

PILGRIMAGE AS A MEANS OF
SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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ABSTRACT

PILGRIMAGE AS A MEANS OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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The purpose of this project was to enhance the formation of the spiritual lives of the people of *Rockledge United Methodist Church* by engaging in the ancient practice of pilgrimage. A person on pilgrimage, according to Dr. Lauren Artress in *Walking the Sacred Path*, engages in a three-fold path of purgation, illumination and union as they seek an ever-deepening sense of union with the Divine.¹ By encouraging persons to be open to their stories of faith and reflective of their own spiritual condition, *Rockledge United Methodist Church* sought to deepen its capacity for spiritual journey in the company of other traveling companions, thereby we had hoped that we might move closer to God and each other.

The narrative of concern, which sparked this project, was the sense that this congregation wanted to be vital in ministry and grow close to God but it seemed that every time they began to make progress in the right direction, something came along and knocked them off their path.

The theological and biblical foundations for the project focused on the nature of relationships in the context of pilgrimage experiences and we explored them in the layered stories from those who participated in the pilgrimage events. The research methodology included two opportunities to practice pilgrimage: a labyrinth experience

¹ Lauren Artress. *Walking the Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 29-30.

on campus during Lent and a trip to a local beach.

Most of the people that comprised the congregation of *Rockledge United Methodist Church* took advantage of these opportunities to seek God. God moved among the participants in various ways and most shared amazing stories of divine encounter in their reflections. As a result of this project, the congregation now wishes to keep the practice of pilgrimage alive. We are exploring ways of having the labyrinth back during others seasons of the year or even having a permanent labyrinth installation located somewhere on campus. We are exploring additional trips to the beach and to other close by places to intentionally seek God.

In the narrative landscape of the project, the pastor-researcher and the Local Advisory Committee discovered connections between the pastoral, personal and congregational journeys that converged into a newfound understanding that God is with us no matter what.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I arrived at *Rockledge United Methodist Church* in July of 2015. I was eager to begin a new appointment and excited at the potential of ministry in a new context. I read the church profile and expected to find a healthy and vital congregation of about three hundred worshippers. My first Sunday found seventy-eight in the pews. In my past I have found church profiles to be less than accurate so I thought it might have been a data-entry issue. As I began to unpack my office and set up my space at the church, I began to hear from various church members how difficult the past few years had been for them. They shared their stories of hurt and heartache. They voiced their frustrations over the fact that much of the congregation had departed in the months leading up to to my arrival. They expressed their hopes in the future and that somehow they could become vital again. I heard many individuals who put the blame for this situation on some of the clergy who preceded me. I also heard plenty of congregants who praised some of the previous pastors. Along with that I also heard some who were sentimental about a desire to return to bygone days now romantically idealized in their stories. On the surface I experienced a people who acted as if they had it all together, but under the surface there seemed to be grief and bitterness. As Rachel Evans, a church systems writer said, “We pretend we don’t need help and we act like we aren’t afraid.”¹ I sensed there was more to their story. As the new pastor, I tried to listen deeply to these narratives and to be present

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sundays: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2015), 70.

with them in both their joys and their sorrows.

My District Superintendent had grouped clergy within geographical proximity into what he called *peer groups* in an effort to provide accountability and support to the pastors. He also hoped that these relationships would produce opportunities to combine resources to better benefit the community. There were seven clergy in the group to which I was assigned. I went to the first meeting and immediately everyone wanted to know how I was doing and how things were going at the church. I shared with them the disconnect of the church profile and what I had experienced so far and also some of the stories that I was hearing among some of the church members. The facilitator of the peer group said, “You have a tough job ahead of you because you are following *Wreck-It Ralph*.²



Illustration 1.1: Movie poster

² Rich Moore, dir. *Wreck-It Ralph*. Walt Disney Studios. 2012. Arcade-game character Wreck-It Ralph is tired of always being the "bad guy" and losing to his "good guy" opponent, Fix-It Felix. Finally, after decades of seeing all the glory go to Felix, Ralph decides to take matters into his own hands. He sets off on a game-hopping trip to prove that he has what it takes to be a hero. However, while on his quest, Ralph accidentally unleashes a deadly enemy that threatens the entire arcade.

It seems that I have made a career out of following people who have had a tough time before me, but this statement really caught my attention. I asked him to tell me more and he said, “Everything ‘Ralph’ touches he destroys. I do not think it was malicious; he is just not a healthy person and he needs help. We hope and pray that he is getting the help he needs but you have inherited a mess. You are going to spend a season just picking up the pieces and starting over.”

At the end of the meeting we all prayed for each other and our respective ministries. We prayed specifically for “Ralph” and then they prayed for me and the church that healing and vitality would return to the congregation. I left that meeting stunned, not only at the way that other clergy had described my predecessor, but also at how they named the struggles in my new appointment in such a brutally honest way. I climbed into the seat of my car and I felt a flood of emotions. I was angry that the church profile gave me false information. I felt blindsided. My heart sank as I began to reflect on the stories from the congregation that I had already heard. I felt more sadness in the weeks that followed because more stories emerged from the congregation which directly pointed out the depth of despair that they faced. It was grief; it was lament. Some were angry, others in denial. Still others were bargaining that either I could help fix the situation or if not, they would ask the District Superintendent to appoint someone else to this charge. In my years of ministry I have helped churches in need of turn-around and visioning but this is the first time that I had to deal with what seemed like very deep pain or grief on a congregational level. I began to wonder about how we might move forward. Consequently, I spent much time in prayer in order to seek direction from God.

Introduction of the project

I sensed that understanding of the circumstances of *Rockledge United Methodist Church* might enable this congregation to rediscover God's purpose for them during trying times. I proposed a research project that might evaluate the impact of a notion of pilgrimage as a means of spiritual formation for the *Rockledge United Methodist* congregation. Their negative and hurtful experiences happened at the church. In other words, their pain had an address. It was my hope that a project on pilgrimage might help us to heal and grow in a healthy way. Most readings I found on the subject of pilgrimage use that concept as a metaphor. I think pilgrimage can be more than a metaphor; it can be a real tool to help people grow in their spiritual formation. I hypothesized that the act of physically traveling to another place might help us reconnect to God. Then once we came to terms that God is with us *out there*, we might begin to realize that God has been with us all along in our everyday lives. Like Jacob's dream at Bethel I hoped we might become spiritually aware enough to understand that, "Surely the Lord is in the place and [we] did not know it!" (Genesis 28:16).

There is a term for someone who like me finds themselves faced with the task of ministering to a congregation in the aftermath of the betrayal of pastoral trust. We are called the "after-pastor."³ While I agree with the premise of this term, I want to flip the metaphor. I am the before-pastor. God is always at work and we participate in God's eternal now even in our woundedness. In my experience it seems like God is always out ahead of us already at work and we spend our entire lives trying to catch up to what God already has in motion. Therefore our best days are ahead of us. A before-pastor

³ Beth Ann Gaede, *When a Congregation Is Betrayed* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 53.

functions more as a first-follower.⁴ I want to be a minister who points the way to God who is always on the move forward and I want to encourage others to come and join in the dance.⁵

I hypothesized that pilgrimage might be a creative disconnect from the ordinary in order to steal away to a different context for a time so that we may intentionally focus on God and the condition of our souls. Pilgrimage is a time of liminality. Liminality is often thought of as a threshold or moving from and place of relative certainty to a new way of being where we are no longer what we were, but we are not sure of what we will become as a result of the process of travel and encounter. We serve a living God and as such, every day is a pilgrimage. We are all on a journey back to the Divine. That said, the experience of travel has the ability to change us. It can open our minds to new possibilities and can heighten our senses of awareness thereby allowing us a greater opportunity to experience God in a new way.

The importance of pilgrimage became evident to me when I had the privilege to travel to Israel and experience the holiest places in all of Christianity. That experience changed the way that I read scripture. What once appeared black and white on a page now come to me in full color. Contemplation also has helped me learn that you do not need to travel halfway around the world to experience God; we have access to God all around us. As Church theorist, Diana Butler Bass has said, “The church [building] is not

⁴ Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

⁵ For a link to the video mentioned in Sweet’s book, *I Am a Follower*, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW8amMCVAJQ> . Viewed on September 26, 2017.

the only sacred space; the world is profoundly sacred as well.”⁶ If this is true, and I believe that it is, then pilgrimage is active contemplation. Pilgrimage is intentionally going on a journey with the intent of encountering God and self in a new way. This could happen by sitting outside or taking a walk. One could take a short trip to a retreat center or spend time walking a prayer labyrinth. Certainly big adventures like Israel can be thought of as a pilgrimage, but there are ways to travel toward God that could be accessible for everyone.

⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World, a Spiritual Revolution* (New York: Harper One, 2015). 23.

CHAPTER 2

NARRATIVE OF OPPORTUNITY AND CONCERN

This is the story of *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. This is a church with fifty years of history that sensed that it might be coming to the end of its life unless something is done. *Rockledge United Methodist Church's* story is one that profoundly connects with the larger story of the Christian mainline church in North America, many of which are in decline. People who identify as spiritual but not religious (whom some refer to as the *nones* and *dones*) are seeking other ways to connect with the holy.¹ This has created a seismic shift in the Church.

It is difficult to stand back and objectively look at a situation when one is in the middle of what seems to be turmoil. Many pundits, philosophers, and theologians look to postmodernity as the key to understanding the current condition of the Church. In his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* philosopher James Smith argues "that postmodernity is often an intensification of modernity, particularly with respect to notions of freedom [and] the use of technology..."² These profound philosophical and sociological shifts seems to have contributed to a sense of drifting or being lost. In other words, society has moved forward and the church seems to be at a loss as to how to engage this new emerging culture. It is the sense of aimless drifting that serves as a

¹ James Farrer. "Six Insights About 'Nones' and 'Dones.'" Accessed February 19, 2018. <https://www.biblicalleadership.com/blogs/six-insights-about-nones-and-dones/>

² James K. A. Smith. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 26.

primary metaphor as this chapter explores the context of *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. It was this crisis that was the theological motivation that drove the concept, execution, and expectations of this Doctor of Ministry project at *Rockledge United Methodist Church*.

Rockledge United Methodist Church came into being in 1965. It was the height of the space race and the central Atlantic coastline of Florida was booming. The area became home to affluent white academics whose goal was to land someone on the moon before the decade came to an end. In general, our bishops place United Methodist Churches a fair distance from each other. This is intentional in order to avoid ministry overlap and competition between churches. Today, however, in the aftermath of the space race, there are five United Methodist Churches within a fifteen-mile radius of each other. During the space race, when the population was booming, there was need for this kind of churching. But today we find that we are over-churched. Fifty years later, the area is seems to be in a general pattern of decline. The ups and downs of the local economy are closely tied to what happens at NASA. It was better during the Space Shuttle program, but this area has never enjoyed a boom like it experienced in the mid to late 1960's.

The town of Rockledge is almost all residential. It is a community of neighborhoods designed for the scientists and engineers of NASA to live close to work. In the fifty years of its existence, the community has slowly changed. There is now greater ethnic and economic diversity and the area has become more and more economically depressed. *Rockledge United Methodist Church* is no longer a church of scientists and engineers. They are now generally working-class people who appear to be

one or two paychecks away from homelessness. Poverty is becoming more obvious and the community is aging. The affluent families have moved over to the other side of I-95 to the communities of Viera and Suntree while Rockledge continues to experience economic decline.

When I arrived at this appointment they had just celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the church. On my first day in the office, the church secretary and church treasurer gave me a tour of the campus. The first thing they showed me was a timeline that the history committee had made for the recent fiftieth year celebration.

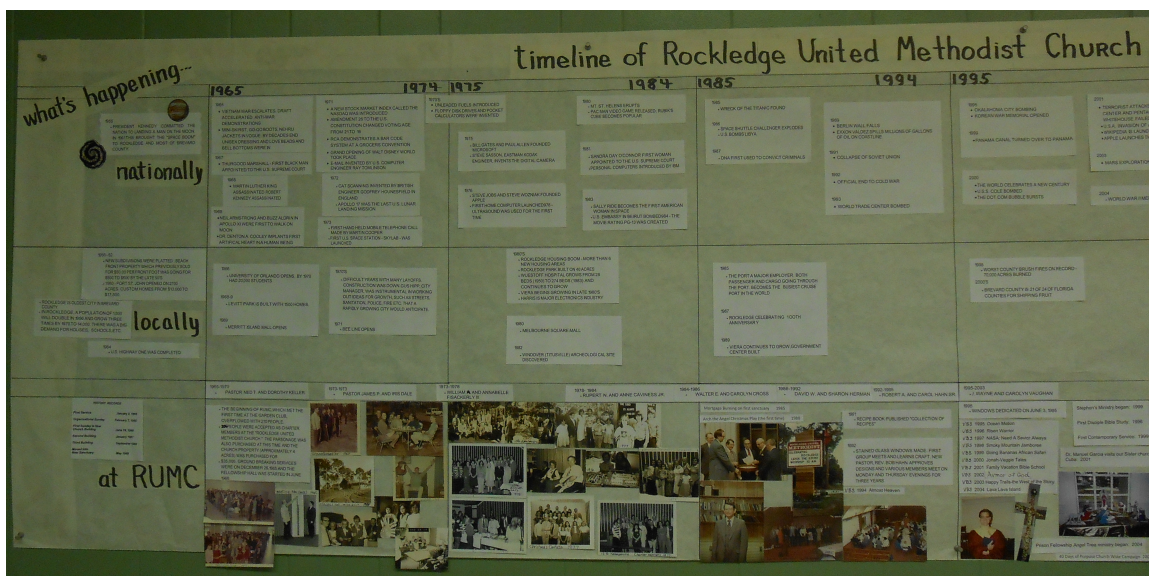


Illustration 2.1: Church Timeline

They had divided it into three sections, the history of the church on the bottom, the history of the local community in the middle (which also included some state history) and the history of the nation on the top. Each line was stacked on top of the other. When I saw this I understood that this church’s identity is closely tied to what happens in the government. They are proudly patriotic and there is even a Congressman who is a

faithful member of the church. What happens in Washington, DC and Tallahassee still has a direct effect on this community, though maybe not to the extent that it was in the late 1960's.

As I began to settle into my new appointment people began to share with me about the history of the church. They proudly told stories of grand-days-gone-by and some were brave enough to share about the not-so-good-times too. I was impressed to learn that the church leadership had began a process of revitalization a few months before my arrival and they asked me for my input in the process. They were being so nice to ask me but at that point I could not find the silverware or coffee pot in the sea of boxes still be unpacked at the parsonage let alone lend thought or guidance to a group of people whose names I was just beginning to remember correctly. So I asked if I might implement a process that would involve me meeting with all the groups of the church to ask questions and to learn about this new appointment. I hoped that this might help me get to know the congregation and the results of the process might give guidance to the revitalization efforts that were already in motion. They agreed to this.

I call them *Ezekiel meetings*. While the Hebrew people were in exile, the prophet Ezekiel described in great detail what the temple would look like after they returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple (chapters 40-48). It was an exercise in looking into the future with hope. It was a theological statement that God is not done with us and our best days are ahead of us. In a sermon I told the church that we stand on the shoulders of faithful saints who for fifty years had laid the foundations for us today. God planted us here and God knew the trials and struggles we would face in the future. We believe that God is not done with us.

In my experience, God's will for a congregation does not usually come from a directive through a clergyperson, but it can bubble up from within the congregation. I asked everyone to participate in an Ezekiel meeting. I visited small groups (such as Sunday School classes and Bible study groups), the choir, the ushers, church leadership and even had a special staff meeting to seek input. We set up opportunities for people who were not part of a small group or in leadership to come and lend their voice to the process. Almost everyone in the church participated. In the meeting I asked four questions: What do we do well? What could we do better? What do we need to stop doing? If money was no object and you had a magic wand and could make anything happen, what would that be? There were a lot of responses to the first two questions but very few suggestions for stopping anything and almost nothing that came to the mind of the people in regards to dreaming about what could be.

We distilled all the comments and grouped them into like responses. As we presented our findings to the church one lay leader said, "Once we were vital, but now we seem to have lost our way." Another said, "It looks like that over our history, we have ups and downs. Just when we start to gain momentum, something comes along and knocks us down." The sadness and despair in the room was noticeable. I asked them to tell me more. "What's been going on in the last few years? Why are we so sad? Our best days are ahead of us!" In a moment of vulnerability they shared how over the past five years the church had been in what they perceive as severe decline. There was severe decline in the two years that "Ralph" was the pastor, but looking back they saw that there was slow but barely noticeable decline that had began toward the end of the appointment of the pastor that preceded "Ralph." Looking back at the church data for attendance and

membership confirmed their story. Slow decline had indeed started five years prior to my arrival, but in the two years of “Ralph’s” leadership, literally half the church left because of conflict with him. Membership records confirm that just over fifty percent of the church left in the twenty-four months prior to my appointment to this church. This was a huge blow to the church. Their finances were in a mess. Money was tight. Almost all ministries to the community had stopped. Lifelong friends found other places to worship and the remaining congregation found itself in a place of grief and pain.

“Ralph” was removed from active service by the executive committee of the Annual Conference. He was given a leave of absence because he needed help and he needed to be close to his relatives. I am thankful that the *United Methodist Church* has resources to help clergy who are in crisis or need assistance. Many at *Rockledge United Methodist Church* laid the blame for the church’s decline squarely at the feet of “Ralph.” Some felt that the decline had started before “Ralph” was appointed to *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. Some others recognized that the reality of the decline might also be the fault of the congregation, but few were courageous enough to admit it.

And so I entered into ministry along side these people. I have to admit that it did feel like everything had been wrecked. The Pastor’s office was totally cleaned out. I do not know if it was “Ralph’s” doing or some in the church or perhaps a combination of both. What I do know is that I have had to work with staff and lay leaders to reestablish policies and procedures all over again. Some days I feel like I am “Fix it, Felix,” the counterpart to “Ralph” in the movie, but in reality I was not focused on fixing things. In addition to spending most of my time sitting on the mourning bench with my congregation, I was also aware of my own grief and brokenness. I sensed the pain and

grief of the congregation and that they need some kind of healing but I was also aware that I was in need of healing and renewal too. In my experience, dealing with grief and pain is an ongoing process. It feels that the aggregate of my grief experiences are linked together somehow. Being with people who are going through similar painful experiences can wreck me, and present circumstances can stir up emotions that in some cases go back years. One church member told me, “We just don’t sense the Holy Spirit here anymore.” The pain of this congregation happened at the church. Their pain has an address and it is the same location as where they try to worship. How hard it is to see God in the middle of confusion and grief! And yet there seems to be an overwhelming desire to seek out and serve God.

From the Ezekiel meetings I heard over and over again about how they remembered that the ministries of the church were once vital and alive but now they seem to have lost their way. This loss of ministry and vitality was confirmed for me when I went to the Viera Government Center to have my address changed on my driver’s license. The lady at the window asked me what brought us to Rockledge. I told her that I was the new pastor of the Methodist Church in Rockledge. She inquired, “There is a Methodist Church in Rockledge? Where is it?” Our church is on the main road running north and south through town. There is a big sign. The buildings are large with impressive stained glass and a steeple. It is arguably the biggest church structure on the street and not easy to miss yet the community does not know about the people called Methodist who faithfully gather and worship each Sunday at 1935 South Fiske Boulevard. Psalm 137 captures the mood of this new appointment:

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,

when we remembered you, O Zion.

As for our harps, we hung them up
on the trees in the midst of that land.

For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,
and our oppressors called for mirth: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

How shall we sing the LORD'S song upon an alien soil?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget its skill.

Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

CHAPTER 3

In the summer of 2016, I worked with two other Doctor of Ministry classmates in the methods of research class to put together a paper articulating the stories of our context. We were also to assist each other to mine for a nugget that might serve as the foundation of each of our respective research projects. At this point I had no idea what my project would involve but I could not shake the reality of the grief of this congregation and the circumstances that led them to that point. In class I shared the story about “Ralph.” I talked about the severe membership decline in recent months and how the church feels stuck, like ship that has run aground. I remember our methods professors who said that sometimes you find a project and sometimes a project finds you. Since I had no idea how to proceed, I hoped and prayed that a project would find me.

At first, I could not see a connection between the stories, and it took me some time to realize that what I was hearing from the congregation was in reality a well-rehearsed story about trouble and heartache told by the members of *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. First of all, our stories define us and the stories we tell become our reality. Secondly, narrative research theologians Carl Savage and William Presnell identify a well-rehearsed story churches tell about themselves as the “defining, dominant discourse.”¹ This narrative is the air that members and their pastors breathe, defining not what is, but what the congregation perceives automatically. However, embedded in this

¹ Carl E. Savage and William B. Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 79.

dominant discourse, a “latent, more functional, faithful, and hopeful story” waits to be noticed: a “shadow script.”² The word shadow in this sense involves a *waiting-in-the-wings* notion of hope, rather than any connection with relative darkness and malevolence.

Gathering the narratives of the church through the Ezekiel meetings, I felt somewhat like Moses taking notice of the burning bush in the desert. The very act of taking notice and gathering narratives is a form of “turning aside” (Exodus 3:3-4). Turning aside involves both seeing and hearing. Placing the narratives of the church together provided the power to reinterpret what Savage and Presnell called “problem-saturated” stories in order to possibly discover and reimagine an emerging “preferred story” of hope.³

But what hope could emerge from a story of a declining church, an empty fellowship hall, and a wounded congregation? For one thing, there are other ways to tell (and interpret) these stories. Just the acts of letting everyone tell the story from their perspective showed that the story is not a solid thing. Everyone has his or her own take on the situation and because of this, there is a necessarily certain amount of collective uncertainty in the dominant narrative. This can create space for new interpretations of hope in the midst of dominant, typical narratives and their interpretations.⁴ In other words, the preferred narrative the church tells about itself is not solid and fixed in place. There is room for hope to emerge and for a new story to come about.

² Carl E. Savage and William B. Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 79.

³ Ibid., 82-83.

⁴ Ibid.

