

The Powerful Use of Symbol and Metaphor in the Judeo-Christian Tradition:

Rich Symbolism in Labyrinth Prayer¹

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The labyrinth is an ancient tool for prayer that has only recently been rediscovered by Christians. In the past few decades, labyrinth prayer has been growing in popularity, especially in North America. While its meaning and purpose are ambiguous to modern day users, thus rendering the labyrinth open to many different interpretations and uses, Christians use labyrinth walks as a way to seek God in prayer while using their whole bodies.

We know that Christians created a unique labyrinth pattern for the floor of the nave in the Chartres Cathedral in France in about 1200 A.D. (This is the pattern that appears on the floor of the Faith, Hope, and Love Chapel at Myanmar Institute of Theology.) However, we lack the needed historical documents to know for sure how the Christians in Chartres used the labyrinth in worship and for personal prayer. Thus, Christians who choose to make use of it today are left to create their own meaning and value. How shall we best do that?

Before trying to answer the question of the use and value of the labyrinth as a prayer tool, it might be helpful for us to first think about the powerful use of symbol and metaphor in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a backdrop to our reflection. Then, afterward, I will offer a few comments on the rich symbolism of labyrinths and on the many possibilities for metaphor found in the experience of walking them. I will also be making a few suggestions for how the Holy Spirit might use a labyrinth walk to draw us closer to God and to teach us more about ourselves as pilgrims on our spiritual journeys.

Powerful symbols and metaphors in the Judeo-Christian tradition

Symbol and metaphor are very important to human thinking, experience, and communication. They stimulate our imagination and serve as tools to enrich our ability to understand and interpret our experiences in life. In our relationship with God, they help us to grasp and remember what is most important in our faith and faith experience. Thus, we find the use of symbol and metaphor frequently in Scripture and in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Here are a few examples of these.

1. The Exodus

The Exodus experience for ancient Israel was an actual historical event whereby God delivered Israel from slavery Egypt (Exodus-Deuteronomy). For Jews and Christians, the concrete, physical experience in history of being

¹ *This article is based on a lecture given to the faculty and staff of Myanmar Institute of Theology, June 1, 2012.*

delivered from slavery has served as a symbol for God's salvation and faithfulness to those who trust in the Lord. On a spiritual level, the term "exodus" becomes a metaphor for God's deliverance from captivity to sin.

2. Moses

In the Hebrew tradition, Moses was the Savior figure for ancient Israel, even though the Torah is clear that it was the Lord who delivered Israel from Egypt. For Christians, Jesus is the Savior of humanity, likened to Moses, only greater. (Hebrews 3) The song of Moses is equated with the song of the Lamb, giving praise and honor to the Lord God. (Revelation 15:3-4)

3. Tabernacle and Temple

In ancient Israel, God dwelt in the tabernacle and in the Temple; people worshipped God there. For Christians, the body is now the temple of God—a holy place, in which the Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3). In neo-platonic fashion, the writer of Hebrews referred to a heavenly Temple that is the grand master design for what ancient Israel was instructed to build. (See, e.g., Hebrews 8.)

4. Wilderness experience

Those delivered from Egypt were prevented from entering the Promised Land directly due to their sin (principally, disbelief), but also learned to trust in God for their provision in the wilderness. Paul refers to ancient Israel's experience as examples for us, drawing parallels to baptism (into Christ versus Moses), to spiritual food (Lord's supper versus manna and water provided miraculously by God), and to the dangers of idolatry. (1 Corinthians 10)

5. The explicit instruction to create symbols of faith

In one of the most important passages in the Torah, known as the *Shema* based on the command "to hear" (and obey) these words, Moses sums up the heart of the Jewish monotheistic faith. He commands Israel to love the one God, and then he tells them to create symbols and rituals to be practiced at home and everywhere they went in order to help them to remember their faith.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

This teaching from Deuteronomy led to the creation of phylacteries (small leather boxes that contained portions of the Hebrew Scriptures that were strapped on the heads of Jewish men when praying) that were still in use in Jesus day. (Matthew 23:5) Thus we have an example where teaching in Scripture led to the creation of concrete symbols and rituals as ways to express one's faith and devotion.

6. "Lifting up" the means of our salvation

Moses lifted up a snake for Israel to look at in order to be delivered from the plague. (Numbers 21:8-9) John references this wilderness experience (the lifting up of a snake) as an analogy for how Christ must be lifted up (on the cross). All those who look to Jesus Christ in faith will be saved from their sins and will receive eternal life. (John 3:13-17)

Today, the cross is recognized by Christians everywhere as a symbol for the death of Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. In its historical, concrete usage, the cross was an instrument of torture; but Christians have reinterpreted it and given it Christian content in ways that have tremendous spiritual value for followers of Christ.

7. The symbol of the fish

A fish was simple basic reality for sustaining life in the ancient world, yet Christians felt free to imbue the word and the shape of the fish with spiritual meaning. They used the fish as a covert way to identify themselves to one another as Christians when they were afraid of persecution. The spelling of the word for fish in Greek is IΧΘΥΣ, and each letter stood for the first letter in the phrase, Jesus Christ Son of God (our) Savior. At times, they would simply draw the fish on the ground, and the symbol became a way of identifying themselves to one another as well as a rallying point for fellow Christians.

8. Bread and Wine

We hardly need to say much at all about how the Church from the beginning has used bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. No matter what one's beliefs are concerning the actual presence of Christ in the elements, the Church has taken rather ordinary elements of bread and wine and held them as the most important symbols in the Christian faith to represent the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. (I Corinthians 11) The practice of breaking the bread and sharing the cup in a ritual format has tremendous symbolic and spiritual benefit to those who participate from a place of faith and openness to the Holy Spirit.

