassion.*

## Lectio Divina, or Praying with Scripture

Lectio Divina is an ancient way of praying with a passage of scripture. It consists of four movements:

- *Lectio*: Read the passage slowly. Then read it again.
- *Meditatio*: Pay attention to thoughts, feelings, memories, and images that arise in your mind.

- *Oratio*: Reply to God. This is what we usually do when we pray, and most people are used to talking to God.
- *Contemplatio*: Rest in God. This is prayer without words, and really without thoughts. Contemplative prayer, when time seems suspended and you're simply aware of the room around you and the vast, moving universe enveloping you.

It is probably best to sit with the scripture and read it through slowly at least two times before entering the labyrinth. This is the *lectio* movement as it's described above. Then enter the labyrinth for the next three movements. You might find that you pass through all three movements before you reach the labyrinth's center. You might find that you spend the entire walk in the *meditatio* movement and only enter *oratio* and *contemplatio* when you're about to step out of the labyrinth. Whatever happens is meant to happen, and there is no need to insist on a rigid schedule for the four movements.

## Intercessory and Petitionary Prayer

Intercessory prayer brings the needs of others before God. Petitionary prayer brings our own needs. Both are simply ways of asking for help from the divine. There is no specific language or formula for this. It is simply a cry from the heart, and a way of building compassion towards both other people and yourself.

## Body Prayer

When you walk the labyrinth, you are engaging your body. Sometimes it is enough simply to focus on the body. Christians believe that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. Divinity itself sought a body to inhabit. And the divine will express itself through our bodies in ways that are sometimes surprising.

Many people walk the labyrinth barefoot, or in their stocking feet. Some don't walk at all, but dance, or skip, or crawl. If it doesn't bother the other people who are walking, or if you are walking alone, it is more than appropriate to play music while you're traversing the labyrinth, as a way of enticing body expression.



After you walk, you might want to spend some time reflecting on your experience, or journaling about it. We invite you to sit in one of the chairs near the St. Stephen mosaic in the northeast corner of the sanctuary. Feel welcome to light a candle. Write in a journal, or simply sit in prayer, allowing yourself to integrate your experience of walking the labyrinth into your spiritual understanding.