As we presented our papers in methods class, someone mentioned that perhaps the church needed a spiritual retreat. As I took notes and wrote down what everyone said, I put a star by this idea. When I reviewed my notes overnight I began to think about what it would take to get the church to a retreat center. What would be the logistics for such an endeavor? I even did a quick internet search for retreat centers close by the church. One site I found talked about taking a pilgrimage to the sea. Their proximity to the ocean was a major selling point for this particular center. However, what really caught my attention was the word, *pilgrimage*. I had taken a pilgrimage to Israel in 2013 and I began to wonder how traveling, even short distances, might be like a pilgrimage. The Israel trip was formational for me. Could travel, even short travel experiences that are pilgrimage oriented, that is spiritual in nature, lead to spiritual formation and renewal in others, specifically my congregation? In other words, would going on a spiritual trip help us? Would it create space, in the context of my new appointment, for God to be experienced in a more active or noticeable fashion? What would happen if we did this? My mind began to race at the possibilities and at that point I knew that the project idea had indeed actually found me.

I returned to class the next day eager to share my new insight and pose my questions to the group. The response from my classmates and even the professors was overwhelmingly positive. One classmate said, “Most of the time you hear about pilgrimage and it is used as a metaphor. The idea that you would really take a trip somewhere specifically to seek God is intriguing to me.” We brainstormed a few moments about what types of pilgrimages might be available to us. Some raised concerns that these trips would need to be close, cost-sensitive or free, and should be set

up so that anybody could participate. Dr. Daniel Kroger encouraged me to look up information on labyrinths as a possible method for people to experience an on-site pilgrimage of sorts. He encouraged me to do some research on the history of labyrinths and how they came to be utilized in several cathedrals in Europe and more recently in the United States. I had experienced a labyrinth before but I did not know much about them. At the time, I was resistant to ideas that kept my congregation on campus. I felt strongly that we needed to get away from the location that housed our pain.

Nevertheless, I felt encouraged that I had stumbled across the research nugget that I felt could become the nucleus for my research project. However, I knew that for the project to be successful in my context, it would need to resonate with the congregation as much as it had begun to resonate with me. Upon returning home from class, the time came for our monthly Administrative Council meeting. In that meeting I usually give a Pastor's Report. I told the story of my recent time at Drew. I also shared once again the outcomes of the Ezekiel meetings, which had articulated a strong desire to strive for vitality again. I told them about sharing our story with others at Drew and how the methods class had helped me begin to explore the idea of pilgrimage as a means to foster spiritual renewal. The council's response was positive and affirming. Some even seemed excited about the idea. They unanimously agreed to give this idea a try. I shared that the next step would be to form a Lay Advisory Committee to help guide and implement the project. This took some by surprise. "You mean that this is not something you do and we participate in if we want to?" I assured them that it would not be a project like that. In my short time as pastor to this congregation, I have learned that there are people who have been part of this congregation who have depth to their understanding of

this particular context. I was convinced that they would help guide the project. In addition, I immediately sensed a change in the energy change in the room that night. After the meeting one of the leaders came up to me and said, “What I like about you is that you do not force your ideas on us, but seek to work with us in new and creative ways. I feel like you are investing in us. Thank you for that.”

I was encouraged. I had hope that this project would bring us all closer to God. But I also expected that some would struggle with it. I prepared myself to accept negative results as well as positive ones. In the next few days I assembled together seven key leaders in the church to be the Lay Advisory Committee and we began to design the project.

Facing reality

“This project is bigger than *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. Our context is a laboratory that might help the general church. We are participating in something bigger than ourselves.” These were my opening words of the first Lay Advisory Committee meeting and the big picture that we kept in front of us as we entered into project design. As we started, I gave each member of the Lay Advisory Committee a copy of the project prospectus that I had submitted to Drew University as a kind of contract, working paper, or blueprint for the Doctor of Ministry Degree. We reviewed that document, especially the area about the narrative of opportunity and concern. I asked them if they thought the story I had revealed in that prospectus, captured the perceived reality of *Rockledge United Methodist Church* at this time. Is there anything we need to change or modify in the way we tell our story? They sat there in silence for a moment. I noticed that some hung their heads as they affirmed the reality of their story. In that moment, I noticed that

not only was there pain and grief at work here, but a certain amount of shame as well. In that moment I understood that as spiritual writer Henri Nouwen has written, “The only way out was also the way in, that only by entering into communion with human suffering can relief be found.”⁵ I took a moment to encourage them and to remind them that God is already at work out ahead of us. God is preparing us for a new and exciting future and our best days are ahead of us.⁶ With that, we all took a deep breath and began dreaming about and designing the research project.

It was at this point that I began to call the Lay Advisory Committee *Trail Guides*. When you are traveling to a place to which you have never been, you need someone to show you the way. As pilgrimage author Ian Reader states, we need “...spiritual teachers, who have similarly walked the pilgrimage [before us].”⁷ We all need Trail Guides to help us plan for the experience and to help us through the process. For a while I have been drawn to the idea of the pastor a spiritual director or guide. Ministry is much more than preaching as church author Howard Rice observes, “Equipping the church of ministry involves helping people individually and corporately develop a healthy, balanced, and appropriate faith.”⁸ But this approach to ministry felt more like I was governing the movements on a chessboard. There was a certain detachment and I longed to be in ministry with my congregation, not just directing them here and there. I wanted

⁵ Henri J.M. Nouwen. *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image Doubleday, 2010), 83.

⁶ I took every opportunity I could to be the “before-pastor” during this project, always trying to point us toward God’s future.

⁷ Ian Reader. *Pilgrimage: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65.

⁸ Howard Rice. *The Pastor as Spiritual Guide* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 36.

to travel with them. There is a difference between giving someone directions and actually going there with them. One of the classes for the Doctor of Ministry Degree at Drew involves a trip. My cohort had the opportunity to travel to Orcas Island to spend a week with Dr. Leonard Sweet. During that week, Dr. Sweet gave me some sage advice. He said, “Don’t think of yourself as a spiritual director, think of yourself as a spiritual Sherpa.” I like that metaphor. In seminary I had a chance to take a course on world religions. We visited a Buddhist temple close to campus and they told us that they cooked and served free lunch for anyone. On those days when I did not have money for lunch, I would go to the temple to meditate and to receive a meal. They were always very nice and extremely hospitable. It was around those meals that I learned about Tibetan Buddhism and the indigenous people known as Sherpas.

Sherpas are elite and knowledgeable guides. They are experts in mountain climbing and as such, guide climbers through treacherous terrain. They have the ability to live and work consistently at high altitudes. They live in community and they are often seen as wise and pious in their faith. Most are Buddhist and as such they have a strong connection with nature. Tradition seems important to the Sherpa as it keeps them grounded while at the same time they can look forward into the future. While some Sherpas take vows of celibacy and live in monasteries, most of them could be more adequately described as active contemplatives.

Though I have been practicing Christian contemplation and meditation for only a few years, I feel that in many ways I am only a beginner. I do not think of myself as an expert in the ways of the Christian mystic. Though I am passionate about traveling with others along the pilgrimage pathway of life, the more I learn about God the more I feel

like I am just a beginner. I have a deep desire to teach people how to live in faith. Like a Sherpa, I crave the hands-on aspect of ministry and the tactile things of faith such as art, prayer beads, candles, incense, water, and bread.

Changes in personnel

About six weeks into the project one of the Trail Guides felt that she could no longer continue. She needed to move and to take care of some personal business. About the same time a new person joined our church whose name was Mary. One day Mary came up to me and said, “I do not know why, but I feel like we need to pray in that building (motioning to the Fellowship Hall) because something important is about to happen there.” Mary did not know about the research project or what the Trail Guides were planning. Indeed God is at work in ways that we cannot foresee! I asked her how she would like to proceed. She thought that she could come by twice a week and just spend time in prayer in the hall. When she showed up for her first prayer session, I shared with her what we were working on and we both felt the power and presence of the Holy Spirit wash over us. When I shared this story with the Trail Guides, some got goose-bumps. One said, “The hair on the back of my neck just stood up!” There was a couple that just said, “Wow.” We all agreed that even though she was new, that we would ask Mary to be an official part of the Trail Guides. As one needed to leave, God provided another to take their place, and we did not lose momentum.

Revisions and challenges

This project was not something accomplished in one draft. It took several meetings and many revisions to craft the final project. At first, we wanted to have three trips for the church to experience. All of these trips would be off campus. We discussed

a retreat center, a trip to a local beach and a trip to a monastery. We wanted variety and to provide enough opportunities to give everyone at least one chance to do something they found interesting. *Rockledge United Methodist Church* is not a wealthy church and cost and logistics quickly became an issue. We did not want anyone to incur any personal expense for this nor did we want to create any perceived notion that only those who could take off work or could afford it could have an opportunity to get close to God. We needed a way to have a level playing field. We also decided that we needed a framework with which to implement the project. We settled on the EPIC model by Dr. Leonard Sweet. Our project needed to be “Experiential, Participatory, Image-driven, and Connected.”⁹ These were the overarching descriptors we planned to use to design the project.

The Trail Guides also felt strongly that the church might benefit from an introduction to the concept of pilgrimage before we began to engage the project phase. I resisted this at first because I was afraid of frontloading. Frontloading is the idea that if you tell someone what to expect, they will naturally report back what you told them thereby undermining your research. We called my professor and project advisor, Dr. Gary Simpson to advise us on this. He said that basic education is not frontloading. He asked, “How many of your people have ever seen a labyrinth or been on a pilgrimage the way you are describing it?” Our answer was, “not many.” He advised us on how to capture reflections using brief, open-ended questions for reflection. This way we could educate the people about the process, but the outcome of the experience would be open to the interpretation of the experience. We decided to focus on four phases of a pilgrimage,

⁹ Leonard Sweet. *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 28.

the call, getting ready, the journey itself and the post-experience reflections.¹⁰ This would involve a Lenten sermon series on pilgrimage. In addition, each week the committee would distribute material on spiritual formation practices. In addition, we would prepare a handout with brief, general instructions about the upcoming pilgrimage experiences. The team also would prepare instructions to be given out at the experience itself, and finally each pilgrim would be asked to reflect on their experience in a written journal to be collected by the Trail Guides. The Trail Guides would be at every phase of the project to answer questions and to help pilgrims along their journey.

Working in consensus

I like to lead by consensus. I am not one to try and force my views or ideas but I like it when a group of people agrees about how to move forward on an idea or project. It is shared leadership. Working through a chairperson, I invited the Trail Guides to push back on my ideas. Just because the preacher mentions it does not mean that it is the best way to go. I affirmed them in their gifts and sought to instill within them a sense of ownership in this process. We then continued to walk through the prospectus as together we brainstormed ideas. It took three meetings just to lay the groundwork and get everyone up to speed. Sensing that we needed to try something that was different and maybe even outside of our comfort zone, we affirmed that the purpose of this research project was, “To get outside the normal routine of life so something new [could] happen.”¹¹ We talked about the concept of pilgrimage and how we might use that

¹⁰ Viki Hurst. *Personal Pilgrimage: One Day Soul Journeys for Busy People* (Kelowna, BC, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2000), 24-27.

¹¹ Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace B. Clift. *The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action with Inner Meaning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 54.

metaphor for this project. We talked about what kinds of trips we might design. We put everything on the table and I was so impressed at how this group came together. They trusted each other enough to be vulnerable. They were all willing to suggest ideas and if the group decided to go another way, that was fine with everyone. To see us working together like this was a gift and a healing moment for me. Up until this point I had experienced a congregation that was not generally friendly and certainly not vulnerable. It felt like they were hurt and protecting themselves against further pain. In that moment, it seemed that a safe place opened up and we were able to work together in consensus and love no longer afraid of being hurt. It was the first time I felt like they trusted me as their new pastor and that I was not like those who came before me. We scrutinized every step of the process and revised it more than once. As I mentioned above, at one point we had to reach out to the professors for guidance. At all points we were able to bathe the entire process in prayer. What would have been a complicated process for a single researcher came together almost effortlessly as we worked together in consensus on what God might do with us through this project.

By Christmas we had a plan. This project would involve the staff, leaders, members, and friends of the Rockledge United Methodist Church congregation. Participants were invited to participate in two pilgrimage opportunities. The first was a labyrinth experience at the church and the second was a trip to a local beach. Both of these opportunities were ways for participants to travel without having to endure the cost or logistics often associated with pilgrimage. We desired to design experiences that were accessible to anyone who wishes to participate. A third trip to a Trappist monastery was my time on pilgrimage exploring the Moses example mentioned earlier. The

congregation was not be invited to the monastery because there was a cost associated with the experience. Also, due to the limitations of space in the monastic setting, not everyone in the church would have been able to attend. We did not want to create a perceived stratum within the congregation by offering an experience that only a few could attend.

Timeline of the research project

September – December, 2016 – Local Advisory Committee recruitment, exploratory meeting and training. Prospectus development and submission by December 2.

November - December 2016 – Project development, meetings with key leaders. Submit RDF form for expedited review.

January, 2017 – Order supplies and materials needed, begin story recorder training.

February, 2017 – Advertise, send out invitations. Finish up story recording training.

March 5- April 27, 2017 – Project and evaluation phase. Site visit during this time.

- A sermon series on pilgrimage, Sunday mornings during Lent.
- Labyrinth set up on April 3, tear down on April 17.
- Beach Trip, April 22.
- Monastery experience for pastor, April 24-27.
- Post pilgrimage reflections to be gathered after each experience.

May 2-21, 2017 – LAC reviews and collaborates notes from story recordings and pilgrimage experience reflections with final interviews with willing pilgrims.

Biblical and theological basis

Undergirding the scope and design of the project was our Biblical and theological basis. A key theological view that I wanted to incorporate into this project was the

ancient Celtic idea of thin places. Dr. Edward Sellner, professor of pastoral theology and spirituality, writes in his book, *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints*,

The early Celts also believed in ‘thin places’: geographical locations...where a person experiences only a very thin divide between past, present, and future times; places where a person is somehow able, possibly only for a moment, to encounter a more ancient reality within present time; or places where perhaps only in a glance we are somehow transported in to the future.¹²

In other words, a thin place refers to the notion that heaven and earth are not separated but in reality they overlap each other. Heaven is not some far off place we go to when we die. Rather, heaven and earth are overlaid but separated by a thick veil. The concept of thin places explores the idea that at some points along our journey we may experience places where the distance between heaven and earth might seem very close or the veil feels like it has a thin spot in it.¹³ The Apostle Paul mentions the same concept using other words. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 he writes, “For now we see through a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part; but then I will know fully even as I am fully known.” From our perspective thin places could be an opportunity to catch a glimpse of the Reign of God now. However, if God is always the first mover, then I believe that in reality God is causing the thin spot by pushing or moving toward us. We can only respond to this grace when we become aware of it. A major component to pilgrimage involves coming to an awareness of where and how we encounter these thin places. In reality, this is liminal space, or what church researchers Hester and Walker-

¹² Edward C. Sellner. *Wisdom of the Celtic Saints* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1993), 25.

¹³ Celtic Spirituality has enjoyed a renewed interest in recent years and as such, it is important to understand that Celtic Spirituality has had an influence on modern scholarship and research. For the purposes of this research project, I will use this concept in the evaluation and write-up phase to see if linkages can be made with the research.

Jones call an, “alternate framework...within which [the] everyday way of being and leading may be transformed.”¹⁴ Liminal space can give participants a way to tell their stories by taking them out of their routine and into a perceived improvised experience where God could bring about transformation. Liminality is the space of encounter where we are between who we are now and who we are growing toward. It is like crossing a threshold into a new part of the house.

It is also the contention of the Trail Guides and me that one does not need to take a big expensive trip to experience spiritual formation through pilgrimage. One could take a prayer walk through a neighborhood, or walk on the beach, or stroll through a labyrinth. Experiencing God in pilgrimage takes intentionality. It takes preparation to be aware of your heightened senses of being in a new context and in the moment or encounter. In this project we hope to design settings in which we might experience God. To do this will take some preparation work in the areas of self-awareness and being present to the presence of God. In other words, we suspected that one way for the participants to have the greatest chance of encountering a revelation of God was to share with them several tools or methods of spiritual practices they might use while on the pilgrimage experience.

God is experienced through revelation. God is always at work revealing God’s self to the world but this is done in a hidden fashion. Those who ask, receive. Those who search, find. Those who knock will receive an answer (Matthew 7:7-8). With this in mind, we believe that a physical journey – and not just a metaphorical one – might have the ability to get us out of our comfort zone and into a place where we might

¹⁴ Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know your Story and Lead With It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2009), 120.

experience a heightened awareness of God. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, sought to connect the head and the heart of the believer. It is our hope that moving from a cerebral experience to an embodied one might facilitate a connection of the head and heart for the pilgrim.

Pilgrimage is common, not only to all the major world religions, but has deep roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Throughout the Bible we hear how the Hebrew people traveled to Jerusalem at least once a year to worship in the temple and make their sacrifice to God. The Psalmist proclaims that those who make this journey will find happiness and strength from God (Psalm 84:5). Throughout the ages, Christians have journeyed to places of spiritual significance to worship and to feel close to God. This tradition continues today as believers travel to places like Ireland and Mexico City not to mention the millions of Christians who travel to Israel on pilgrimage to visit and worship in the holiest sites in Christianity. In our modern context, we send our youth to summer camp and away on mission trips. Though these are not referred to as pilgrimages, they are a form of traveling with holy intent. Participants often come back renewed and transformed. Sadly, traveling for spiritual engagement and reflection is not something that is generally done by adults.¹⁵

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¹⁵ In this research project we did not focus on generational and gender considerations of pilgrimage but the author does acknowledge that these are significant considerations for future explorations of pilgrimage.

as pilgrimages, they are a form of traveling with holy intent. Participants often come back renewed and transformed. Sadly, traveling for spiritual engagement and reflection is not something that is generally done by adults.

Finally, I wish to address my role as the leader of this congregation. After Moses gave the law to the people they said to him, “ ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.’ Moses then drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:19-21). It is important that any religious leader should spend time seeking God so that the congregation they lead can be guided toward God. The ministry I work in is not mine but God’s. I can only point people toward God. The reality is that as the leader, it can be easy to point the people in the wrong direction. It is important to find those dark places where God is so that I can be an effective leader of God’s people. It is also important to address the use of the word “dark” in the above scripture. Often times the word “dark” carries with it negative connotations. One of the Trail Guides said, “The only time I can think of where the word “dark” is used positively is when it is associated with chocolate or beer!” For us, we see the “dark place” as a metaphor for a place of mystery. It is experiencing the presence of God where creative possibility exists. It is a place of being open to the mysterious guiding of the Creator of the universe.

This idea of being an effective leader is carried forward in Acts 6:1-14. The Apostles realize that they cannot do it all. They cannot spend adequate time in prayer and the study of God’s word and also take care of all the needs of the people. It was just too much. Therefore they appointed others to help carry the burden thereby increasing the reach of the ministry. Not only do leaders need to spend time in the dark place where

God is, we need to participate in the work that God is already in motion. This means sharing leadership by allowing laity us use their gifts of ministry. We participate with God in this work by affirming God's call within the body, train them and then step back and let them shine!

Evaluation plan

We planned to use the structuralist approach as defined by Carl Savage and Bill Presnell in *Narrative Research in Ministry* as it outlines a good method to evaluate how “unconscious patterns may shape the context.”¹⁶ Since my context was dealing with potentially painful situations, there may be unforeseen emotional issues that could surface for some of the pilgrims. Some people might be resistant to exploring their emotions and as such, the post-project structure will need to be an emerging one. Outcomes may be difficult, if not impossible to foresee. We hoped that by examining the narratives, we might be able to gain a new sense of awareness or identity that could eventually lead to the emergence of a new preferred story either personally or communally or both.

After each pilgrimage experience, a survey for reflection was given to those traveling. The Trail Guides and I met to compare and interpret story notes and observations during the project phase. In May, we invited the participants to review our notes and their reflections together so that the participants themselves would be co-authors to the evaluation process thereby thicken the narratives.

The Trail Guides and I used Laurie Green's model of theological reflection. This model consists of a spiral or loop that takes one's experience and then gives space to

¹⁶ Carl Savage and William Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute), 129.

explore, reflect and respond to that experience that might ultimately lead to a new or deeper experience at which point the process could roll around the loop again as needed.¹⁷ “So as the theology group makes its journey, and as the wheel continues to turn, new insights move them to new actions and ever greater fulfillment.”¹⁸

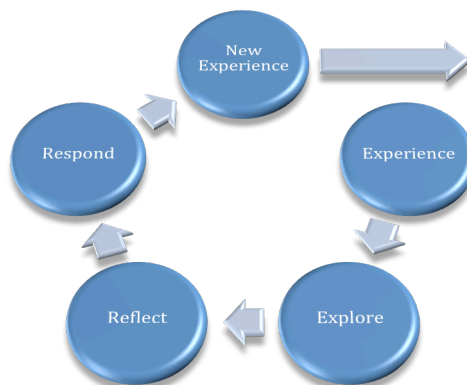


Illustration 3.1: Theological Spiral by Laurie Green

As participant observers, both the Trail Guides and I practiced the concept of reflexivity. We were hopeful that this would allow us to listen kenotically so that we might remain as neutral as possible while documenting experiences and capturing narratives. The Trail Guides were trained to employ the art asking “curious questions” as a way to thicken the stories and create points of connection.¹⁹ Asking curious questions is an acquired skill that I first became familiar with during a seminary course of Clinical Pastoral Education. Asking curious questions assumes that I, the interviewer, do not

¹⁷ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: Resources for Contextual Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹ Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know your Story and Lead With It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2009), 143-145.

presume to know anything about the situation. I try to simply remain curious. These kinds of questions do not try to fix the problem. It is a process that listens for the emotions that underlie the narrative and tries to discover what is going on behind the words, at a deeper level.²⁰ Finally, I shared my experience at the monastery with the Trail Guides as the final interview and official end of the project phase.

²⁰ Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know your Story and Lead With It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2009), 143-145. A detailed description of each principle for asking curious questions is also found here and will be the basis for the Trail Guide training.