Thus, Christians stand in a religious tradition that has made frequent use of symbol and metaphor in order to help fellow believers to better understand, remember, and live out their faith. We have taken concrete physical experiences—such as escaping from slavery and trekking through the wilderness—and common elements from life—such as snakes, a cross, bread, wine, and fish—and infused them with great meaning and practical spiritual purposes. Today, might the labyrinth be another symbol full of possibilities for Christians? Might a walk on a labyrinth create all sorts of metaphors that the Holy Spirit can use to strengthen our relationship with God?

The Labyrinth: Full of Possibilities for Symbols and Metaphors

We do not know the origins of the various labyrinth patterns (pathways that turn back on themselves, leading to a center space) that have been found in various spots

around the world, some of which predate Jesus Christ by at least a thousand years.² Yet it seems clear that human beings have been and continue to be drawn to them for spiritual purposes. Christians, too, have adopted labyrinth patterns as tools for prayer, and have given them Christian content, regardless of what may have been original intention of their creators.

Those who designed the Chartres Cathedral pattern did more than appropriate someone else's creation. The builders crafted the proportions of the labyrinth so the design itself would speak of Christ and the Christian faith. One suggested interpretation is that the labyrinth represents God's victory over Evil and Christ's victory over Satan.

Today, the labyrinth, with its winding paths and cherished center as destination, can easily symbolize one's life journey, in general, and spiritual journey, in particular. As such, biblically informed walkers will find a natural resonance to the journey motif found in numerous places in Scripture. For example, Abraham's journey from his homeland to Canaan (Genesis 12) came to symbolize obedience to God and trust in God's promises (see Hebrews 11:8-10). Jesus' mission was characterized as a journey "on the way" to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). There he offered his life as the ultimate act of sacrificial service and obedience to the will of God, thus exemplifying devotion to God in congruence with his teaching to his disciples. (See Mark 8:31-35.)

Journeying, then, often symbolizes living by faith and faithfulness in Scripture. Thus walking the labyrinth can be a symbolic reenactment of one's own journey as well as a way to embody the inner movement that has characterized or is currently characterizing our pursuit of God and salvation. The walk also gives rise to numerous metaphorical interpretations of our experience. Consider the following examples:

- As we twist back and forth on the labyrinth, we are reminded of the nonlinear nature of our own life journey, including how we have sought God and salvation from different angles through all the vicissitudes of life.
- The 180-degree turns that one encounters repeatedly when walking the labyrinth remind us of the recurring call to repentance in our lives. God's ways are not our ways, and the spiritual journey is one of surrendering to the will of God.
- Continually changing directions on the labyrinth also reminds us that we need to learn to look at our experiences in life from fresh perspectives, and to let God reorient our thinking. For example, the mature Christian must learn to look to God to use our suffering and life's experiences to transform us, and to purify us, so that we may become more and more like Christ. (See, e.g., Romans 12:2.)

In other words, labyrinth walks often work as a "mirror" to something we are experiencing in our life. That is, the thoughts, feelings, and reactions we have while

² See "The First Labyrinths," by Jeff Saward, one of the world's leading experts on labyrinths: <http://www.labyrinthos.net/firstlabs.html>.

walking may be identical to, say, some frustration, fear, anger, confusion, or some other aspect of our everyday life. When we see the parallel to our lives, sometimes we gain new insight into how we might better respond to whatever is happening.

As an example of how the labyrinth may function as a mirror, we may feel that we are wandering in the wilderness while we are walking, and then may suddenly realize that in our everyday life we feel like we are drifting or fear that God has abandoned us. The security of the pattern and the certainty of reaching the center remind us that we do not need to fear getting lost in life, and that we can count on God to safely lead us all the way “home”.

Thus, in walking the labyrinth, we can learn many things about ourselves and our relationship with God, and then pray from our hearts or about whatever comes to mind. As we are open to the metaphors that are suggested to us as we walk and pray, new thoughts, feelings, and prayers will often emerge naturally and through the help of the Holy Spirit.

Intellectually, our prayer walk may spark theological questions as well. For example, winding back and forth on the labyrinth may lead us to ask:

1. How do we seek God in life’s journey?
2. How do we pray?
3. How does God work in our lives for good?
4. How does God care for us and provide for us along the way?
5. What does it mean to persevere until the end?
6. What does it mean to walk by faith?
7. What is happening in our life that we can learn from that may help us to grow as people and to be changed by God’s Spirit at work in us?

Prayer walks have also inspired me to prayer for others as well as for myself. I may walk all the way to the center or all the way from the center back out of the labyrinth praying for one specific concern or person. When walking the Chartres style labyrinth, the six “pedals” in the center circle remind me that there are different individuals in my life who mean a great deal to me. Each deserves and needs individual attention from me from time to time. I often will take a moment to stand in one pedal and pray exclusively for one person or area of concern; then I will move to another pedal and pray for someone else.

Conclusion

The labyrinth holds no power of its own, and there is nothing magical about it. Rather, it is a creative tool for prayer that facilitates our thinking about our faith and experiencing God in fresh ways. From a faith perspective, labyrinths can serve as a rich symbol of the spiritual journey. Further, labyrinth prayer easily elicits meaningful metaphors relevant to our life and relationship with God.

When we walk, reflect, and pray on the labyrinth, God is likely to use the experience to draw us closer to God and to help us to see aspects of our lives that we might not

be able to see otherwise. We may be stimulated to think more creatively or deeply about God or some aspect of our life. We may also be moved to think or pray in new ways about our relationships with others or for their wellbeing. No matter what, as we open ourselves to God and listen to whatever Christ might want to say or reveal to us, the Holy Spirit can use our labyrinth prayer experience to transform us inwardly in ways that change our lives outwardly.