CHAPTER 4

METHODS AND PRACTICE

Designing the project proved more difficult than I had anticipated and I could not have completed this project without the help of dedicated Trail Guides. In the Methods of Research class during the Summer Intensive at Drew University, we talked extensively about the problem of frontloading, which is the degree to which a researcher might intentionally, or inadvertently lead respondents toward desired responses or research outcomes. Because of this concern, we wanted to allow room for the Holy Spirit to work as needed. We did not want to build a system in which we controlled the results. Resisting my urge to be in control, I trusted the Trail Guides and let them govern the process. This was a powerful lesson for me. I was holding things too tightly and needed to relax.

The sermon series

We decided that the entire season of Lent would be our time to educate the congregation about the concept of pilgrimage. We used this time to talk about the opportunities for local travel that would be available around Holy Week and immediately after Easter. After we consulted the Lectionary, we chose to focus upon the Gospel readings. In Lent these pericopes have a sense of momentum as they tell the story of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. Within each week's reading, we found themes that would be helpful to set the stage for the research project. For instance, the first Sunday of Lent featured Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We designed a sermon

called *Traveling with the Devil* that looked at how Jesus faced temptation and how we could face temptation in our own lives today. This study developed into a sermon series we called *Traveling with Jesus* and each week of Lent presented a different aspect of traveling the spiritual journey. Each sermon began with a similar introduction, “All of life is a pilgrimage. If we come from God at birth and we return to God at our death, then all of our life is a journey back to God. It is a pilgrimage.”

Hands-on tools

Early on in this appointment we started a Taizé style midweek worship service designed around silence along with working with various spiritual disciplines designed to help people grow in their faith. My hope was to give those who attend access to different tools that they might use to deepen their own spiritual practice. One of the Trail Guides was a regular worshipper at the Taizé style service and she suggested to the other Trail Guides that along with the sermon series, it might be beneficial to have an insert in our regular Sunday Order of Worship that would be a short educational piece on how to use various spiritual disciplines. She said, “Most know that we are supposed to pray, but I can not recall, outside of the Taizé worship service, the last time someone actually showed us how to pray. I think this would help our church.” The Trail Guides agreed and we selected some spiritual formation practices to be included with each week’s sermon. Each week, we described a practice as a possible tool one might use in their devotion. We wanted to give the congregation practical methods for their spiritual toolbox that they could use during a pilgrim’s journey.

The labyrinth

This brought us to the labyrinth. Author Melissa Gayle West, leader in the

modern labyrinth movement, states that,

A labyrinth is different from a maze, though the two are often confused. The labyrinth is one of the oldest contemplative and transformational tools known to humankind, used for centuries for prayer, ritual, initiation, and personal and spiritual growth. This ancient and powerful tool is unicursal, offering only one route to the center and back out again: no blind alleys, dead ends, or tricks, as in a maze. No matter where you are in the labyrinth's coherent circuits you can always see the center. Once you set your foot upon its path, the labyrinth gently and faultlessly leads you to the center of both the labyrinth and your self, no matter how many twists and turns you negotiate in the process.¹

Some of the Trail Guides were having trouble visualizing what the labyrinth experience might be like because they had never experienced one. I tried to find a labyrinth within travel distance to take the Trail Guides to, but there were none close by. So I used books and photos. On the Internet we found a *YouTube* video of someone who recorded what it was like to walk a labyrinth from the perspective of the person walking. I also made photocopies of a few labyrinth patterns and we traced the patterns with our fingers, which is another way to experience a labyrinth. These things helped orient us and we began to dream about how the space would look.

The Florida Annual Conference has two canvas labyrinths that churches may rent. We found that one of these would fit our space. I called the Conference office and reserved it. We wanted to transform the Fellowship Hall space. Because Leonard Sweet's EPIC model was important to us, we began to design the physical setting for the labyrinth space so that it would be experiential, participatory, image-driven and connected. We considered installing some temporary drapery to line the walls. We envisioned utilizing light fixtures that shown up the walls to soften the room and wanted to include some kind of calming music to create a peaceful atmosphere. We wanted this

¹ Melissa Gayle West. *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Broadway Books, 2000), 4-5.

to be a tactile experience so we included a fountain whose sounds might evoke a memory of one's baptism. We also wanted to make sure that each person left the experience with something positive...but as to what, we were not sure.

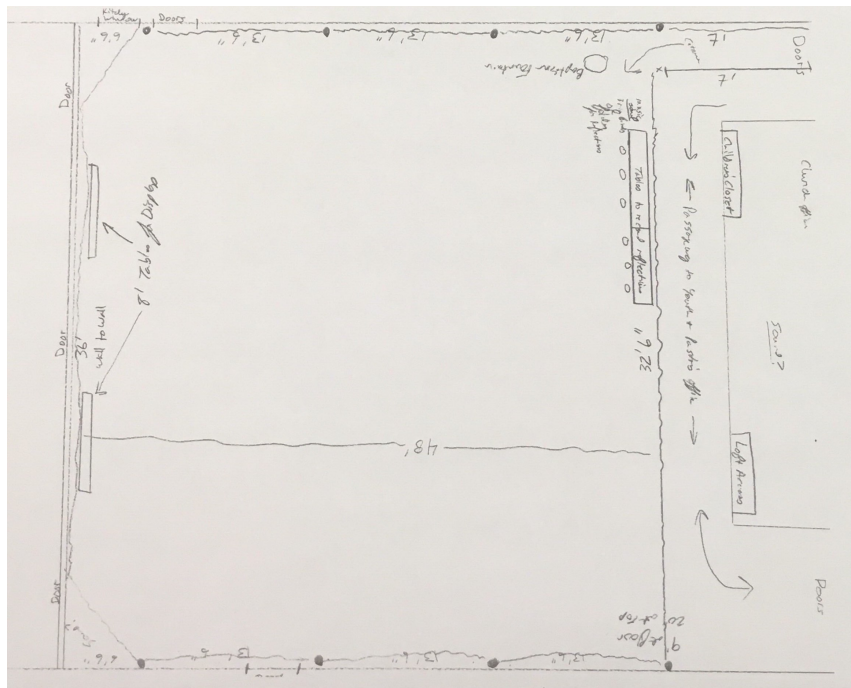


Illustration 4.1: Drawing of Fellowship Hall space for labyrinth

In our church we have two women who love to decorate. Naturally we decided to ask them for their help to decorate the labyrinth space. When I asked them what they had planned, they told me not to worry; they would handle it. It was another opportunity for me to let go of my need to control things!

When the day came to install the labyrinth, I drove to Lakeland and picked it up. When I got back to the church, a small group was there to help with set up. We unfolded the canvas, put the pieces together and oriented it to the room. The labyrinth was not very clean. Thousands of people have walked this labyrinth over the years and it was

showing its age. We took this a metaphor for our church. We may feel old, the spiritual life may be messy and inefficient, we may be bruised, worn, and tattered, but we still have some life in us and by the grace of God we plan to continue on in the mission God has set before us. After stretching out the labyrinth and sweeping it off, the decorating began. I was so pleased when the group began to decorate the space like a quiet garden! How creative and on point to the vision and desires of the Trail Guides!



Illustration 4.2: Fellowship Hall set up with labyrinth

Once the space was set up, we began to physically walk through our plans and get a feeling of what the experience might be like for the pilgrims. As the pilgrim entered the space, Trail Guides would give them a “Guide to Walking the Labyrinth Card.”² This card explained how a labyrinth walk works and invited the pilgrim to be open to

² A copy of this card can be found in the appendix.

whatever they might experience while walking. After the pilgrim finished walking, the Trail Guides gave the pilgrims the opportunity to journal about what they just experienced. At the end of the experience, these journals were collected for the evaluation process of the project. The Trail Guides also collected plenty of field notes.³ These were notes that the Trail Guides made on any conversations they had with the pilgrims that they felt were significant enough to record. We hoped that this verbatim recording of conversations might give us more insight into the pilgrim's experience so that later we could ask questions in an attempt to thicken the narratives.

The beach

The beach experience followed the same general format as the labyrinth; the big difference was the context. We planned for each pilgrim to receive a packet upon arrival. The packet included instructions, a short devotional, and space to journal about their experience.⁴ They had some unstructured time to walk on the beach or play in the ocean. Since we were at the ocean, those that wished to remember their baptism were given the opportunity to do so. Before we left the beach, we asked the pilgrims to reflect on their experience in a journal and to leave that journal with us for the evaluation process. Trail Guides kept field notes and made their own journals about this experience.

Pastor visits a monastery

Originally we planned that the monastery experience for the pastor would try to follow the same pattern as what we had previously designed for the other two pilgrimage experiences. However, one of the Trail Guides noticed that in the Biblical story of

³Mary Clark Moschella. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 118.

⁴ A copy of this packet can be found in the appendix.

Moses, going into the mysterious place where God was while the people stood back, that we do not know what happened after Moses drew near to God. It was decided that we should not try to impose a structure on this experience for the pastor and that I should go armed only with a journal, a pencil, and an open heart and mind. I appreciated this approach and felt that it gave room for the Holy Spirit to work while not holding things too tightly, which had been one of our overall goals in the design and implementation of the research project. It was important to me to make this trip because this research project is not just about the church. I needed help too. I do not have all the answers. I believed that I could not ask my congregation to do something that I was not willing to do myself. Even though I tried to remain a detached observer, I could not fully do that because I was emotionally invested with this congregation. In other words, we are all works in progress and pastors need time and space to care for their own souls too.

CHAPTER 5

THE STORY OF HOW THE RESEARCH UNFOLDED

When we conceived this project, we sought to better understand how a church that feels they have somehow lost their way might reconnect with God and regain the hope of a vital future. We hypothesized that one of the reasons for the decline of this congregation might relate to the pain they collectively experienced at the church. In other words, their pain has an address and it is the same address where we worship. We had originally wanted to get the church to experience renewal off campus, but came to understand that transformation and renewal comes from God and could happen anywhere. We affirmed that we did not need to leave the campus because God is with us, even, and maybe most especially, in those times when we do not feel the presence of God. This was our understanding as we designed the research project to include a sermon series on pilgrimage along with weekly handouts highlighting various spiritual disciplines one might use in their own spiritual discipline.

Sermons and tools

I am a lectionary preacher. I rarely preach sermon series although I especially like to preach a series when it can incorporate sections of the lectionary. For us, Lent seemed the ideal season to reflect on the pilgrimage metaphor because Lent is a season of self-reflection and introspection. Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, the scriptures that the lectionary provides in Lent have an innate sense of movement as they reveal the stories of Jesus intentionally headed toward Jerusalem and the cross. We also find Jesus

faced with some of the same struggles we have as we travel through life. The metaphor of pilgrimage was easy to incorporate within these parameters. The sermon series ended up being nine sermons running from the beginning of Lent, through Holy Week and two weeks into Eastertide. Each week's bulletin also included a handout with instructions on a spiritual discipline that one might use in their own spiritual journey.¹

Week Year A, 2017	Theme	Sermon Title	Scripture	Spiritual Discipline
Lent 1	Temptation	Traveling with the Devil	Matt 4:1-11	Breathing and being still
Lent 2	Confusion	Traveling in the Dark	John 3:1-17	Welling Up
Lent 3	Shame	Traveling Incognito	John 4:5-42	Mindfulness
Lent 4	Belief vs Unbelief	Traveling with Suspicion	John 9:1-12	Centering Prayer
Lent 5	Grief	Traveling with a Broken Heart	John 11:1-45	Labyrinth Prayer
Palm Sunday	Anger	Traveling with Purpose	Matt 21:1-17	Prayer Walking
Maundy Thursday	Love	Traveling with Love	John 13:1-17; 31b-35	Breath Prayer
Easter	Hope	Traveling with Victory & Hope	Matt 28:1-10	The Daily Examen
Easter 2	Doubt	Traveling with Assurance	John 20:19-31	Contemplative Prayer

Illustration 5.1: Sermon series planning chart

The Labyrinth arrived on campus twelve days before Easter. After a day to set up the space, it was open for use for a total of eleven days. This included all of Holy Week and Easter Day. It was interesting that most pilgrims seemed to have similar experiences

¹ The sermon manuscripts and spiritual discipline handouts can be found in the appendix.

on the labyrinth. By this I mean that in their reflections, the vast majority seemed to have gone through the three stages of a labyrinth walk; “releasing, receiving and returning.”² In the releasing segment, the pilgrims generally reported that the process of walking into the labyrinth was one in which they were able to clear their minds and let go of distracting thoughts. In the center, they generally felt that they received a sensation of peace. Many described the sensation of being in the divine presence of God or feeling love. It was on the return, as they made their way out of the labyrinth and back into their regular routines where they seem to have found clarity and discernment or where the pilgrims felt that they received love and encouragement from God.



Illustration 5.2: Pilgrims walking the labyrinth

But there were others who did not have a good experience on the Labyrinth. Two pilgrims remarked that they did not experience anything in the labyrinth space. Another left without completing the walk convinced the practice was, “new age and of the Devil.” Another expressed her disappointment saying, “God kicked me off the labyrinth.” The

² Lauren Artress. *Veriditas Facilitator Manual*. (N.p., 2016), 13.

trail guide responded, “You got kicked off? What happened?” The pilgrim said that she was careful to follow the path. She understood that there was one path in and one path out and that it was impossible to get lost. All of a sudden, she does not know how, she was back at the start, facing out. “While I was walking my mind was full of all the things I have to do. I was distracted and not focused on the walk. When I found myself back at the start without ever having made it to the middle, I felt God say, ‘You are not paying attention, come back later.’” The trail guide reported that the pilgrim was visibly shaken and tearful. Sadly, to our knowledge, she did not return to the labyrinth to try again.

The labyrinth experience is essentially the same. The pattern does not change. The ambiance was consistent. Writer and travel expert, Lori Erickson says that, “Two travelers may go on the exact same journey, and one will have a profoundly life-changing experience while the other [does not].”³ When the Trail Guides and I reviewed these pilgrim’s reflections, we found there to be a consistent theme; what they expected to happen in the labyrinth did not occur. “Personal intentions are always triangulated with free will and unforeseen outcomes revealed by God.”⁴ Almost all the pilgrims reflected that they entered the labyrinth space with a bit of trepidation or uncertainty. One said, “I did not know what to expect.” Another said, “I was nervous going in but trusted God at everything would unfold as it needed to.” Even though there was uncertainty going in, it was the return trip where pilgrims seemed to experience the unexpected. One pilgrim reflected, “I sensed peace from God and I knew that everything was going to be OK in

³ Lori Erickson. *The Joy of Pilgrimage* (Totowa, New Jersey: Resurrection Press, 2007), 14.

⁴ Hillary Kaell. *Can Pilgrimage Fail? Intent, Efficacy, and Evangelical Trips to the Holy Land* (Journal of Contemporary Religion, 31:3), 399.

my life.” Another wrote, “I did not expect to hear God today, but I did!” Many pilgrims wrote about feeling loved or peaceful and they took this feeling as an experiential encounter with God. Taking field notes on the conversations had with pilgrims helped us to understand that anything could happen on the labyrinth. We concluded that it was important to keep an open mind while on our own walk.

Pilgrims on the beach

The second pilgrimage was to a local beach. This trip was less structured than the Labyrinth space at the church by the very nature that it was outdoors in a public space. We gave the pilgrims a small packet to help guide their time at the beach, a copy of which is in the appendix of this paper. The pilgrims then had unstructured time to experience the beach in whatever way they wished. Having learned about labyrinths, I decided to draw a labyrinth in the sand. This was not planned. It was a spur of the moment decision for me. I just felt compelled to do it. So I found a stick and drew this:



Illustration 5.3: Todd after drawing the labyrinth on the beach

It was not long before the people on the beach began to notice the labyrinth. They would stop and ask, “What is this?” I explained the concept of the labyrinth and invited them to walk it. It was not long before two of the Trail Guides noticed what was going on and came down to join me. They naturally assumed their role and even asked the

participants to fill out reflections. We had thirty-six people, not part of the planned pilgrimage experience; participate in the project through the labyrinth in the sand. This turned out to be evangelism through invitation!

The reflections showed that the people of the congregation who came to the beach pilgrimage did so primarily because they felt they could easily connect with God through nature. We had not talked specifically about Celtic Spirituality and connecting with God in geographical locations during the teaching phase leading up to the project. That could have been front-loading. Since so much of modern pilgrimage language and contemplative practices has been informed by the Celtic tradition in recent years, we wanted to see if the idea of thin places would naturally rise to the surface or not. In their reflections, each pilgrim talked about the concept of thin places but using their own words. “Thin places are those that reveal the interrelationship between heaven and earth.”⁵ The landscape clearly was a key component to these pilgrims feeling they were able to connect with God. Almost all the pilgrims who went to the beach made some comment about feeling close to God in nature. One wrote, “I always feel close to God at the beach.” Another reflected that, “There is something about the water. I feel close to God when I am around water.” Interestingly, some that had experienced what they perceived as a failure on the labyrinth had a moving experience on the beach. None of the pilgrims that participated in the trip to the beach reported a sense of failure or disappointment in their experience.

The Trail Guides were very busy making field notes due to the amount of people that happened upon the sand labyrinth and this created some excitement among them.

⁵ Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook. *Pilgrimage – the Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart* (Woodstock, Vermont: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2013), 79.

They saw evidence of God at work in average people who just happened to be at the beach that day. One trail guide wrote in their reflection, “God cannot be contained to a building. God is everywhere! Even on the beach!” We left the beach knowing that God was moving in ways that we could never have predicted and we wondered how we might could incorporate the labyrinth and small trips into a ministry that reaches out to the community giving those who may self-identify as spiritual but not religious a way to be connected to the traditional church. I made a note in my journal of this and how happy I was I experienced a spark of evangelism. I hoped that this might be a positive step toward healing, renewal, and deeper spiritual formation.

Pastor at the monastery

The third trip of this project was my pilgrimage to a monastery. We choose *Mepkin Abbey* because they were only a few hours away by car and they were Trappist. Trappist have a working tradition. They are not just praying and observing silence all day long as so many might image is the lifestyle of a monk. They make things to sell to support their ministry. They work and have jobs within the cloistered community. In other words, they are active contemplatives. Therefore we thought was that it would be a good fit for me as a pastor since I try to live my life in an actively contemplative fashion too. Also, going into a cloistered community for a time felt very much like we were keeping our theological approach in view. Like Moses, the pastor sought to enter into a strange and different place, a metaphorical dark place, to try and seek an encounter with God.

The monastery was a beautiful experience for me. I needed the quietness and the slower pace. As I reflected on that experience there were two significant encounters for

me that crept into my consciousness. First was a word that I heard over and over. I have often thought that when things happen in a repetitious fashion, that may be a cue for me to pay attention. The word that kept presenting itself to me while I was at *Mepkin Abbey* was *welcome*. In my experience, God is not some unapproachable being in a dark cloud. God is accessible and God is welcoming. The first words I heard from the monk at the retreat center were, “Welcome! We are so glad that you are here.” From greetings, to spiritual discussions, in worship experiences, to learning about welcoming prayer, to learning how to welcome all things in Christ, *welcome* was the word I kept hearing.⁶ I need to learn how to welcome people and emotions into my heart. Years of building walls (family of origin issues and perfectionism tendencies that I continue to learn from and embrace) are coming down. I do not feel exposed, but protected by grace.



Illustration 5.4: The monks of Mepkin Abbey

⁶ One of the monks offered a class on welcoming prayer. This was new to me so I attended. A copy of the handout they gave us with my handwritten notes appears in the appendix.

Second, I sensed in my very being that there is a preserved righteousness. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, talked about Prevenient Grace in two ways. The first way is God's grace that goes before us; guiding us, wooing us, drawing us every so gently towards God. This is called prevenient grace. But the other aspect of prevenient grace that Wesley talked about was the concept of preventing grace. This concept is a distinctive theological perspective to Methodism.⁷ Some say that at the fall, humanity fell into a state of total depravity and humanity became utterly ruined. The image of God within us ceased to exist. But Wesley looked at it differently. "Wesley affirms that after the fall, God did not leave men and women in this utterly dejected state, but reinscribed, in some measure, a knowledge of this moral law upon their hearts."⁸ In other words, Wesley taught that after the fall, God stepped in and *prevented* humanity from falling into total depravity. God preserved just enough of the *Imago Dei* that there would be something within each human that would seek out the divine. Had God not done this, we would have surely fallen into a depravity from which there would have been no return. Christian writer, theologian, and mystic Thomas Merton may have best illustrated this concept of prevented grace. After his famous Fourth and Walnut experience, Merton reflected that,

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in

⁷ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 51-52.

⁸ Kenneth J. Collins. *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 77.

everybody, and if we could see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.⁹

While at *Mepkin Abbey* I came to sense that at my very core is therefore a holy place, untouched by sin that belongs only to God. I felt a connection to this inner place within while at the monastery. This was an experience of peace, love, and what I can only describe as deep welcome!¹⁰

The third experience I had at *Mepkin Abbey* was in reality a culmination of the week I spent in the monastery. During the week I felt flat. Worship was nice but nothing seemed to be stirring in my soul. At least, not the way I had expected it to or hoped that it might. But Friday morning was different. It was a true gift. As we stood in a circle around the altar to celebrate Holy Communion together, I felt the Holy Spirit filling me deeply, not just a “top down” filling (as I often imagine it to be) but a spring-of-life filling that was also from the bottom up, and from all sides. I felt like a plant sitting in soil that was saturated from rain and more comes. Friday was my soul-filling-up day. I was reminded of the words of Isaiah, “The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, to make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail” (Isaiah 58: 11).

Back home regular worship happens on Sunday. At the monastery it happens seven times a day. To be honest, I did not make the 3:30 am service. Rest and renewal was part of my intention too. Reflecting on the different approaches to worship between

⁹ Thomas Merton. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday: 1966), 140-142.

¹⁰ For a more modern interpretation of this concept I recommend Richard Rohr’s *Immortal Diamond*.

Mepkin Abbey and *Rockledge United Methodist Church*, Sunday is usually more emotional for me. It is like slamming spiritual Redbull since we only do this once a week. Get in, get filled with the spirit, see you next week. But the week at the monastery was different. Rather than a quick shot of religious emotionalism, this felt more like slowly descending into a beautiful hot bath. Maybe the congregation needs more opportunities to worship each week? I plan to bring these observations back to the Trail Guides and I will be interested to see how they receive them. Whatever the outcome, I hope that I am able to continue to cultivate a more constant immersion into my life.

Post-pilgrimage interviews: Thickening the narratives

After all the trips had ended, we invited the pilgrims back to a post-pilgrimage interview. The Trail Guides interviewed those who were willing to participate. The Trail Guides were split up into teams of three. Two would conduct the interview and ask questions while one would take notes. In his book, *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson talks about the challenge of deep listening. He writes, “Pastoral listening requires unhurried leisure, even if it’s only for five minutes. Leisure is a quality of the spirit, not a quantity of time.”¹¹ There is a big difference in listening for understanding and listening to respond. If we are listening to respond, then the conversation tends to remain focused on us. If we listen for understanding, the focus may shift and the person being interviewed tends to feel more heard and appreciated. Narrative researchers Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones in their book, *Know Your Story and Lead with It*,

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 21.

call this method of deep listening, “practicing curious questions.”¹² The questions and observations are focused on the person speaking. “That sounds interesting, tell me more.” “What I hear you saying is (repeat back what they said). Is that right?”¹³ The Trail Guides practiced this as a group. I modeled it by role-playing with a trail guide volunteer and then they practiced with each other. We had three training sessions to practice this skill before the interviews began and it was worth it. One trail guide said, “At first I was resistant to this but now I see that if we can master this skill, it can change the way we interact with others in all areas of our lives for the better.”

As we interviewed the pilgrims, we asked them to “tell us more.” We became curious about them and their experiences. We worked hard not to interject ourselves into the conversation and to let their story naturally thicken by the retelling of it. We found that after some time had past, the pilgrim was usually able to reflect more clearly on their pilgrimage experience. The pilgrims were originally asked to reflect on their experience immediately after having it. This means that they were in a liminal space. In other words, the pilgrim was in a state of movement where things are not clearly defined or articulated. There should be some time for reflection so that, “...the non rational way of knowing moves eventually to a post-liminal structure of rationality, but in its new transformed state blends the insights of both rational and non-rational categories of knowing.”¹⁴ We found this to be true in the pilgrims that were interviewed. When we

¹² Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know your Story and Lead With It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2009), 143-145.

¹³ See the appendix for our list of curious questions.

¹⁴ Timothy L. Carson. “Liminal Reality and Transformational Power: Pastoral Interpretation and Method.” *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, Vol. 7, Issue 1, (1997): 102.

asked questions for clarification, they were generally able to talk about it in a way that included more detail or insight than they had previously provided in their original reflection. In this way, new experiences sparked reflections; which led to a deeper response and a transformed or new way of telling their story. We saw the model of Laurie Green's loop for theological reflection naturally unfold as the pilgrims retold and reflected on their story which enabled them to build on their past experience and live into an new paradigm. Carl Savage and William Presnell talk of the same phenomenon using the concept of a person adding to their narrative story so that it is "...thickened in depth and insight."¹⁵ Whether or not they are being thickened or going through a loop of reflection, the act of retelling about one's experience, supported by a compassionate and curious listener, can allow the narrative of an experience to unfold and become a possible point of growth or formation in one's spiritual journey.

¹⁵ Carl E. Savage and William B. Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 78.

CHAPTER 6

THE STORY OF WHAT WE LEARNED

Observing change and discerning transformation are the ways in which we sought to evaluate the outcomes of the research project. By observing change, we sought to,

...compare the state of the context prior to a new ministry intervention and afterward. In a sense, the part of evaluation is only a measurement process. Has there been change in activity, habits, stories told, etc.? Transformation is a marked change, as in appearance of character, usually for the better.¹

Both the Trail Guides and myself were participant observers. Employing the ethnographic research method, “we attempted to maintain an unbiased, kenotic position in order to understand the culture of the faith community.”² We collected journals, took field notes, and verbatim accounts of the post-experience interviews. These sources became our data. Since this congregation had been through trauma and they sensed the need for healing and a renewed vitality, we took on the structuralist approach for the evaluation of our project. “The structuralist approach looks for unconscious patterns that may shape the context.”³ This approach allowed us to examine any naturally emerging outcomes of the research project that might be indicators of a newly birthed preferred story.

What changed for the pilgrims?

¹ Carl E. Savage and William B. Presnell. *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville: Wayne E. Oates Institute, 2008), 124.

² *Ibid.*, 108-109.

³ *Ibid.*, 129.

Out of the eighty pilgrims who walked the labyrinth and participated in the pilgrimage to the beach, only four had situations that they perceived as non-transformational. As I mentioned earlier, their expectations were unmet or they had a negative experience. The vast majority indicated that they had some kind of transformational experience while engaged in the project. Most wrote about how they sensed the peace and comfort of God in their lives during the experience. A few felt they received discernment for an important decision or circumstance in their lives. Almost all wrote about encountering God as something that occurred midway or at the end of the pilgrimage while the beginning was generally a time of uncertainty but still trusting God. One wrote, "I am open to the Holy Spirit to show me what I need in this time."

Emotions were wide-ranging. Some were moved to tears. Most were tears of joy at the feeling that God loves them no matter what. Others were tears of sadness as they felt remorse for their sins and renewed their commitment to follow God. Most wrote in their journal about their feelings of happiness and hope for the future. On the whole, those that went on the journeys came back excited to have had a real encounter with God and they were able to articulate an understanding that God is with us no matter what. One pilgrim wrote, "I had been struggling with discerning God's will for my life. While on this pilgrimage, God gave me assurance that everything was going to be OK." Another wrote, "Thank you for this opportunity to slow down and listen for God. I feel God's presence with me."

What changed for the Trail Guides?

The Trail Guides entered this process thinking that they were going to help me with a project. By the end, they had taken ownership of the project and were excited about

the outcomes they had seen. There was talk among them about having a permanent labyrinth on church property someday. They also expressed a desire to experience the labyrinth in other seasons of the church year. Some of the Trail Guides liked the trip to the ocean and suggested that we could plan other local experiences for those who were interested in that kind of pilgrimage. They were sensitive to the needs of our generally aging community and they had an understanding, based on the outcomes of the project that less people might travel off campus for an event than would take advantage of something on church property.

The Trail Guides responded with excitement at the potential of a *Fresh Expression* of ministry as the public responded favorably to the labyrinth on the beach. One of the people who stopped by that labyrinth on the beach said, “It is nice to see the church out here.” Through advertisement brochures and the church sign, some from the public came to experience the labyrinth at the church. These things made the Trail Guides wonder how we might continue to use the labyrinth in creative worship settings both in the church and in the community.



Illustration 6.1: The public walks the beach labyrinth

Fresh Expressions of ministry are a big focus of the Florida Annual Conference at

the time of this project. The current Florida Conference Bishop, Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. says that, “A Fresh Expression is a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.”⁴ The idea of a fresh expression is to think about ministry in a way that meets the needs of people today. Our church is on a very busy street and more than 66,000 people live within a ten minute driving radius of the church and yet the church is in decline. As we were evaluating the project reflections, one of the Trail Guides asked, “How can we have church on the labyrinth?” We began to dream about how that might come to be but with no budget to purchase a labyrinth, we committed the idea to prayer hopeful that God would lead us in the path of finding a way to provide a labyrinth-based ministry to our community.

The Trail Guides also expressed an interest in continuing to learn about contemplative practices and how to incorporate them into their daily lives. Many of them enjoyed learning about and trying out various contemplative practices from the weekly inserts in the Order of Worship.⁵ As we have seen in the chart located in chapter five, we presented nine practices to the congregation. Each of the Trail Guides remarked about how one or two of the practices were meaningful for them in their daily devotional practices.

They saw a new way of church leadership. The chair of the Trail Guides said, “Todd is the leader but he was also one of us.” This is first followership. “The Lord of the Dance takes the lead. But the most important human role is that of the ‘first

⁴ Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. and Audrey Warren. *Fresh Expressions: A New Kind of Methodist Church of People Not in a Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017), 11.

⁵ These inserts can be found in the appendix.

follower...”⁶ We became a team in consensus metaphorically dancing in a circle together with God. I believe that this kind of leadership is needed in the church today. When a celebrity or a pastor’s charisma drives churches or congregations, there can be a danger that the church or congregation will become focused or dependent on the person and not God. “As we join the Lord of the Dance in the art of pilgrimage (being on the way), we form a community of followers, each relationally on the move and invested in each other’s life.”⁷ The team spirit that the Trail Guides developed throughout the research project was an indicator that relational community was formed. But was this type of community beginning to form in the church?

What changed for the context

Church-wide change is much more difficult to gauge. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of changing a church’s culture. I think that church wide changes generally take time. Sometimes it takes a lot of time and it can seem to move so slow as if nothing is happening at all. But it may be changing, if only at glacial speed. Jesus compared the coming of the kingdom to a mustard seed that slowly grows into a large tree and yeast moving through bread until it is completely leavened (Matthew 13:31-33). The Trail Guides got a sense of how God was working at the church by reading through the pilgrim’s journals. In a very slow but real way, we came to see that God is at work among us. This gave us hope! One Trail Guide said, “God is not through with us yet!”

In the middle of liminal space it is hard, if not impossible, to see any transformation that might be happening. It is only after the event that we can reflect and

⁶ Leonard Sweet. *I am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

begin to tell our story.

When you are in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all but rather a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood, like a house in a whirlwind or else a boat crushed by the icebergs of swept over the rapids, and all aboard are powerless to stop it. It is only afterward that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you're telling it to yourself or someone else.⁸

It is through the telling and retelling of our stories that we can see God at work. It involves reflection and honoring the space between no longer and not yet. Celtic theologian and pilgrimage guide Kay Mutert says that, "Life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forward."⁹

The Trail Guides sensed that God is at work in the congregation. Healing and spiritual formation seem to be happening but it is not massive nor a sweeping change. It does not seem to be at the same level that the Trail Guides experienced. One trail guide put it this way, "I had hoped to we would have more of a Damascus road experience, instead we got a lesson in baking bread and a reminder that God's ways are not always the ways we would hope change will come about."

What changed for me personally

There is a science to projects like these but we also made room for art. We did not hold onto the process so tightly that we inhibited the artful movement of the Holy Spirit. We tried to hold things lightly. We were not in full control and with that attitude; we were able to see God at work. Most of the time, it was subtle movement only seen in the reflections of the pilgrims. I came to understand that God is at work in this

⁸ Polley, Sarah, dir. 2013. *The Stories We Tell*. Lionsgate Studio. DVD.

⁹ Kay Quinn Mutert. *Seasons of Change: Reflections on an England Spiritual Journey*. (N.p., 2010), 150.

congregation despite my questioning of what I perceived to be their spiritual condition. I learned that it is important to ask what is going on the spiritual lives of the congregation I serve. In my experience, I believe that I have passed judgment on a congregation because on the surface it seemed like there was little or no spiritual growth. After reading the reflections and hearing the post-pilgrimage interviews, it became clear that most of the participants in the project felt that they had some kind of experience with God. God is at work among God's people but if I do not take the time to ask about it, I may miss one of the greatest blessings of ministry - watching a pilgrim travel with God.

I approach pilgrimage, "...motivated by the desire to be transformed through [an] encounter with the sacred."¹⁰ While transformation may be my desire, I have learned that transformation does not always happen in the way I hope that it might. While I hope to guide others through a process of pilgrimage, I am ultimately only responsible for myself. What others experience on the pilgrimage path is their journey. I can only support them on the way. Some seem to have positive experiences and others seem to have no experience or even negative experiences! I cannot control the outcomes. I can only work to create space for God to move. That said, this project has helped me too. I have my own issues to work through. No project can ever solve all the problems. This is just a step on the journey and learning how to follow God and become more self aware is a lifelong endeavor.

Another thing that I have learned is that one does not need to get away to experience God. I experience God in nature. It is a blend of wonder and gratitude. But not everybody experiences God in nature the way that I do. Based on the pilgrim's

¹⁰ Leonard J. Biallas. *Pilgrim: A Spirituality of Travel* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), 41.

reflections and the far less number of pilgrims that traveled to the beach as opposed to the labyrinth, one could conclude that the labyrinth experience was far more effective as a means of spiritual formation. On the other hand, my experience at the monastery was a necessary retreat. I needed to get away from the business and distraction of church life in order to be still and focus on the condition of my own soul. This project reminded me that God can and does work in all circumstances. Our way is very narrow compared to the power of God. Ultimately we do not need to travel great distances in order to encounter the divine, we only need to be open and present to the current moment.

The idea of being present brings me to the next thing that I learned. Not all spiritual practices appeal to everyone. It involves trial and error. What works for me may not work in the same way for another. Spiritual growth and transformation does not occur overnight. Learning to follow God feels like a long process that one never really masters. I have spent almost my entire life trying to grow in my spiritual walk and I still feel like I am a beginner. The Trail Guides and I worked together to select the spiritual practices that would be shared with the congregation. Some found that they were useful and some did not try them at all. During the project some experienced great breakthroughs while others seemed to experience dryness. In his book, *Pilgrim: A Spirituality of Travel*, Leonard Biallas writes, “Our spiritual growth proceeds along a zig-zag path toward what we hope will be union with the sacred.”¹¹ In other words, it takes time and it takes practice. It may be messy and frustrating or it may be glorious and deep. It is not constant, straight, orderly, or predictable.

Regarding the pain of the congregation, it has been my experience that our pain

¹¹ Leonard J. Biallas. *Pilgrim: A Spirituality of Travel* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), 285.

lives within us. It may be associated with a location, but we cannot get away. We can only learn from it. Dealing with my own grief has been a life-long learning project. It is not fun to deal with one's grief, but if we are courageous enough to address it, we can learn from it. I have spent time in counseling, with spiritual directors and taken two years of Clinical Pastoral Education to try and learn from my own grief. One of the most helpful tools I have learned is the use of Welcoming Prayer, an experience to which I alluded earlier in this paper. In this prayer, welcoming does not mean acceptance, but it does mean acknowledgement. It can also be done as you move through your day. There is no need to stop and meditate. Essentially the process is like this: I experience an emotion (usually sadness, anger, fear, or some other unsettling emotion). I acknowledge the existence of the emotion and let it pass by. I do not cling to it, but give it to God. In this way, I am less likely to continue to complain about circumstances and move forward in life in a more healthy way. At night, when I practice my daily reflection, I am able to look back and think about what triggered my emotions, where it might have come from and become more self-aware of the condition of my heart, mind, and body.

Dealing with pain on a personal level is hard but when a congregation is dealing with pain, it feels much more difficult to move forward. Trust needs to be built. Healing takes time. How often do leaders not do the work of bringing the congregation to healing because they themselves are hurting? In my experience, dealing with grief, loss, and pain is not fun but it is necessary for spiritual health. I am very aware that what "Ralph" did I have the potential to do. There is an old adage that says, "hurt people hurt people." I can only surmise the emotional condition of "Ralph" and I hope that in my own ministry, I will continue to work on being more self-aware so that I might be a more effective leader

of God's people. God is always at work and we participate in God's eternal now even in our woundedness. In my experience it seems like God is always out ahead of us already at work and we spend our entire lives trying to catch up to what God already has in motion. Therefore our best days are ahead of us. I want to be a minister who points the way to God who is always on the move forward and I want to encourage others to come and join me. To be sure, this is a messy process and I may not have the good fortune to remain at this appointment long enough to see the fruit of God's healing of this congregation. Therefore, my focus has to be one of the before-pastor, pointing the way toward God's future for all of us.

Another thing that I learned is that you do not know the condition of someone's heart unless you ask. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, made a habit to ask people, "How their souls prosper."¹² Today we typically phrase the question this way, "How is it with your soul?" I was so encouraged as I read through the journals of the pilgrims. On the surface, I could not get a sense of the spiritual condition of my new congregation. But in the reflections, I read that many of the project participants felt that they had encountered God during their pilgrimage experiences. This revelation reinforced to me the importance not only of telling our stories but asking your congregation to share their stories with you.

Lastly, I learned that I could not force my ideas of healing and transformation onto a person or congregation. Catholic Missionary Vincent J. Donovan said, "...do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to

¹² *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 78.

a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.”¹³ This quote is another way to express the concept of being a first follower. We are all in the faith journey together and God is the leader.

The Outcome

Can pilgrimage experiences lead to spiritual formation? The answer is yes; it is possible, but maybe not for everyone and certainly not all in the same fashion. If God is directing all our paths (and I believe that this is so), then God works with us individually right where we are. Most people on pilgrimage wrote that they felt close to God or received direction or discernment for their lives. Some wrote that they did not encounter God and likened it to a time of spiritual dryness. Recall that one pilgrim in particular wrote in her reflection that, “God kicked me off the labyrinth. I understand that there is one path in and one path out, but somehow I made it back to the beginning without having made it to the center. I admit that I entered the space with my mind on other things. I have so much to do and my life is very frantic at the moment. As I left, I heard God say, “Come back later. You are not focused on me.”

In our experience, pilgrims seem to generally come away from their experiences with a greater awareness of their place in the universe, recognizing that they are part of a community, and what they perceive to be sacred is ever present. While these patterns may be common, not all experiences are the same. Still, it is worthwhile to be intentional about taking advantage of pilgrimage opportunities because God is at work. God is either encouraging us or correcting us along the way. And in those times when it feels dry or like nothing is going on, we can rest assured that God is still on the move and at work

¹³ Vincent J. Donovan. *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), xiii.

drawing us into the relationship of divine dancing.

In the case of *Rockledge United Methodist Church*, this pilgrimage project came to us through a particular series of circumstances and events. But we saw through this project, particularly in the reflections of those not connected with *Rockledge United Methodist Church* and its recent history, that pilgrimage works irrespective of the preceding circumstances. One does not merely do pilgrimage because of looming crisis. A pilgrimage is not designed to fix a problem but to orient its sojourners that we are always moving toward spaces with God. Overall, we were encouraged by the outcomes of the pilgrimage opportunities. It felt like the church was trending in a good direction of healing and renewal. Little did we know the challenges that the next few weeks would bring us.

CHAPTER 7

LOOKING DOWN THE PATH

Through the pilgrimage experiences, we experienced a connection to God. During the process the Trail Guides and pilgrims reported a general sense of joy and mystery that they felt during the research project. For those who choose to travel, a sense of community seemed to bring some of the congregation together. I recorded in my journal that I observed those who had walked the labyrinth would engage in conversations with others who has also walked it. They compared experiences and seemed to have the connection of the pilgrimage journey that drew them closer together. I also observed that the Trail Guides seemed to form closer bonds as a team might. They functioned as a team encouraging one another, challenging one another and supporting one another in the research project. I wrote in a field note, “At first the Trail Guides acted more like strangers. There was tension in the air. No one knew what to expect. Now our meetings are full of laughter and camaraderie as this team has bonded over the last few weeks.” As the research project came to a close, many asked, “What happens next? How can we keep this going?”

Working through a small group of volunteers we began to explore other ways we could get out in nature and try to connect with God through creation. Besides the beaches, there are some local parks with gentle walking trails that seem to be conducive for our needs. However, Florida is very hot in the summer months so we decided to wait until later in the year to try and organize another pilgrimage outing. On top of that, Hurricane Irma came through our community in September causing significant damage

not only to our local parks, but to our community and church property as well. The same weekend of the hurricane, our youth minister (who was only forty eight years old) suffered a heart attack which forced the laity to scramble and organize the annual pumpkin patch fundraiser for the youth ministry and to keep that ministry, with all its many parts, moving forward. As if that was not enough, my family suffered an unexpected death. We got the news the day after the hurricane hit. All this upheaval caused us to experience a season of disorientation as we scrambled to take care of our church and community, while at the same time; my family and I were in mourning. As I write this chapter we are in Advent and we are just now getting to a place where we can begin to talk about going out into nature again.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, the Trail Guides and I were captivated by the power of the stories that the pilgrims shared in their journals. Because of this, we came to believe that sharing our stories was important. We decided that we would try to offer a worship service that would resurrect testimony night. Many years ago it was common practice in our tradition to gather on a Sunday evening and share stories about how God had been at work in the lives of the people in the congregation. Many remember these worship experiences fondly. These experiences seemed to evoke a time that both celebrated and affirmed God's activity among the people. We thought that it would be fun to add a fellowship component to the evening and so we asked people to bring a churn of homemade ice cream to share after the worship service. Several people in the church thought this was a good idea and seemed very excited to attend this special service. After several weeks of promotion, my family was alone in the sanctuary that night. I was very disappointed. Not even the Trail Guides came and the Bardin family

ate our ice cream alone. Maybe it was because the time had changed and it was getting dark earlier now and people did not want to drive after dark. Maybe it is because we do not normally have a Sunday evening service, maybe the people are not used to getting back out and going to church. We can try to come up with excuses but the reality is that despite all the effort, no one came.

The good news is that we have been able to continue our exploration with the labyrinth. In my research I came across the Veriditas organization. On their website they state:

Veriditas is dedicated to inspiring personal and planetary change and renewal through the labyrinth experience. We accomplish our mission by training and supporting labyrinth facilitators around the world, and offering meaningful events that promote further understanding of the labyrinth as a tool for personal and community transformation. Our Vision is that the labyrinth experience guides us in developing the higher level of human awareness we need to thrive in the twenty-first century.¹

I learned that this organization offers a weeklong summer school in the Southeastern United States every year that teaches how to work with labyrinths and offer labyrinth experiences to the community. They also teach techniques on how to make and build labyrinths. At our final meeting, the Trail Guides were unanimous in their desire to experience the labyrinth at other times of the year, so I signed up for the Veriditas class and spent a week at the Kanuga Episcopal Retreat Center learning all I could about labyrinths.

Upon my return, I shared with the Trail Guides about my experience. I learned about many different labyrinth patterns and how to make them on canvas. I learned about making them using arts and crafts supplies on a tabletop. I even learned about how to

¹ Veriditas, 2017. Accessed December 1, 2017. <https://www.veriditas.org>



Illustration 7.1: Labyrinth builder Lars Howlett, teaching sacred geometry

make them using masking tape on the floor. It was the masking tape that caught the trail guide's attention. Our desire is to build a large thirty-six foot canvas labyrinth but the tools needed to do a job like that are expensive not to mention the cost of the canvas material. Masking tape seemed to offer us a medium in which to continue to explore the labyrinth while giving us the flexibility to experience different patterns. We felt that the best place to put the labyrinth would be in the narthex of the church. This way the labyrinth would remain in view of the entire congregation and it would be an ongoing reminder of the availability of the labyrinth and a teaching tool to which we could easily point. I am glad to see that the labyrinth is being used. Some come early to church to walk it. Some stay after worship. The midweek worship service in the style of Taize seems to utilize the labyrinth more than any other group. The sanctuary remains open during the week for prayer and from time to time, I find people on the labyrinth outside of our organized worship times.



Illustration 7.2: Temporary labyrinth in Narthex

The time since the research project ended has been one of ups and downs in the life of this congregation. I understood the earlier comment by the parishioner that said, “We start to gain momentum and something comes along a knocks us down.” All the destruction and death felt like a punch in the gut and I was not motivated to do anything except move from day to day the best I could. I was numb and so were some of the people around me.

Circumstances did not derail the church’s desire to continue to explore the labyrinth ministry and pilgrimage opportunities. After a few month of digging out, something amazing began to happen. First, the roof on our fellowship was badly damaged during the hurricane. We began to raise money for a new roof and filed an insurance claim. The idea of a new roof has lead to a spark of life in the church! The fellowship hall has windows in the roof designed to let in natural sunlight. They have been boarded up for years and the patch job looked bad after years of weathering. Now,

a new roof has been installed and the new windows have let in light once again. One church member said, “This feels like a new beginning.” Another said, “People in our community will see that we are getting a new roof and they will take it as a sign that we are alive and vital. Let’s encourage people to come and check us out.” Another church member came to my office as said, “After such a hard summer and fall, I need to walk the labyrinth again. Can we make that happen?” That comment was like a breath of fresh air that renewed my soul from the bottom up. This was natural response to a time of confusion and uncertainty. Labyrinth Historian Jeff Saward writes,

Throughout the long history of mazes and labyrinths, whenever and wherever society is undergoing rapid change and development the labyrinth, one form or another, has blossomed. Humanity is once again seeking the sure path of the labyrinth, reflecting as it does the journey of life in which one step is taken at a time, as the turns and setbacks of life in the modern world are negotiated.²

We started to put down temporary labyrinths again around campus in masking tape. I began to secure the tools I would need to make labyrinths on canvas. We are walking again.

Personally, I have become very interested in a labyrinth ministry. I feel very strongly that this ministry should reach out to those who identify as spiritual but not religious. The labyrinth is a tool that can accomplish the goal of connecting the spiritual but not religious person to the traditional church. I have taken what I have learned about this tool at the labyrinth summer school and am using it to engage in ministry outside of the local church. It is a Fresh Expression! We are giving half-day labyrinths retreats to the community, providing temporary labyrinths in masking tape in various venues and

² Jeff Saward. *Magical Paths: Labyrinths & Mazes in the 21st Century* (London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2002), 12.

preparing to build portable labyrinths on canvas. Some in the church are not happy about this. For new ministries to occur, priority must be given to the new ministries. I have made an intentional decision to spend half my time engaged with those outside the church and half my time taking care of those who are already here. This means that I must rely on lay help to make sure everything is covered. Some in the church have mentioned that they feel I am not as accessible as I have been in the past. To their credit, they seem to understand the need to reach out to the community around us even though the thought of doing something different appears to create added stress. I am beginning to offer labyrinth-building services and I am also available to facilitate labyrinth walks.³ There is the possibility that this ministry could grow to the point where it might become a full time endeavor. Whether or not God leads me down this path remains to be seen. My only desire is to be at the center of God's will. For both me and *Rockledge United Methodist Church*, the future seems to have many options. It is only by moving forward that we will journey into the pilgrimage to which God is calling us.

We are on what feels like a threshold, moving from one area of ministry into another. This project on pilgrimage has taught all of us to not be afraid of what lies beyond the threshold. When we get knocked down, we can get up and live again by the grace of God. We can trust that we can live in the liminal space and that when we emerge, we will be different people than when we began. It will be different for the same reason that you can never truly swim exactly the same way in the same river twice. In the first place, people change and mature over time. Our thoughts evolve and hopefully we have grown spiritually as well. Secondly, the river is always changing. New water

³ I have started www.sacredtraveler.org as the basis of this new ministry.

forces the river to move and evolve over time. Liminal space is like this. We enter it knowing that the current experience will be different than the last one and that once we make it through the time of confusion, we will be able to tell perhaps a different story, a deeper story than we could before. Pilgrimage teaches us to honor the space between the already and the not yet.

When I arrived at *Rockledge United Methodist Church*, I remember that it felt like a mess. In my journey with these people, we have made some significant progress in becoming a more healthy and vibrant church, by the grace of God. This path of renewal has not been easy. There have been ups and downs but we can affirm that God is with us every step of the way. This research project has helped us to see that life is journey. Seasons of vitality come and go but even in spite of the hardships we endured after the research project, the fact that the congregation had a desire to go back to those experiences affirms for me impact pilgrimage had on the spiritual formation of the church. When the world was turned upside down, the natural reaction was to seek out ways to connect with God in a tangible way, through the labyrinth. I am encouraged and hope that as *Rockledge United Methodist Church* moves into the future, they will do so with confidence and love.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The times are difficult. They call for courage and faith. Faith is in the end a lonely virtue. Lonely especially where a deeply authentic community of love is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over...¹

I tend to see a congregation as a whole, but really it is many different people moving at various rates in the spiritual life. This may seem a simplistic observation, but this paradigm shift has allowed me to be able to work with people where they are and not worry so much about everybody being a unified thing. In other words, not everybody has to be experiencing God the same way for there to be growth and healing in the church. Working in the church is more like trying to push hundreds of marbles up a hill at the same time. It is difficult and often frustrating work, but there are moments when God's grace shines through. Some people respond. Some even seem to grow in their spirituality. But overall, it is difficult work. In the end, we can only create space for God to work and arrange, as best we can, an encounter of the people with God. We can only be the first follower; dancing the dance with God while encouraging others to join in. I hope and pray that my work in the local church is one that has an overall positive influence. I will continue to do these things even if the church seems unable to perceive grand and sweeping changes. Through this project I have learned to celebrate the little moments of healing and small movements in spiritual formation because that is, after all, progress.

¹ Robert E. Daggy, ed. *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), 107.

Though it is tradition in many United Methodist churches to celebrate the Eucharist on the first Sunday of the month, we celebrate Holy Communion every week at *Rockledge United Methodist Church*. There is a moment in the ritual of what we call our family meal when, as presider, I break the bread and lift the cup, and announce that we invite all to share in the body and blood of Christ. I say, “These are the gifts of God for the people of God, take them in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your heart with thanksgiving.” After this we receive the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, together. We engage in this practice this again and again.

Paul writes to the saints gathered at Ephesus: “He is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Ephesians 2:14). It has been my experience that it is Christ who brings about peace and restoration and I am part of the process. My job is join Christ in this work by breaking bread and breaking down the walls between us. God may see fit to use me but I am not the one bringing about the restoration of my congregation. God is the healer and restorer of all creation and we are a part of that restoration. Weekly we pray for peace in worship. We eat together at the Table. I believe that it is hard to be angry with someone with whom you eat and pray. It is a work of love that begins over and over and over again.

In his book, *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, pastor and teacher Peter Scazzero says, “Loss is loss. It is the norm of life, not the exception.”² Dealing with my own grief and loss has been an ongoing process for me. If the church is like a body (as the Apostle

² Peter Scazzero. *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 162.

Paul illustrates in Scripture) then it makes sense that what a person can experience, the church can also experience. The author goes through a long explanation about how our past is always present. He talks about the liminal experience and the importance of reflecting on experience and emotions. In the moment, many seem unable to share their stories. Perhaps it is far too messy a process or they are too close to the situation to begin to articulate it. It is only through reflection that we can think back and begin to form our story in a way that we can share it. The author then makes the point that the old births the new. From this he does not mean there is some kind of ultimate healing that comes, but that our grief is always with us and we somehow learn how to live with it. Grief is grief. It is an ongoing thing. We may experience new grief in life but that emotion is connected to all the other grief experiences in our lives. In a sense, our grief never really gets to heal because every time something comes us, it taps on the scab again, or pushes on the bruise, creating pain. Dealing with my grief will be a life-long process and I am ok with that. I am learning that God stands in solidarity with those who suffer.

In the case of *Rockledge United Methodist Church*, circumstances have caused the grief of the congregation to seem ever-present. Even the recent talk about the possibility of merging with another church is pushing on the bruise again. As such, it can feel like no progress is being made to grow spiritually, but we know that God is at work if only by the reflections and journals of the pilgrims.

To be fair, there have been moments of joy and glory. They are *Shekinah* moments. *Shekinah* is a Hebrew word that refers to a collective vision that brings together what was fragmented and broken into a unity in the presence of God. My Rabbi friend calls it a form of healing. As the story goes, the Hebrew people returned to

Jerusalem from Babylon after years in exile and were heartbroken at the ruins of the Temple. In their broken and defeated state, the people saw a great light fill the space where the Temple had once proudly stood. This dazzling display was the glory of God, the very presence of God, showing the people that they were home and that God was with them. The Shekinah light faded out but the glory of God remained.

Spiritual formation can be a messy endeavor. It can feel like failure and frustration. In my own experiences I can look back and see that I learned more about the spiritual life from doing it wrong than doing it right. God seems to teach us in every circumstance. So for me, I think that the important thing to remember is to try. People in my church are at different levels in their spiritual growth. Some are moving faster than others. Some are trying and others are afraid they will do it wrong and seem frozen in fear of a God that might as soon smite them as love them. Still, we cling to an understanding that God is with us no matter what.

Earlier in this paper I mentioned my time on Orcas Island with Dr. Leonard Sweet. During those days of deep and thoughtful discussions about the church, Dr. Sweet asked us, "Is ministry to you more science or art?" Some in the group answered, "science" while I answered, "art." I may have answered "art" at that time because of my background in music and my love for the art world. But after this research project I am seeing my ministry in the church at a deeper level. I do not think that you can take a scientific approach to ministry. Church is not a formula or series of steps that if you do things right or in a particular series, you will get results. I tend resist the idea of taking a business plan or idea from the secular world and to attempt to use it to bring renewal to the church. Yes, I realize there are things we can learn from other areas, but the church is

not so formulaic. It is more like art. As art, sometimes things do not work and you start over, like an ice cream social ministry experience at which only the minister's family attends! Sometimes you make mistakes and you paint over the mistake with a correction. Sometimes what you started to make takes on a completely different direction than what you started out to do but the end result can be marvelous, like a beach experience wherein the minister spontaneously decides to create a labyrinth with a stick and it becomes a moment of evangelism through invitation. And sometimes amazing things you never thought possible happen, like renewal from a new roof or people asking to walk the labyrinth because they sense that they need to be held in that sacred space again.

Spiritual formation is an artistic process. It is not a philosophical, political, or pragmatic project. It is more like a creative, artistic, musical composition. It is like a symphonic arrangement of melody and harmony but instead of various instrumentation, the art of the church can be found in stories, experiences, sounds, symbols, images, and metaphors that connect us and unify us as a congregation. In other words, we live the spiritual life together, it is messy and inefficient but there can still be Shekinah beauty in the process.

Rockledge United Methodist Church and her pastor remain a work in progress and that is ok. When we pause to consider a moment in time, in the life of a church or a person, it is possible to become discouraged. Snapshots in life can feel like an incomplete painting or unfinished tapestry. To be honest, some days feel like progress and other days like regression. But we move forward day by day certain that God is at work among us. And as we move into the future, we can trust that all of our moments of both good and bad stuff are going to be weaved together into the tapestry of the life of

this congregation. God is the master artist and we are the clay being molded and re-created by the hand of God. So do not be afraid to try something new. Do not be afraid to fail, learn from it. Celebrate the victories both great and small and have fun on the journey.

APPENDIX A

SERMONS

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God

Sermon #1

March 5, 2017

Lent 1

Traveling with the Devil

Theme: Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

Welcome to Lent! We have officially entered into this season of the church year where we practice reflection and consider the condition of our souls. We ask hard questions like, “How am I doing in my spiritual walk? What can I do to follow God more faithfully? Where have I done well in following God? Where could I do better?”

For me, this Lenten season is special. Many of you know that I am working on my Doctor of Ministry Degree. This degree requires a research project designed to explore some aspect of ministry to see what can be learned for the benefit of not just the local congregation, but for the church universal too. My research project will take place this year in Lent.

In one class I heard that sometimes you pick your project and sometimes the project picks you. In my case, the project picked me. I am exploring Pilgrimage as a means of Spiritual Formation. This all started in a very organic way with the simple idea that as Christians, we follow a living God and because of this, every day is a pilgrimage. I define pilgrimage as, “traveling with a holy intent or purpose.” If we come from God at birth and return to God at our death, then the time in between is a journey back to God. It is a holy pilgrimage lived out in our ordinary, day-to-day lives, however many of us do not look at our lives as a pilgrimage.

So I began to wonder, what would look like if we lived our lives from an awareness of pilgrimage? What kind of travel is involved? Can we travel locally? Does one have to travel to exotic locations and spend a lot of money to experience pilgrimage or can the experiences be short ones and be done on a budget or even for free? I also began to think about how hard it could be to connect with God when our lives seem so ordinary. We get use to our surroundings and sometimes we can go from task to task with little or no thought. Have you ever driven in your car and your mind drifts and all of a sudden, you realize where you are but you cannot really remember how you arrived there? Life on autopilot. People do it at church, too. They say *The Lord's Prayer* or the *Apostle's Creed* or come to the Table and there is no passion. They are just going through the motions, all the while life is going by but we are unaware of the profound experiences that are unfurling all around us! I began to think about how a pilgrimage experience or trip might be a creative and necessary disconnect from the ordinary in order to seal away to a different context for a time so that we may intentionally focus on God and the condition of our souls.

So this is my project. Can traveling with a holy intent help a person or a church to grow in their faith? Each Sunday of Lent I will be preaching on a different aspect of pilgrimage looking at the example of Jesus. Jesus was always on the move. We are going to look at different aspects of his life over the next few weeks leading up to Easter and we will consider how pilgrimage – traveling with a holy intent – can shape our spiritual walk. Toward the end of Lent, there will be two, local and free opportunities available to the members and friends of the church that will give us the chance to practice

pilgrimage and to reflect on our experience. More information will be coming in the weeks ahead.

Each week you will also receive an insert in your bulletin highlighting a different spiritual practice. If one is going to be traveling and focusing on spiritual formation, then I believe that having several tools in your toolbox to choose from might give us a better chance to connect with God in a new or deeper way. These tools are not just for pilgrimage; they are for life. This week's spiritual practice is on how to practice Christian Meditation. We will not spend a lot of time on these each week but they are there for you to read and try. Read them. Be open-minded and give them a try. As always, if you have questions or concerns, just give me a call or drop me an email.

So let's get into today's message. The sermon today is titled, "Traveling With the Devil." In our text today, Jesus is facing temptation. Have you ever been tempted? Think about that – what was that like for you? Did you overcome your temptation? Did you give in? Was it a struggle? Did you give in right away? What feelings did you have as you went through it?

The Devil tempted Jesus in three ways.

1. Physically. The Devil tempted Jesus with food in the middle of his fast. I think that it is easy to reason that Jesus was able to resist temptation better than us because he is fully divine. But remember, he is also fully human. Often we forget that. Jesus was hungry. He was famished. He was not just hungry; he was starving. The Devil came to Jesus when he was weak and put before him the idea that he did not have to be hungry. This was easy to fix! Jesus could fulfill his own desires – his own needs – and do it on his terms. If you are the Son of God, do this. The Devil tempts Jesus not

only with hunger but with his very identity, but Jesus did not take the bait. Why? Because he knew his purpose. He knew who he was and who's he was. He knew the plan that would lead him to death on a cross for the restoration of the world.

2. Spiritually. The Devil challenged Jesus' identity again. If you are the Son of God, fling yourself off the pinnacle of the Temple. God will save you! Miraculous salvation for all to see! Wouldn't that be great? Jesus says, no. God's glory will be revealed in God's time, not yours and not mine. God is in charge. Too often I struggle with this. I want to do God's work on my time and my terms. I am here to tell you, it does not work. This is why resting and praying is so important. This is why being still before God is critical to our spiritual walk. This is where contemplative practices can help us so much. God needs to direct our path, no one else.

3. The devil tempts Jesus with power and Lordship. Jesus knew that all authority in heaven and earth would be given to him (Matthew 28:18). But Jesus understood that it has to be on God's time and by God's hand. In the end, the temptations that Jesus faced all had to do with power and his identity. Was Jesus going to do things his way, or the Father's way? Ego verses submission. Immediate gratification or stick to the plan of suffering that will ultimately lead to the restoration of the world?

The Devil temps us today too and he does it much the same way. Will it be our way or God's way? The easy way out or the path of downward mobility that God wants you to travel? Facing temptation is a fact of life. Sometimes we are overcomers and sometimes we are weak and give in. Have you ever heard the expression, "God will never give you more than you can handle?" That concept is in the Bible. (1 Cor. 10:13 – "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he

will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

If this is so, then what was the way out for Jesus? I think dealing with temptation is about knowing God’s will and purpose for our lives and clinging to that with everything we have. Temptations are shortcuts. Temptations can short circuit God’s will for our lives and the lives of those around us. Temptations are ways to satisfy our desires – to let our own ego be in charge. Temptations are a way for us to play God.

Jesus knew that he was the Son of God. Jesus knew that his life was headed to the cross. Jesus knew what the game plan was – restoration of all creation through him, back to God. To take a shortcut or the easy way out would thwart God’s plan for him.

The way out, the escape hatch, if you will, is that Jesus is certain of the Father’s will for his life. Do you know what God’s will is for your life? Do you know as well as you know your name what it is that God wants you to do with your life? Do you feel like you know the reason you were born? Some of us do, some of us do not. If you do not know, you can find out. Pray. Ask God what it is that he has for you to do. Age is not a factor to God. Pray a simple prayer, “God, show me what you want me to give my one life to and whatever it is I will do it. I will be what you want me to be. I will go where you want me to go.” Keep praying until you get an answer. When we know our God-given purpose or calling, battling temptation becomes much easier.

Finally, it is important to not skip over the last part of this story. Immediately after this ordeal was over, God sent angels to take care of Jesus. Angels are real. By the grace of God, we are cared for and nurtured by a loving God. God travels with us in life.

God stands in solidarity with those who suffer. But from suffering and death comes new life.

As we pilgrimage through life, we know these things:

- God travels with us.
- God supports and sustains us on the journey.
- God loves us and cares for us along the way.

So when you are tempted as you travel through life, hold firm. Endure. Remember that God has provided the way out. And when you fail, do not beat yourself up over it. Give yourself grace. God does! Try again. Keep walking and keep traveling the road of life. It is a difficult but glorious journey.

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #2
March 12, 2017
Lent 2
Traveling in the Dark
Theme: Confusion
John 3:1-17

Have you ever experienced a time in your life when you were confused about something? Have you ever been presented with an idea or notion that you just could not seem to wrap your brain around? What was that like for you? How do you process and deal with things that seem contradictory to what you believe? Do you hold your ground and say, “I am right and everybody else is wrong?” This kind of person is often referred to as “close-minded.” Or do you try and muster up the courage to see the other person’s opinions and ideas? In the process they hold in tension multiple ideas and are open to new truths and deeper faith. In this process, we may not change our mind, but we are not afraid of someone else with a new idea. This person is the “open-minded” person.

Today we hear about Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who comes to Jesus in the middle of the night, asking questions. The religious leaders are trying to figure out who this Jesus is. Some brush him off as just another fly-by-night religious nut but others are willing to hear him and carefully weigh what he is saying. Among the Pharisees, there is a debate. They are wondering about resurrection and the afterlife. Some believe in it and some do not. There is confusion among the ranks so Nicodemus gets this idea that he will go and ask Jesus. Nicodemus is sure that Jesus is from God because no one could do what Jesus is doing unless God is with him.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Some speculate that Nicodemus came at night so that he would not be recognized by other Pharisees and ridiculed or made fun of. As if

coming to Jesus at night was some kind of self-protection or way to preserve his image and privilege as a leader among the Pharisees. But I don't think so. Nicodemus shows up again in Jesus' story. Where? (With Joseph of Arimathia). This was not a man trying to hide. If Nicodemus was concerned about his image among the Pharisees then he certainly would not have show up to deal with the dead body of Jesus ritually defiling himself, just before the holiest day of the Jewish year.

In the Bible, darkness is often a metaphor for confusion. Nicodemus is confused. He is in a dark place. He is unsure. He has questions. He is wrestling with his faith. One of the biggest reasons I became a Methodist is that we allow room for people to ask questions and to wrestle with the difficult issues. We can faithfully come to our own conclusions and know that there is room for our ideas and the ideas of others in the same faith. We can hold different ideas and opinions in tension and still love each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. I do not know about you, but I love being able to bring my whole self into church, warts and all.

But lets be honest, new information and ideas can be unsettling. It is ok. Jesus presents Nicodemus with the idea of a new life in God through the Holy Spirit. At first Jesus says it is like being born again but this is very confusion to Nicodemus. Jesus tries to use something physical and concrete to explain the resurrection to Nicodemus, but it is just not seeking in. So Jesus switches metaphors. It is like the wind that blows. It is real, you can feel it, but how it arrives and how it departs us is a mystery. Nicodemus is not picking up what Jesus is putting down. He just does not get it. So Jesus takes yet another approach, an example from Scripture. You can find this story in Numbers 21:4-9.

The Hebrew people have left Egypt. They are on their way to the Red Sea and the people are becoming impatient. They begin to oppose Moses and God saying, “Why did you bring us out into the wilderness to die? We have no food, we have water and the food that we do have taste terrible.” So God sent venomous serpents among the people and if a person was bit, they died. Well, it did not take long for the Hebrew people to change their tune. “Help us Moses! Pray to God to take away the serpents from us!” But God did not take away the serpents. Instead he commanded Moses to make a bronze image of the very serpent that is causing all this trouble and put it on a pole in the middle of the camp. Anyone who is bit need only to look upon this image and he or she will live. To worship an idol is wrong, but to gaze upon something, knowing by faith that it is God who is providing the healing and not the image – that is ok. The bronze serpent did not do anything, the healing – new life – that came from God through the faith of the one who is suffering. What a metaphor for our sinful condition! A serpent on a stick. A sign of healing. A path to a new life that is refocused on God. This is the symbol of healing still used today for those in the medical field.

This image is not only healing, but this is a beautiful symbol of life that continues, an image of eternal life. No matter how many times one was bitten they only needed to look upon this sacred image and get another chance. Total healing, renewal, and life continuing for all those who follow God! Eternal life is nothing for God. God can make it happen! If God is powerful enough to perpetuate our physical lives in the face of constant death, then the afterlife is totally within the realm of possibility. The serpent on the pole becomes the metaphor for what will happen with Jesus on the cross. Look to Jesus and you will live. That is good news!

Sometimes Jesus tells a story to us that only makes sense later. Jesus tells Nicodemus this story, but with the experience of the cross before him, I can only imagine that Nicodemus's mind must be reeling. Did you notice that this story is left open-ended? We do not see any resolution within Nicodemus. We do not know if he had an "Ah ha" moment or if he went away more confused than ever. I think that is the point. The questions about eternal life that Nicodemus asked are the very questions that we need to wrestle with too.

- Can I be born again?
- How will that work, Jesus?
- How can I be certain of the resurrection and eternal life?
- What must I do to receive eternal life?

I could give you my thoughts to the answers to these questions, but I am not going to do that today. I am happy to visit with you should you wish to discuss this further, but for today, I think it is important that we leave these things open ended. Having heard all of this. If you were in Nicodemus' place, how would you respond to Jesus?

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #3
March 19, 2017
Lent 3
Traveling Incognito
Theme: Shame
John 4:5-42

What does the word “Incognito” mean? (having one's true identity concealed, in disguise, disguised, under cover, in plain clothes, camouflaged). It is to cover up who you are so that you do not have to face the reality of your situation. Spies travel incognito. Movie stars and famous musicians travel incognito to try and avoid paparazzi. But I think the woman in our story is concealing something. How do we know? Because she is going to the well at noon (v6).

You see, it was customary in the day of Jesus for the women to gather water from the well at the beginning of the day. You need water and it is best to get it before the sun gets too hot. The women would often go out in groups to help each other carry the heavy load. Many times the kids were in tow. So if most people go to the well early in the morning, to go out at noon tells us something about this woman. What does it tell us? (by herself, no friends, she is carrying shame).

This woman's shame has to do with the fact that she has been married and divorced 5 times and presently, she is living with a man who she is not married to. In the day of Jesus this is scandalous! No wonder she is going to the well when nobody else is around! Perhaps she is an outcast. Maybe she is pushed to the sidelines of society. There might be a stigma attached to her. Or maybe, she is so full of shame that she has taken it upon herself to avoid other people. Maybe she is thinking, “I do not want to confront this. I do not want to have to talk about my shame with others so I will just go

to the well when the chances of bumping into other people will be less.” How have you experienced shame in your life? Are you experiencing shame right now? What is that like for you? How do you deal with your shame? I bet that for most of us, we bury our shame deep down and we dare not talk about it - ever.

Women and men experience shame differently. Shame for women seems to be more about not meeting expectations, never being enough in your appearance, motherhood, balancing work and family, relationship activities and fitting in. For men, shame has more to do with fear. Us guys are afraid of being seen as weak, we fear being a failure, we fear rejection for what we perceive as our defectiveness. But no matter how we experience shame, the fact of the matter is that we all experience it. No one talks about it and by not talking about it we give shame power in our lives. So how does one overcome their shame?

The first step is to realize the power that shame can have over us by not talking about it. Our own thoughts, our own ego is the battle ground for this. Somehow we come to believe that we have no inherent worth and that we have to work hard to prove ourselves. For a perfectionist like me, this can be a place of constant frustration. Shame and vulnerability researcher, Brene Brown says in her book, *Rising Strong*, “...when perfectionism is driving, shame is riding shotgun.”¹ On top of that we live in a culture that is a scarcity culture where we never have enough. On top of that the little voice inside our head tries to keep us in place of shame by questioning our motives, “Who do you think you are?”

¹ Brene Brown. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 194.

Overcoming our shame requires the courage to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is our ability to share both our strengths and our struggles with others. Vulnerability can “slide” and we can either be very open or very closed. In our openness we are empathetic, when we close off ourselves we are fearful that our shame will adversely affect the relationship.

Back to the story. How does Jesus interact with the Samaritan woman? He talks to her! He treats her with respect. She must feel that this Jewish man is a safe place to share her deepest and darkest secret. Jesus talks first. He makes the first move! God is always the first mover, we can only respond. We can only second the motion. Jesus offers her living water. Living water is a metaphor. What does Jesus mean by this? Physically we know that water is life giving, it is refreshing, it quenches our thirst. Without water we die. If the physical body needs tangible water to live, then the spiritual body needs spiritual water to survive.

By having the courage to be vulnerable and share her shame with Jesus, she became able to receive the living water of God by faith. Talking about her shame to God removed the power that her shame had over her. Look at what happened! She began going all through the town talking to anybody and everybody who would listen. She is no longer afraid of relationships! She became transformed and God used her testimony to transform the entire community!

The thing about confessing those things that shame us to God is that God is a God of love. God is a God that will give us another chance. God does not take our confession and use it against us. God fills us with the love of living water so that our old ways are washed away and we become new creations, clean and perfect before God. I do not

know what shame are you traveling with in life. But I do know that we do not have to carry that heavy load. We can put it down and swim in the river of living water that is before us.

As we come to the table today, we will have a time of confession and pardon as we usually do. There is a time of silence there. I would encourage you that in that moment of silence, you make your own confession to God, about whatever you need to. Take courage. Be vulnerable. Give whatever is shaming you or whatever is on your heart to God. Christ, our Lord, invites to his table all who love him...

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #4
March 26, 2017
Lent 3
Traveling With Suspicion
Theme: Doubt
John 9:1-41

Have you ever been under the microscope? Have you ever felt what it is like to be suspected for something you did or did not do? Has anyone ever called into question your integrity or cast doubt on your character? Has anyone ever thrown shade your way? What did that feel like? How did you respond or react? Did the situation of someone casting doubt on you cause you to doubt yourself? As we travel through life we deal with doubt and suspicion from time to time. Sometimes the source of the doubt is external, it is from others, But at other times, we get caught up in the paralyzing web of self-doubt.

One of the main themes in the Gospel of John is the metaphor of blindness. Who can see and who can not. In our story today, Jesus heals a man who has been blind from birth. It was an assumption in the day of Jesus that if a person had some malady or birth defect that it was either the result of sin in their own life or even the consequences of sin in the lives of the parents or grandparents. The disciples ask, “Why was this man born blind? Was it his sin or the sin of his parents?” That is an interesting question. How could it be his sin if he was born that way? Could he sin in the womb? For this man, his integrity, his character is called into question because he is blind. All his life he has lived under the suspicion of being a sinful person or worse, the recipient of punishment for acts he did not even commit. We can not trust this guy. He is a sinner. God is punishing him.

Jesus tells them, it is not what you think. And Jesus then did something kind of gross. He spit.¹ I wonder how those around Jesus responded to his spitting on the ground. Were they shocked? Did some think Jesus was showing some kind of contempt for the man thereby confirming the sinful curse on this outcast Jew? But then Jesus did the unthinkable. He reached down and picked up the spit along with some dirt, made a paste out of it and smeared it onto the man's eyes.

Healing spit! Wow! I wonder if this is where we get the phrase, "clear as mud?" In a sense, Jesus spits in the eye of the traditional views of his religion to illuminate the truth of God's love even for the outcast! Jesus tells the man to go to a certain pool and wash. The man does, but Jesus is long gone. The man never saw the face of his redeemer! The people around the healed man want to know where the prophet is, but all the man can tell them is that his name is Jesus. Isn't it interesting that in the face of healing and restoration, some people just can not accept it? Rather than celebrate the miracle of restored sight, they took the man to the Pharisees who question him, then call in his parents to testify and then question the man again! And after all that, Scripture tells us that the Pharisees drove him out again. The poor man was outcast because he was blind and now he is outcast because he can see. He can not seem to catch a break. He is living under the constant cloud of doubt and suspicion.

As I imagine in my mind this story unfolding, I see the man leaving the Temple. I see the sadness on his face but at the same time, I see joy because he can see where he is going now! I feel his emotional pain as he realizes that he is unwelcome to worship God in the traditional fashion. Even his parents ended up on the inside while he is

¹ Leonard Sweet. *The Bad Habits of Jesus: Showing us the Way to Live Right in a World Gone Wrong*. (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 4.

outcast again. He is alone. Shame, doubt, and suspicion fall on him like heavy shadows. All of it being piled on from those who do not understand and who do not have eyes to see the reality of the work of God that is before them. Isn't that the way it is in life? We try and follow God, we try to live our lives for him but there are those that no matter what we say or do will disparage us at every opportunity. We are put down because we are Christian. We are labeled. We are painted with broad brushes as elitist, privileged, uncaring, hateful, judgmental, so on and so forth.

Sadly, some of that is brought on ourselves but I believe that for the vast majority of God followers, we just want to follow God. And in doing so we have to deal with the slings and arrows that are heaved our way, either rightly or wrongly. But there is good news. The end of our story today we see that Jesus actually finds the man when he is at his lowest point. When all hope seems lost and he is full of despair, Jesus shows up! Here is the truth: God stands in solidarity with those who suffer. God stands in solidarity with those who are outcast. God stands in solidarity with all those who are in pain. Isn't that amazing?! God has a bias and it is not toward the religious people, it is to those on the margins, who are poor, weak, suffering and alone.

So listen up, religious people! Are we the blind ones? Are we the Pharisees in this story? Is God at work all around us and are we missing it? Do we reject that God might be doing some new work in front of us just because it does not fit our understanding of scripture and tradition? Can God use all people to bring about the Kingdom? Could God use even those we think are sinful to accomplish his purposes? Could God use black, white, Hispanic, Jew, Muslim, Christian, old, young, gay or

straight people? You bet he can! You better believe he does! The Bible is full of stories of misfit people who serve God and make a difference in this world.

As we travel through life, and as try to follow Jesus as a forgiven and restored people, folks will doubt us. People will be suspicious of our motives and put us down. We may even have moments where we doubt ourselves as we try to follow God. We may have moments of incredible clarity and also times of feeling like the outcast. We may have times where we can see God at work and others where we are more like the Pharisees than we care to admit. But take heart. God is seeking us out. God wants to help us see! God is on our side and he stands in solidarity with us. So let us travel boldly, knowing that it is God who gives us the sight we need to see as we take that next step.

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #5
April 2, 2017
Lent 5
Traveling With Grief
Theme: Grief
John 11:1-45

We follow a living God and as such, each day is a pilgrimage. Each Sunday of Lent we are focusing on a different aspect of pilgrimage looking at the example of Jesus. Jesus was always on the move. We are going to look at different aspects of his life over the next few weeks leading up to Easter and we will consider how the idea of pilgrimage – traveling with a holy intent – can shape our spiritual walk.

Toward the end of Lent, there will be 2, local and free opportunities available to the members and friends of the church that will give us the chance to practice pilgrimage and to reflect on our experience. These will be a prayer labyrinth and a trip to a local beach. Let's talk about the labyrinth. It will be here this week. Opening day is Thursday, April 6th. There are no appointments, come when you want to and experience this unique and moving way to pray to God. The labyrinth is ancient. Maybe you have heard it said, that if you want to try something new, try something old. Prayer labyrinths are an ancient method of prayer that is enjoying a renewal today.

Labyrinths are not mazes. Mazes are meant for entertainment. There are dead-ends and more than one way through them. In a Labyrinth there is only one path. One path to the center and the same path back out. You cannot get lost! You have a labyrinth on your insert today. You can trace the path with your finger. If you do this prayerfully and mindfully, even the act of tracing a small labyrinth with your finger can be deep experience. The prayer labyrinth is meant to be symbolic of the spiritual life. Life has

twists and turns in it. At times we are far away from God (God is represented by the center) and other times we are close. We seek to travel to God but we have to return to the world.

Read the brochure. Read the Spiritual Formation practice and plan to come out and experience the labyrinth. A lot of work by many people has gone into the planning of this experience so give it a try. Be open-minded and come searching to catch a glimpse of the Holy. I am excited to see how God might to use this ancient tool to form us in our spiritual walk today. Well, enough about that. Let's get into today's message. In this series we have considered the topics of shame, doubt, confusion, and temptation. Today's sermon is titled, "Traveling With Grief."

In scripture Jesus cried twice, once over a city and once over a person. It is profound that Jesus grieved over Jerusalem, a city that would not hear his message or receive him. Jesus was moved to tears, not over buildings and temples, but over the condition of the hearts of the people. When is the last time we cried over Rockledge? When is the last time we were broken-hearted over 32955? It is worthy question to ask, but that sermon is for another day.

Our story today is the time when Jesus cried at the tomb of his best friend, Lazarus. Scholarly interpretation on this passage is widely varied. Many focus on the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus and by association, the divinity of Jesus, but far fewer commentaries address the humanity of Jesus, the weeping Jesus, which is what captures my interest and what I would like us to focus on today.

Jesus was fully divine, but he was also fully human at the same time. I need Jesus to be human. I need to know that my God understands what this life is like for me. But

for some reason, we do not think too much about the humanity of Jesus. We like the divine qualities that we see. We do not think about Jesus doing mundane things like we do. Did he like baths or showers? How bad was his teenage acne? What kinds of games did he like to play with his friends? What kind of jokes did he play on his siblings? Did he leave his toenail clippings on the floor of his room, driving his mother crazy? What kind of music did he like? Can you imagine Jesus singing? Did he dance? What was his favorite meal? Did he ever go to bed having forgotten to brush his teeth?

While thinking of Jesus in this way may be new for some of us, for some reason, to think about Jesus in grief is not too much of a stretch. Perhaps it is because we have an understanding of the horrors of crucifixion. Maybe we remember how Jesus sang out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Psalm 22:1)?” Maybe it is because we know that Jesus actually suffered and died. The prophet Isaiah calls the messiah, “A man of sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3).”

Grief is a tough one. Some deal with sorrow and grief really well, but until recently, that was not me. You see, I grew up in rural West Texas. In that culture, men and boys do not cry. I suspect it is the same in other parts of the world, but this is how I experienced it. Stop crying boy, or I’ll give you something to cry about. Sound familiar? From a young age, I learned how to bury my feelings and not deal with painful emotions. Thank God for *Clinical Pastoral Education* and the ordination process of the *United Methodist Church* – it has helped me so much in this regard. Now I do not blame my parents. They did the best they could. It was a different time and a different place. It was the culture of the day.

I think that when most of us think about grief, we think about the grief we have when we lose a loved one; the grief that comes from experiencing death. That is a profound grief. In my own experience, the deepest grief that I deal with is from the tragic loss of loved ones. That kind of grief is deep and painful at first. It is still painful even now, but somehow I carry my grief differently than I did when it was new and fresh. I do not want to minimize that kind of experience at all. But I also think that there are other kinds of losses that we can grieve.

- Leaving the womb, though I do not remember it, it must feel like a loss.
- Going to school – clinging to mom.
- Friends moving away.
- Changing schools.
- Changing churches.
- Graduating and going to college.
- Getting married.
- Experiencing the death of loved ones.
- Moving to another state (leaving family).
- Losing a job.
- Kids growing up and moving away.
- Kids getting their driver's license and not needing me in quite the same way anymore.
- People leave the church.
- Itinerancy.

Looking back, all these things were changes. Yes, good came out of most of them, but at the onset of many of life's changes, we experience grief in various ways. How have you experienced grief? How do you handle your grief? What do you lean on? Do you tend to stuff and forget, like me, or do you have other means to deal with it?

I think that it is important that we grieve all our losses. We need to give ourselves permission to grieve. If you need to, literally write yourself a permission slip.¹ I wrote one that said, "I give myself permission to feel sad and to grieve my losses." As I am approaching the end of the ordination process in the *United Methodist Church*, one of the things that I keep getting feedback on is that I need to continue to work on my own grief and issues of suffering. And I wonder, why does this keep coming up? Peter Scazzero, in his book *The Emotionally Healthy Church* says that for clergy, we experience loss in an ongoing fashion simply because of the nature of our work.² You see, grief is grief. The emotion is the emotion. Every time we experience a grief event, it taps on the grief wound we already have. It's like picking back a scab or pushing on a deep bruise. Every time the bishop moves us – grief. When we leave friends, when we bury friends, when friends leave us – even picking new doctors and dentists. Ugh. That grief just keeps on getting poked and picked at and as a result, it never really truly goes away. But this is not a phenomenon unique to clergy. No, the truth of the matter is that this is how it works for all of us.

¹ Brene, Brown. *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 68.

² Peter Scazzero. *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2010), 159.

Even Jesus knew what it was like to be sad and grieve. In our story today Jesus cries, but not because Lazarus is dead. He plainly told the disciples that Lazarus was dead days before he arrived in Bethany. Scripture gives us no indication that Jesus mourned at that point. Where Jesus did cry was when he saw Mary and Martha break down and weep. These are his best friends! Jesus goes to Mary and Martha's home in Bethany a lot. It is the one place he can let down his hair and relax. It is a safe place for him. In the house of his best friends, not only can he enjoy Martha's amazing cooking, I suspect that this is the kind of place where he can blow off steam. "That Peter is driving me crazy. I'm worried about Judas."

This is what I want us to notice this morning; when Jesus sees his dearest and closest friends crying out in the painful grip of grief and suffering, he is deeply moved and he cries *with* them. God stands in solidarity with those who are suffering and with those who are in grief. When we are in pain, God is right there with us. In our darkest moments, when we feel that all is out of our control and there is nothing left to hold on to, what we discover is that God is there to catch us. God cradles us in love and compassion. God prevents us from falling into total annihilation. God weeps with us.

I do not know about you, but I find great comfort in this. In our deepest sadness, we are not alone! It is ok to feel sad from time to time. It is ok to cry and to grieve the losses in our lives. Do not hold them in. Do not bury them inside hoping it will just go away. Trust me, it won't.

- As we travel through life in the midst of grief, may God help us in our journey.
- May God help us to trust that when things are out of our control, that we can fall into the safety net of God's sustaining love and peace.

- May we come to know that God is with us no matter what;
- And may we travel this life knowing that God loves us and God stands in solidarity with us even and most especially when we are in our darkest and deepest moments.
- God knows our sorrows and is acquainted with our grief.
- God weeps WITH us.

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #6
April 9, 2017
Palm Sunday
Traveling With Purpose
Theme: Anger
Matthew 21:1-17

Welcome to Palm Sunday! This is the first day of what we call “Holy Week.” Holy Week is the week leading up to Easter, the holiest day of the year for Christians. This week is full of powerful stories about Jesus and today is one of my favorites. This story begins in Bethlehem and ends up at the Temple in Jerusalem and in this story we see Jesus get angry. As we travel the spiritual life, sometimes we get angry. Is it ok to get angry? I think so. I bet everyone as some point or another has experienced the emotion of anger. It is a natural emotion. But how do you handle your anger? Do you fly off the handle? Do you seek vengeance? Do seek a pound of flesh from those who did you wrong? Can anger lead to sinful behavior? In other words, in our anger, can we do things that dishonor God? In Ephesians 4, Paul says that when you get angry, take care that your anger does not cause you to sin. There is a line and it can be crossed.

Bethlehem, it is often referred to as the City of David. David, the unlikely, youngest of all his siblings boy-king, chosen by God was born here. We know that Jesus was born there too. In Hebrew Bethlehem means house of bread, in Aramaic, it means house of blood. Interesting how bread and blood point to our ritual of Holy Communion we practice even to this day.

In the days of Jesus, Bethlehem was the place where the sacrificial lambs for the annual feast of Passover were raised. This explains the shepherd’s fields. Each year the lambs (thousands of them) were paraded into Jerusalem. This happened on the tenth of

the month, four days before Passover. Today we call this day – Palm Sunday. Why? The shepherds would use palm branches as a herding mechanism for the sheep. This way, sheep! The day that the sheep moved from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was called “The Procession of the Lambs.” This was a regular event, and Jesus, crashed the parade! As the procession passed by the Mount of Olives, Jesus joined in!

When the people are shouting Hosannas, they are proclaiming their faith that the Messiah is coming. The one promised by God is on their way! What joy and anticipation the crowd must feel! Who are the Jewish people expecting to return? They think perhaps Elijah will return. Why? Elijah did not die a normal death. Scriptures tells us in 2 Kings 2, how a chariot from heaven came down and carried off Elijah into the heavenly realm.

The crowd is not shouting Hosannas for Jesus. For them it is a statement of faith in what God is going to do in the future. As a matter of fact, they see this guy riding a donkey in the middle of a parade of only pure white sheep and they say, “who is that?” It is almost comical to picture it in your mind. The irony of it all is, of course, that the messiah is right there in front of them and they do not see it. Oh! How many times has God been right in front of us and we did not perceive or see or understand?

Lets talk for a moment about the Passover sacrifice. It had become common for people to purchase an ox or a lamb or a dove (pigeon). If really poor, you could purchase bread. Most purchased a lamb. For four days you were to take care of your lamb. You were to LOVE your lamb, play with it, name it, take care of it and treat it like part of the family. When it came time to bring your sacrifice to the temple, you brought the whole family with you. You would present your lamb to the priest who would ask you, “Do

you love your lamb?” If there were any snickering or lighthearted responses, it showed that you really did not truly love your lamb and the priest would ask you again, “Do you love your lamb?” If after 3 times, you were not able to give a heartfelt and remorseful response – your sacrifice was rejected. Can you imagine the humility if you had to turn around and go home against the flow of hundreds, even thousands, of other pilgrims who are making their way to offer their sacrifice?

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus gets angry. He goes to the place where the sacrificial animals are being sold and he makes a scene. Do you think he calmly says, “My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves,” as he casually walks over to a money-changing table and knocks it over? NO! I think he is angry! I think his voice is raised. I think he is yelling and causing a major interruption in the temple! In the Gospel of John, the writer remembers and records for us that Jesus even fashioned a whip and chased out not only the people but the animals too!

Why is Jesus angry? The sacrifice is no longer personal. In the Old Testament, your sacrifice was supposed to come from *your* flock. It was your gift, your sacrifice. This was meant to cost you something. It was never designed to be something you could just thoughtlessly purchase. It was never intended to be so impersonal. Jesus was angry because the Temple, the holiest place in all of Israel, was turned into a marketplace instead of a place of worship and repentance. It was more about convenience and making a buck than it was about atonement and forgiveness. Jesus is angry because the worship of God has been cheapened, hijacked, and dishonored. The disciples remembered what was written about the Messiah, “Zeal for my Father’s house will consume me (Psalm 69:9).”

So the bottom line is this. It is ok to be angry. Jesus got angry but he channeled his anger appropriately to correct the situation and remind the people of the true purpose and focus of worship. Even in anger, Jesus sought to point people back to God. His was always the message of repentance, change your hearts and minds – worship God in spirit and in truth.

When we get angry, we still need to be mindful of our emotions. We need to appropriately channel our anger so that God is honored. If we ever do anything in anger, that reflecting back, we think – that did not really bring honor to God, it is time to apologize. It is time to seek the restoration of our relationships and most importantly, it is important to ask for forgiveness (from God and from others) for those times when we do not handle our anger very well.

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #7
April 13, 2017
Maundy Thursday
Traveling With Love
Theme: Love one another as Jesus showed us how
John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Being a follower of God is all about love. It was God's intention from the first that those who follow him would live differently. While the rest of the world was about upward mobility where a very few enjoyed tremendous wealth and privilege on the backs of the vast majority who were poor and destitute, those who follow God are different. From the very beginning God tells the Hebrew people that they are to act different and be different. They are to take care of each other and even care for the foreigner, the outsider that is among them. They were to act like God would act if God were there. They are to be the example to the world about what it looks like to follow God. This example would bleed over into the rest of the world and a such Israel would become a nation to bless all nations.

When that did not work out so well, God sent us Jesus to be the physical model for us. In the person of Jesus we see all the misconceptions of God cleared up and we have a perfect example of what it looks like to live a holy life before God. Jesus is not the military king the Hebrews expected. His role was one of suffering, love, and peace; not of power and war and privilege. Even the way Jesus used scripture to make his point is fascinating, always going for radical inclusion and amazing love over any kind of power, especially religious power.

If your religious views favor building walls and keeping out refugees, where is the love in that? If we think that we are better than terrorists, where is the love in that? If we

turn a blind eye to the homeless on our community, where is the love in that? If people would be surprised to learn that we go to church because we live a different life on Sunday than we do the rest of the week, where is the love in that? If we look down our noses at people who act differently, live differently, look differently or have different values than we do, where is the love in that? Following Jesus is to live a life of love. All people have sacred worth. How come we think about creation and go straight to the fall? That did not happen till Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis 1 and 2, we see that before original sin there was original righteousness. For some reason we skip over the part that says, "it was good, it was good, it was VERY good!"

Jesus shows us the heart of God. 13:1: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Isn't that beautiful? He loved his followers till the end, I believe that that included Judas too. Jesus washed all their feet, even Judas is there at this time. He did not leave till later in the meal. No matter how bad we feel about ourselves, no matter how unworthy we think we are, God loves us. The fact that Jesus loved Judas enough to wash his feet so that even he would be completely clean says volumes about the kind of love that God has for people.

God loves all people. God desires that all should be saved. The fact that not all accept God is not a failure on God's part, but it is the result of our own free will. This relationship is a two-way street. God does not force his love on us; we have to receive it for the amazing gift that it is. And thank God that this gift of love is offered to all with no strings attached. You do not have to say *The Sinner's Prayer* (which is not in the Bible, by the way) you do not have to do any ritual or go through some kinds of multi-step program to receive God's love and salvation. All you have to be is willing to receive

it. Over and over again, Jesus proclaims forgiveness and salvation to people and almost none of them asked for it in advance. God is always the first mover. God's love is ready to be poured into our lives; all we have to be is receptive to the gift.

Love is the key value for those who claim to follow Jesus. Jesus said plainly that others would know that we are followers of Jesus by the way we love one another. The church should be the place where love is on display for all to see, yet for some reason, some of the most hateful people and hurtful things are done within the walls of the church and all of it justified and twisted into some sort of so-called righteous behavior. But there is good news...

Maundy Thursday = New Command. This is New Commandment Thursday. Love each other. Sounds simple, doesn't it? We could even make the argument that in our hearts we really do love each other. But Jesus takes this to a whole other level not by just telling us to love one another, but giving us a picture, an image of the kind of love that he is talking about. He washes the feet of his disciples. This is the job of the lowest of servants but Jesus models it so beautifully that if we really want to follow him, then everybody else has to take priority over us.

It is one thing to say we love each other, but it is another to actually do it. I am as guilty as the next person. I try to love but my loving is not perfect. Sometimes I fail miserably and I feel like Judas. Thankfully, God's love is perfect and forgiveness abounds for those of us who are trying to change their hearts and lives. The truth is that we all have a sliver of Judas in us. But Jesus shows us the way. It is by loving others, by totally serving them, placing them and their needs above our own. It is love with no

strings attached that requires tremendous humility to carry out. This is not easy, but I believe that it is possible.

So on this New Commandment Thursday; let us try again. Let us ask for forgiveness for where we have fallen short. Let us seek God's help to restore all our strained relationships and let us try to outdo one another in love. If we do this, if we really take this commandment to heart and try to live into it, I promise that when we come to Maundy Thursday next year, this will be a different church. We will be a vital, vibrant, growing, congregation of friends who really do love and care for each other. Living a life of love does not take big effort either. As a matter of fact, it is in the little things where we most experience love.

But how can we do it? What actions can we take that will show others we love them? Jesus gave us the model of feet washing. We do not go around washing each other's feet today so what is the metaphor? What does Jesus' actions mean for us today? (Wait for feedback)

One thing I love about Dinner Church is the clean up phase. At the end of this time together, we will all participate in cleanup. It always strikes me how doing this together as a group is practicing, on a small scale, exactly what Jesus calls us to do, to love each other. So how about it? Jesus is our friend. He is with us on the journey of life showing us what it is like to travel with love. Let's make love our goal and in the end, God will be glorified.

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #8
April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday
Traveling With Victory and Hope
Theme: hope
Matthew 28:1-10

We follow a living God and as such, each day is a pilgrimage. Each Sunday of Lent we focused on a different aspect of living life from the perspective of pilgrimage looking at the example of Jesus. Jesus was always on the move. Next week concludes our sermon series on pilgrimage as we wrap up how the idea of pilgrimage – traveling with a holy intent – can shape our spiritual walk.

Many of you have taken advantage of the prayer labyrinth these past few days and from your reflections, it is clear that God is at work in a mighty way around here! The labyrinth will close this afternoon so if you plan to walk it, right after worship today is your last chance. But even though the labyrinth is going away, there is another pilgrimage opportunity. This Saturday, April 22nd there will be another pilgrimage, this time we are going to the beach. (Reference handout. Also mention about the *Daily Examen*). A lot of work by many people has gone into the planning of these experiences so give it a try. Be open-minded and come searching to catch a glimpse of the Holy. I am excited to see how God might be forming us in our spiritual walk today. Well, enough about that. So let's get into today's message. In this series we have considered what it is like traveling through life with the partners of shame, doubt, confusion, temptation, anger, grief, and love. Today's sermon is titled, "Traveling with Victory and Hope."

Holy Week is over. The high holy day of Passover has come and gone and it has been a wild ride for the followers of Jesus. On Thursday we celebrated Maundy Thursday and remembered that Jesus gave us a new commandment – to love each other with humble, sacrificial love. We quietly reflected on the events of Good Friday and endured the darkness and confusion of Holy Saturday.

Our text says that it was early on Sunday morning when Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, went to the tomb of Jesus. O how they loved Jesus! They know the stone has been set. Still they must go to the tomb. Other gospel accounts tell us that they wanted to make things right by Jesus. He deserved a proper burial. Things had been rushed. The body of Jesus needed to be treated with the respect it deserved.

Can you imagine how they must be feeling as they make their way to the cemetery? Their friend and rabbi has been killed in the most heinous way known. He was not guilty; he was wrongly convicted. All their hope is gone. Jesus is dead. How can this be? It is safe to say that their situation felt hopeless and nothing like victory.

As they get to the tomb, the writer of Matthew tells us that it is an angel who appears and rolls back the stone creating a tremendous earthquake and revealing that the tomb is empty! This scares the guards so much that they fall down and play dead! But the Angel speaks to the women and tells them something amazing. “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come; see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’”

He is not here. People through the centuries have reasoned away the resurrection. They say the disciples stole the body and hid it. They say that the Roman Government moved the body to prevent rioting. Each of these scenarios do not hold water. The disciples were scattered. They were disorganized at this point. Their leader has just been killed. The tomb was heavily guarded and sealed up according to the other Gospel accounts. To try and raid the tomb was to risk death themselves. The Roman Government wanted Jesus to stay in the grave. To have him “missing” would be to fuel the fires of rebellion. They were trying to keep the peace, which is why the Roman officials finally turned Jesus over to be crucified after finding no fault in him.

But the Angel tells the women to go, tell his disciples that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." As they are making their way to where the disciples are, guess who shows up? Jesus! Out of nowhere. Suddenly, there he was confirming the message of the angel. This was not hallucination. This is the real deal. Go to Galilee. I will meet you there.

I wonder; do they fully understand that Jesus has been raised from the dead? Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps they are just glad to see him. Maybe they fall at his feet and worship him out of pure joy and delight at seeing him again, with all the developments over the weekend, it would take time sort all this out in their minds. I wonder how the disciples received this news? Did they believe the women or were they skeptical?

So what can we learn from the Resurrection account in Matthew this Easter Sunday Morning that could apply to us today? To me, the first thing is the realization that if I want to see Jesus, God will remove any barriers that might be in the way. Just like the stone was rolled away for the women, God will remove our barriers too. I know

this happened for many of you in the labyrinth. We enter with all kinds of walls up and our minds reeling with thoughts and by the time we get to the center, God has intervened. Many left the labyrinth emotional at how they encountered God.

Now the result of God working in our lives may not be what we expect. We may be a little freaked out at God's revelation, but that is ok. God's way points us in another direction, to a place where we can meet with Jesus. But the directions are pretty vague aren't they? Go to Galilee. That is the northern third of the country of Israel. It is not a small place; it is a geographical region. How were they to know where to meet Jesus? This is the second lesson I think we can apply to our walk today. How can we know where we will meet Jesus? I suspect that most likely the disciples realized that Jesus would find them. You will see me there. That takes care of the location problem, Jesus will find us, but the group of disciples needs to stay together. Over the next forty days, Jesus will appear to his disciples. Every time he appears to them after the resurrection, it is around a meal.

Makes sense to me. Jesus was a foodie. He liked food so much that people called him a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34). Of course he would show up at mealtime! As disciples of Jesus today, Jesus still promises to meet us where the food is - at the table. The directions are the same for us as it was for the ladies at the tomb. We are to go from our places of worship to gather up unbelievers and bring them to the pre-determined place (today that is the church - wherever it happens- and the table of Jesus) so everyone may have the opportunity to know him.

Are you seeking Jesus this morning? You do not have to do anything to find him. God has removed the barrier. We all have access to Jesus. Now the access may not be like we anticipate, but I guarantee you it is better than we could ever imagine!

Do you claim to be a disciple of Jesus? If you do, the message for us this morning and every morning from now on is to go, trusting the barriers have been removed and gather the scattered and then meet Christ at the appointed place – His Table. Let us come to the table this morning knowing that victory of sin and death has been accomplished through Jesus on the cross. It is finished and we are saved! Praise be to God! And let us travel this life full of hope. God has been faithful in the past and therefore we know that God will be faithful in the days ahead. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Sermon Series: Pilgrimage: Traveling toward God
Sermon #9
April 23, 2017
Second Sunday of Easter
Traveling With Assurance
Theme: Stop doubting and believe
John 20: 19-29 (31)

Today we conclude our sermon series on living the spiritual life through the metaphor of pilgrimage. Many of you have taken advantage of the pilgrimage opportunities that were offered and considering your reflections; it is obvious that God is with us. God is at work among his people! This is very exciting and formative stuff!

(Recognize *Trail Guides*) A lot of work by many people has gone into the planning of these experiences and I want to recognize my *Trail Guides*. They are the ones who molded and shaped these experiences. So *Trail Guides*, please stand. Let's give them a round of applause. Thank you *Trail Guides*!

Let's get into today's message. Today's sermon is titled, "Traveling with Assurance." What is assurance? (Confirmation, certainty, you know it to be real). This Gospel account begins on the evening of the first day of the week. This is the Sunday after Passover; the feast of First Fruits and it is in the evening. The women have been to the tomb. They have reported that Jesus has risen but there is doubt in the group of disciples. This story from John's perspective happens in two parts. The first occurs on Easter evening, the second part a week later on the following Sunday.

The disciples are in the same house that they had met in earlier. This is where they had celebrated the Passover with Jesus before the horrific events of the past 3 days came to pass. The Bible says that the disciples had secured themselves inside because they were afraid of their religious leaders. The Pharisees handed over Jesus to be killed;

perhaps they are next. Even though they have barricaded themselves in the house, Jesus appears in their midst and says, “Peace be with you.” The resurrected Jesus does not need to use doors. He can come and go in ways we cannot. His bodily resurrection included his whole earthly body. Remember, the tomb was empty. But in the resurrection his body is now able to do things it was not able to do before. Somehow the spiritual body and the physical body are connected in the resurrection.

Christians believe in a bodily resurrection.¹ All the physicality of what Jesus was became part of his real and resurrected body but something is different about him now. He can do things after the resurrection that he could not before, such as appear in and out of thin air. How is the possible? I must admit I do not know. Death and resurrection, like many spiritual matters, retains an element of mystery for us. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then (in the resurrection) we will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully...” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Now imagine, Jesus appears out of thin air. How would you have reacted if you were in the room with the disciples? I think I would have been a little freaked out. So the first thing Jesus says is, “Peace be with you.” After Jesus comforts them, he shows them his hands and his sides and the disciples are full of happiness as they realize it is truly Jesus who stands before them. They rejoice! They are overjoyed! Their doubts have been erased. They *believe*. They receive assurance.

Then Jesus begins to talk to them. He offers peace to the group again and he tells them, “God the father sent me, now I am sending you.” The disciples are commissioned

¹ For a wonderful book on death, resurrection and the afterlife from a Christian perspective, I recommend reading N.T. Wright’s book, *Surprised by Hope*. Harper One Press, 2008.

at this point. They have a job to do. The mission of God's plan for redemption of all creation has transferred from Jesus to the disciples.

In verse 22 it says that Jesus breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Does this remind you of anything earlier in the Bible? Can you remember another time where someone breathed on someone else? It is the creation story where God made Adam and breathed life into humanity. In the breathing, Jesus gives new life, now in the Spirit!

Jesus breathing on the disciples is significant for another reason. This is the first time where a group of people receives the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, a single person was usually given the power of the Holy Spirit for a specific task, time or place. Moses was empowered by the spirit of God to lead the nation out of bondage, but not all of Israel received the Holy Spirit. King David was the same way. Individual prophets, judges and people throughout the Old Testament received the Holy Spirit but not groups of people. But in the New Testament we see a difference. Community is the plan in the new Kingdom of God. Even the wishing of peace to the disciples points to a communal aspect of the church. When Jesus says, "Peace be to you, you is in the plural. And we all know that the plural of you is y'all. Jesus is saying "Peace to y'all."

Now we come to Thomas. Thomas was not with the others when Jesus appeared. All the other disciples told Thomas that they have seen Jesus, but Thomas responded that unless he has a personal encounter too, he will not believe. He refuses to believe. He is stubborn stating he will never believe it unless he sees it for himself and physically confirms by evidence of the wounds that what the group tells him is true. Now I do not think we should be too hard on Thomas at this point. I think throughout history, Thomas

has been labeled in a way that is not all together accurate. He is not willing to believe in just anything. He wants proof. He craves assurance. He does not want somebody else's story; he wants his own story. There is nothing wrong with that.

I wonder how Thomas felt with everybody joyous around him and he missed out on the experience? I wonder what it was like for him to live day after day contemplating the events of the past Sunday. I wonder if his heart was heavy? I wonder how his faith was challenged. Have you even felt like Thomas might have felt? I can identify with Thomas in those times when my faith is challenged, when I do not know what to believe. When walking the pilgrimage of the spiritual life is uncertain and confusing. I can empathize with Thomas during those times of life when we walk through the dark valleys and we do not know what lies around the corner. I know what it is like to have your spiritual legs cut out from under you and yet you try to move forward and make sense of the world around you. I know what it is like to need the real presence of God in your life and not matter what we do, it seems like nothing is there. Have you ever felt this way?

What I have come to admire most about Thomas is his honesty in this situation. I think that sometimes we think we cannot be emotional and bring our raw feelings to God. We get this idea that prayers must have flowery words and be something special. This is not the case. Just read the Psalms. It is ok to tell God how we are feeling, good or bad. Some of my best prayers in life have been one word, "Help!" Another great short prayer for me has been, "Thank you." God wants a real relationship with us and not just a bunch of fluffy, word-filled prayers.

A week has gone by and the disciples are assembled again and guess who is not going to miss it this time, Thomas. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus appeared

to them again! Once again he addressed them with the greeting of Peace. And then do you know what happened next? Jesus immediately turns his attention to Thomas and offers his body for personal examination as he had before to the group of disciples just a week earlier. Jesus tells him, “Do not be unbelieving anymore, Thomas. Believe!

It is interesting that the Bible tells us that Thomas verbally responds to Jesus. We do not know if he actually accepted the invitation to touch the wounds of our Lord. What we do know is that Thomas, upon receiving assurance, upon realizing that Jesus is truly resurrected and is the Messiah, makes his famous confession: “My Lord and my God!” What a powerful statement of faith! Many times, knowledge precedes faith. One must know that they are a child of God before they can act like a child of God. For Thomas, he had to know, he had to have that assurance that Jesus was resurrected before he could make the leap of faith to accept Jesus as Lord and God. For Thomas, God is fully revealed in the resurrected Jesus.

Jesus then asked him if his belief is a result of his seeing. Then Jesus offers a beatitude stating that “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now what is going on here? How have millennia of Christian disciples come to an assurance of their faith without access to the hard physical evidence that the original disciples had? Are we to not be like Thomas and just blindly accept the testimonies of others or is it possible that since his ascension we experience Jesus in a different way? I think there are two main ways.

First of all, we can receive assurance through the Bible. The Bible contains everything necessary for salvation. If a person reads the Bible, they can come to faith in God. Preachers and teachers are not needed. It is possible. Verse 31 says, these things

are written so that you may come to believe (you can have assurance) that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and through this belief you may have life in his name.

The second way is through Holy Communion. Since the first days of the church, until today, we affirm that Jesus is made know to his disciples today in the breaking of the bread. This is how we know him today and that is why Holy Communion is so very important. God is revealed to us in the breaking of the bread. It is at the table where we can receive assurance. We come to God by faith knowing that at the sacred meal, God is present with us somehow, somehow. Belief is a gift from God and is not bound by evidence, but by experiencing grace.

Thomas teaches us that it is ok to be honest about our doubts and fears where faith is concerned. It is ok to question and wrestle with faith issues. It is ok to seek assurance. When it is hard to believe, we should tell God that. In those moments when we are weak or confused and do not know how we could possibly take another step forward – we can tell God that we need assurance. Tell God that we need help. God is not a God that will leave us floundering in our faith. God is the one who brings us assurance through grace just when we need it most.

So may we travel the spiritual road of life filled with the love and grace of God, sure and certain of what we cannot see, but know it to be truth. Go forth assured of your faith and go forth to love and serve the Lord. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

APPENDIX B

SPIRITUAL FORMATION PRACTICES

Most of the spiritual formation practices we wrote are based on our experiences in using them. Those new to us are cited appropriately. These were formatted to be printed on a half sheet of paper and inserted into the Order of Worship.

Spiritual Formation Practice #1 ***Practicing Silence and Stillness***

Most of us, when we pray, do all the talking. But at its root, prayer is communication or conversation with God. Conversation involves both listening and talking. My mother always told me that God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we talk. But how do you listen in prayer? This is where Christian meditation is helpful. The difference between meditation and prayer is how we use our breath.

By focusing on our breathing in and breathing out, we slow down. We become more aware of what is going on in and around us. In this awareness we listen for that still, small voice of God.

There is no single way to meditate. For the beginner, I would recommend these simple guidelines:

- Find a quiet place where you can be still.
- Sit with your back straight, feet comfortably on the floor.
- Place your hands in a comfortable or meaningful position in your lap.
- Close your eyes or lower them toward the ground.
- Breathe slowly and naturally, in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Relax and be present to the moment.

In meditation it is common for thoughts to pop up and consume our attention. Simply notice them and let them go. Return to your breathing. Do not fight your wandering mind. Be compassionate and gentle with yourself. Try to just be present to the moment and focus on God. Start with one minute of silence and add a minute a day until you can do ten minutes.

With time and practice in Christian meditation, we learn how to listen for God. We learn how to let go of what our ego wants to focus on and begin to rest in the love of God. Over time we can come to learn that our true identity is that we are profoundly loved by God. In other words, we are who we are in God, nothing more, nothing less.

Spiritual Formation Practice #2 *Welling Up*

Spiritual formation practices are ways to help us connect to God. God is love. We love because God has first loved us (1 John 4: 8 and 19). When we accept the unconditional love and undeserved mercy that God offers us, then we can begin to allow God to love others through us. God is within you, loving you warts and all. And God is within you, loving others just as they are. When we love from this understanding, it is easy to see that the love we have to give away is limitless. But to love others as God would have us love, we first need to be filled with the love of God. This simple exercise can help us experience the unlimited spring of living water that is welling up in us (John 4:14).

- Find a quiet place where you can be still.
- Sit with your back straight, feet comfortably on the floor.
- Place your hands in a comfortable or meaningful position in your lap.
- Close your eyes or lower them toward the ground.
- Breathe slowly and naturally, in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Relax and be present to the moment.
- Imagine that your body is a deep well. The well is very deep and goes to the deepest part of you.
- Now, imagine that your well is being filled up with water. This water represents the love of God being poured into your life.
- Allow it to fill you up. If water begins to leak out, just dam it up. Let the water rise.
- Let the water continue to rise until it covers you completely and begins to trickle out over the top edges of your well. You can still breathe and you are very comfortable,
- Remain in this moment. Experience the deep love of God surrounding you. Let it be a time of quiet and rest.
- Think about the water that now overflows from your well. This is the love of God that we send to others. Out of our filling up comes the capacity to love with God's love.
- Who do you want the water to flow to? Send it to them now.
- Stay in this place for as long as you like. Rest or float in God's love.
- When you are ready, return to your breath. This time of contemplation has come to a close.

Spiritual Formation Practice #3 *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness is simply focusing attention on the here and now. One of the easiest ways to be present to the moment is by noticing your breath, without forcing or controlling it.

Start with the breath, but expand to include all of your awareness. Close your eyes and go inward. Open yourself to all the senses and expand outward. Be aware of your thoughts and emotions. Acknowledge them and gently let them go.

The Three Keys of Mindfulness

1. Intention (focus & clarity)

Why am I here? For who am I doing this? How much time do I have? What is my direction and desire? The most important thing is to remember the most important thing.

2. Attitude (emotion)

How are you feeling? Honor your emotions and allow them to manifest. Do not judge, be gentle, and begin with an attitude that bridges your intention with your present state of mind.

3. Awareness (inner & outer)

Open to all of your experience equally. Shift between the senses and allow for the unexpected. Breathe deeply, connect with the environment, materials, and people joined in the experience.

Suggested guidelines for a mindful practice:

- Prepare yourself and your environment. Consider your posture, connection to the earth, and surroundings.
- Slowly bring your awareness to your breath without judgment or control.
- Recognize what is around you. Allow & accept it. Investigate with intimate attention and try not to identify with it.
- Rest in the ambiguity. Allow spaciousness for no-thing-ness where possibility arises.
- See, hear, smell, touch, and taste. Feel for yourself. Just listen.
- God is in the middle of all our experiences. It is not about clearing the mind completely or attaining anything. We are who we are in God, nothing more, nothing less.
- If your mind wanders, gently bring yourself back to your breath, the moment.
- Mindfulness is possible in every moment. It is good to have a daily practice and cultivate it through the day. Even a quick minute or two can be helpful.
- Recognize who you already are in God and the beauty that is already you.

Spiritual Formation Practice #4 **Centering Prayer**

Here is a simple method for practicing Centering Prayer.
I hope you'll try it and stay with it for a while!

1. Choose a sacred word. I often use the name of Jesus but it can be anything, a word or phrase from Scripture, perhaps.
2. Sitting comfortably and with your eyes closed, get settled and centered and repeat the sacred word with your breath. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Keep this going for the duration of your meditation time.
3. When your thoughts (including body sensations, feelings, images, and reflections) arrive, acknowledge them. They are a normal part of you. After you become aware of them, gently let them go and return to the sacred word or phrase. Remember your breath. You may have to do this several times in your contemplation. This is normal.
4. At the end of the prayer period, remain in silence with eyes closed for a couple of minutes.

You can also use a version of this prayer as you are on the go throughout the day. When you need to say a quick prayer or have just a moment, say a sacred word or phrase as you breathe. Some call this a "breath prayer." I often use the classic phrase, "Lord have mercy" or "Lord have mercy on me." Keep this simple. It can even be as short as "Help, Thanks or Wow."¹

¹ For a good book on prayer, I recommend Anne Lamott's *Help, Thanks and Wow*. Penguin Group Publishing, 2012. It is available on Amazon.

**Spiritual Formation Practice #5
Labyrinth Prayer**



Pilgrimages to holy sites have been part of the Christian tradition for millennia. Even today, scores of pilgrims travel to places like Israel seeking to deepen their spiritual understanding and make a close, personal connection to the Divine by faith. However, making such a voyage is not always affordable or accessible. Labyrinths were developed as a way for the spiritual discipline of pilgrimage to be honored. By walking the labyrinth, we symbolically make a pilgrimage to a holy place. Labyrinths are not mazes nor are they magical. You cannot get lost. There is one path in and one path out. The labyrinth is not a new or modern technique designed to jump-start your spiritual life. It is a slow, quiet, meditative practice that has historically attended to the desire to make a journey toward God. You can trace this one with your finger.

In walking the labyrinth you leave behind the noise and hurry of life. Just as you would pack for a pilgrimage, you offer your heaven burdens to Jesus and begin your prayer journey. The prayer-path structure moves you slowly toward the center and toward God. At times you are close to the center, further along the path you may be farther from the center. This represents the reality of the spiritual journey. But we keep moving; we are always getting close to the center and to God, no matter how far away it looks in real space. At the center of the walk, you can stop and rest in the presence of God, listening for God's word to you. With God's word in your heart you begin your journey back to the world.

When the full size labyrinth is on site from April 6-16, do not be in a rush. Plan for an hour to walk the labyrinth. To walk the labyrinth:

- Intentionally leave behind all the noise, haste and clamor of your life. Prepare your heart to listen. God may bring a word of Scripture to your mind or speak something into your heart and life. Be patient. Pay attention. How does the journey to the center reflect your own spiritual path?
- As you walk intentionally toward God and the center of the labyrinth consider what you might need to surrender in order to live more fully in the love and fullness of God's presence. Is there bitterness, addiction, expectation, pride, self-orientation, past hurts that you want to leave behind as you walk toward God? When you arrive at the center, offer these things to God. Leave them in the center with God.
- Once in the center, abide the presence of Christ. If you feel like being still, do so. If you feel like sitting, that is ok. Do what feels natural. Ask for God's grace as you seek to return to the world. Receive the comfort, rest, inspiration or word that the Holy Spirit has for you. When you sense it is time to leave, slowly and with a quiet mind, make your way from the center back into the world, listening and stopping as you are prompted by the Holy Spirit. How can you consciously live out the word God has given you on this prayer walk?
- When you receive a word from the Lord for your journey, hold onto it. It has been given specifically to you, specifically for now. Do not move away from this word too quickly. Return to it during the week. To finish your time on the labyrinth, reflect for a moment and journal about your experience.¹

¹ Material for this exercise comes from: Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 263-265.

Spiritual Formation Practice #6

Prayer Walking

Some people do their best praying while they are moving. Prayer walking can be a wonderful gift. This type of prayer intentionally invites people to go to the site of the concern: the office, the conference room, the dining room, the kitchen, the school, the hospital, the government building, or even the church. Physically being in a place gives context that can fuel prayer and offer a way to listen more deeply to God, and what God's concerns for this place might be.

Praying while moving is a way of saturating a particular place and people with prayer. Prayer walking may help us pray beyond our immediate concerns and into a larger circle of God's loving attention. I find this way of praying interesting because I pray with my eyes open as I am on the move. Try these walking exercises:

1. Walk through your home or church in the company of Jesus. Pray for each room and what happens there. How would recognizing Jesus' presence there reorient your interaction?
2. Walk around your workplace and pray for your colleagues, the custodial help, the customer, the delivery people, the kitchen staff, and so on. Offer yourself to be Jesus' hands and heart in this place.
3. Visit a playground or park. Walk through it in the company of Jesus. Pray for those who work, play and study there. How do you see the heart of God for this place?
4. When you are on vacation or in a natural setting, allow God to draw you into prayer for this particular place. Let your interaction with the created world lead you into prayer. Pray for creation, that it would be taken care of.
5. Before a neighborhood or school event, join other believers who will prayer walk the crowds and people they know who will attend. Ask the Lord to give you his heart for them. Pray for the Holy Spirit to be at work in the event.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean for you that God is in every place? How does this affect how you pray?
2. How does moving or being still affect the way you pray?
3. What most helps you concentrate of God? Is this part of your regular prayer practice?
4. What is it like for you to pray, listening for what God's heart for a particular request might be?¹

¹ Material for this exercise comes from: Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 285-286.

Spiritual Formation Practice #7
Maundy Thursday
Breath Prayer

Sometimes all we have time for is a quick prayer. Other times there are just no words that easily come. Breath prayers are prayers designed for saying in one breath. They are usually one word or a short phrase. One of the most popular short phrases is the ancient prayer, “Lord Jesus have mercy on me, a sinner.” Even this can be shorted to, “Lord Jesus have mercy on me” or “Christ have mercy.” I like to use the name of Jesus. When I breathe in I think the first part of the name and when I breathe out I think the last part. Je—sus. Je – sus. Je – sus. Other one-word prayers you might try could include “help, thanks, and wow.” (Want to read a good book on prayer? Try Anne Lamott’s book, *Help Thanks Wow*. You can purchase it on Amazon).

I also like to use the name of God. Did you know that the consonants used in the spelling of the sacred name, YHWH, are the only consonants that if correctly pronounced do not allow you to use your tongue or close your lips? In fact, we know that the pronouncing of the sacred name was an attempt to imitate and replicate breath. It is inhalation and exhalation. Try it!

Spiritual Formation Practice #8 The Daily Examen

The Examen, or examination of conscience, is a quick prayer to help you see where God was active in your day. Usually done for 15-20 minutes at the end of the day, use the 5 easy steps below to pray the Examen every day. Soon you will begin to see God's presence more easily.

1. **Presence:** Remember that you are in the presence of God in a special way when you pray. Ask God for help in your prayer.
2. **Gratitude:** Recall 2 or 3 things that happened today for which you are especially grateful. Savor them. Then thank God for these gifts.
3. **Review:** Review your day from start to finish, noticing where you experienced God's presence. Notice everything from large to small: from enjoyable interaction with a friend to the feel of sun on your face. When did you love? When were you loved?
4. **Sorrow:** You may have sinned today or done something you regret. Express your sorrow to God and ask for forgiveness. If it is a grave sin, pray about seeking forgiveness from the person offended.
5. **Grace:** You may want to return to a meaningful part of your prayer and speak to God about how you felt. At the close of the prayer, ask God's grace for the following day.

Over time, as you pray the Examen, you will notice God's presence in the moment, rather than at the end of the day. You will see your whole day can be a kind of prayer.¹

¹ Though there are many forms of a Daily Examen, this example I found on a laminated card in the gift shop of Mepkin Abbey. We found it to be a simple way to practice daily reflection.

Spiritual Formation Practice #9 Pilgrimage

A journey made with the intent of leaving something behind in order to seek God is at the heart of pilgrimage. While on pilgrimage in Israel, we left prayers at the Wailing Wall. The notion of leaving something behind to go on a walkabout for God began with Abraham and Sarah. Seeking God is never just a matter of the heart. Seeking God means a willingness to leave behind our agendas and the things that bind us so we can go where God calls. To walk in the ways of God means that we have to move our feet. This is what pilgrims do (Genesis 12:1; Psalm 81:13; 25:4-5; John 17:16; Acts 7:3; Hebrews 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11).

The process of slowing down, unplugging, traveling light, praying the hours and not rushing leaves space for prayerful attention to God. When we are not on autopilot, the external as well as internal landscape opens up. Seeing everything becomes less important than seeing clearly who I am to be when I return home. How could thinking of your life as a pilgrim introduce some change or reorientation in your life? Have you ever made a journey that enlarged your view of God? What was that like for you? What are you willing to leave behind in order to have a deeper life in God?

Spiritual Exercises

1. Intentionally take a pilgrimage with others – you can go somewhere near or far. Visit a beautiful local church; walk a local nature trail or visit a place where something significant happened. Consider traveling to the Holy Land July 9-19, 2018. As you travel, consider what you will leave behind, ask God to speak to you through your journey and journal about what you experience.
2. Turn a journey you are making into an intentional pilgrimage that seeks God.
3. If you go on a tour vacation, be intentional about what you leave behind and what you want to receive from God. Ask God to show you how to live more simply when you return.¹

¹ Material for this exercise comes from: Calhoun, Adele Ahlberg. *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press), 69-70.

**Spiritual Formation Practice #10
Welcoming Prayer (from Mepkin Abbey)
Including my handwritten notes**



"What God arranges for us to experience at each moment is the best and boldest thing that could happen to us."
 - Jean-Pierre de Caussade

Deliberately dismantle the emotional programs of the false self. With these words, Fr. Thomas Keating instructs practitioners of Centering Prayer in his classic work on the contemplative dimension of the Gospel, *Open Mind, Open Heart*. The Welcoming Prayer provides a method for living Fr. Keating's teachings.

Definition

The Welcoming Prayer is a method of consenting to God's presence and action in our physical and emotional reactions to events and situations in daily life.

Purpose

The purpose of the Welcoming Prayer is to deepen our relationship with God through consenting in ordinary activities. The Welcoming Prayer helps to dismantle the emotional programs of the false-self system and to heal the wounds of a lifetime by addressing them where they are stored — in the body. It contributes to the process of transformation in Christ initiated in Centering Prayer.

Freedom from the False Self
The practice of Welcoming Prayer is an opportunity to make choices free of the false-self system — responding instead of reacting to the present moment. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, our practice empowers us to take appropriate action as freely and lovingly as possible in any situation that presents itself in our lives.

History

Mary Mrozowski, one of the founders of Contemplative Outreach, formulated the Welcoming Prayer. She based it on the seventeenth-century French spiritual classic *Abandonment to Divine Providence* by Jean-Pierre de Caussade as well as Fr. Keating's teachings and her own lived experience of transformation with its underlying attitude of surrender. The practice was so powerful in bringing about inner change that it soon spread throughout the Contemplative Outreach network.

"To welcome and to let go is one of the most radically loving, faith-filled gestures we can make in each moment of each day. It is an open-hearted embrace of all that is in ourselves and in the world."

- Mary Mrozowski

The Welcoming Prayer Method
Focus, feel and sink into what you are experiencing this moment in your body.
"Welcome" what you are experiencing this moment in your body as an opportunity to consent to the Divine Indwelling.

Let go by repeating the following sentences:

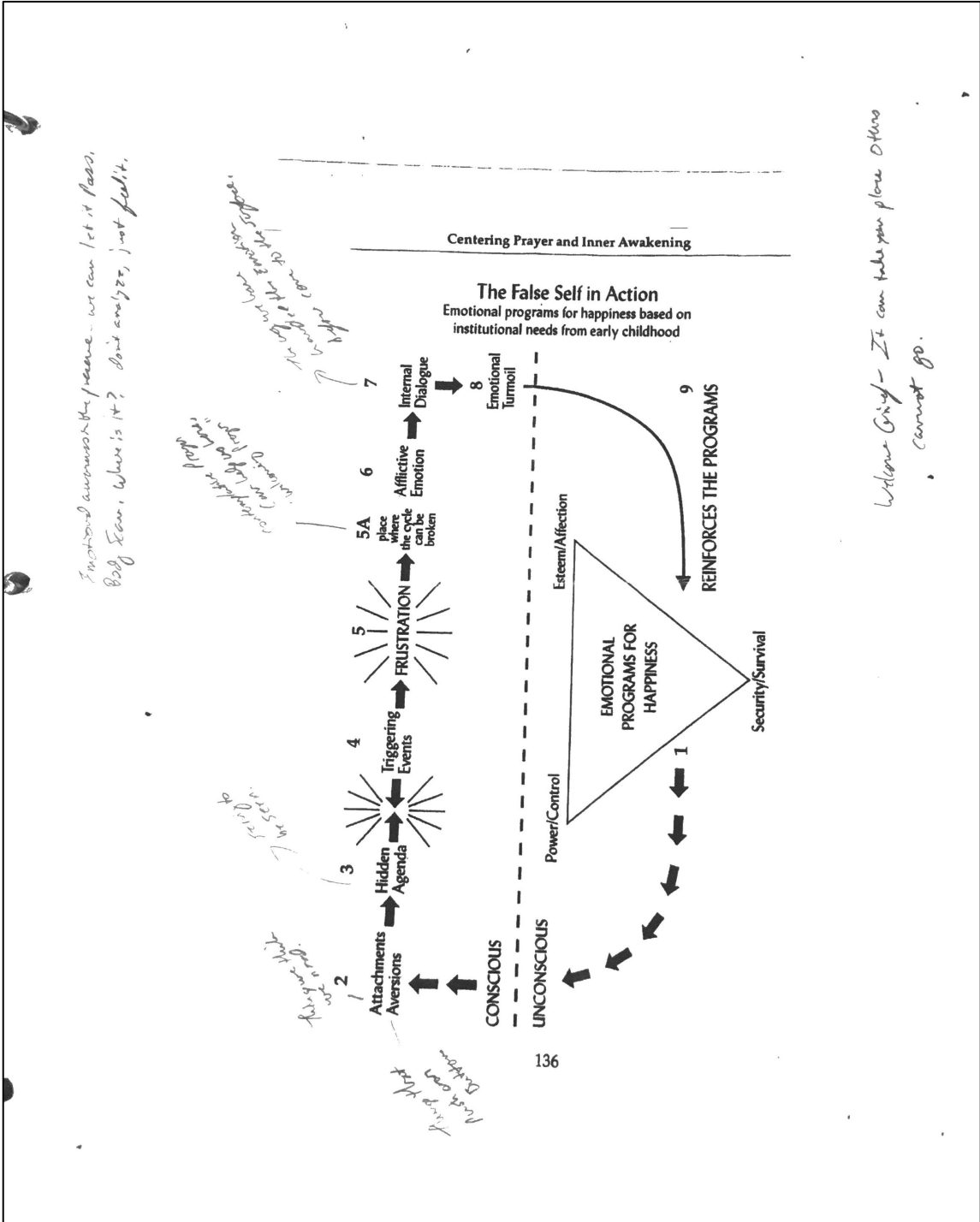
- "I let go of the desire for security, affection, control."
- "I let go of the desire to change what I am experiencing."



The Welcoming Prayer ... consent on the go...

*Authentic self - releasing the power in others
Inner hope, reality - releasing our emotions.
Power "Grant Home" by love!*

*Let go of false self to live in true self
"Ment in the world"
to break through*



Emotional awareness the premise... we can let it pass, Body Scan, where is it? don't analyze, just feel it.

what emotion... what is the cycle... place where the cycle can be broken

Welcome Greg - It can take you place others cannot go.

APPENDIX C

FORMS

A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth	PLEASE RETURN
<p>The labyrinth was used to symbolize the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to be a walking meditation to reflect on life, and to be a sacred space creating order in times of chaos. The labyrinth has only one path. The path winds throughout the space and becomes a mirror for where we are in our lives. It can touch our sorrows and release our joys. We invite you to walk with an open mind and an open heart.</p>	
<p>Before Walking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Remove footwear...if you have socks, please walk in them *Relax *Clear your mind *Be aware of your breathing *Be intentional *Give yourself permission to be as you are as you walk *Wait a few minutes to enter if someone has just begun his or her journey....while waiting, walk around the edge of the labyrinth on the points---the lunations 	
<p>The Journey In</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Focus on the pathway *Give attention to your innermost thoughts *Listen to your body *Examine the quality of your state of life *Explore your dreams, hopes and expectations 	
<p>Time In the Center</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Rest a few minutes *Sit if you wish *Reflect on your experience of walking in *Open your body, mind heart, and soul to the extraordinary *Anticipate the return 	
<p>The Journey Out</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Depart on the same winding path that you followed in *Consider the implication of your renewed thoughts and feelings for your daily life and work *Plan changes *Upon finishing the walk, go around the edges of the labyrinth on the points again 	
<p>Time at the End</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Take a quiet moment to reflect on the meaning of your whole experience *Write and/or share your thoughts *Thank you and may blessings go with you. 	

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A card (two per page) that helped the pilgrim navigate the labyrinth experience

A prayer given to the labyrinth walkers

Walking Blessing – by Jan Richardson

That each step
may be a shedding.
That you will let yourself
become lost.
That when it looks
like you're going backwards
you may be making progress.
That progress is not the goal anyway,
but presence
to the feel of the path on your skin,
to the way it reshapes you
in each place it makes contact,
to the way you cannot see it
until the moment you have stepped out.

Advisory Committee field note instruction form

Your Name:
Interaction With:
Date:
Location:
<p>Description of Activity: (Sgt. Friday – Just the facts)</p> <p>This is for describing what happened as accurately as possible. Take a ‘who, what, when, where, why, how’ approach and try to stick to ‘facts’ to create a verbal snapshot of what happened. This includes noting direct quotes and snippets of conversations, text messages, filenames of voice recordings, and what photos I took.</p> <p>All field notes are constructed, and what we choose to take notes about are influenced by a range of factors, so in this section try to minimize that. Try to keep the description separate from analytical work for as long as possible while recognizing that these are just snapshots in time that show a glimpse of a point in time from a particular perspective, through a particular lens.</p>
<p>Reflections:</p> <p>Reflect on the day’s experiences. How I might have influenced events, what went wrong, what went right, what I could do differently next time, and how I feel about the process.</p>
<p>Emerging Questions/Analyses (curious questions):</p> <p>Note curious questions I might ask to help the participant think more deeply, potential lines of inquiry, and theories that might be useful. This is where I start to do some analytical work.</p>
<p>For Follow-Up:</p> <p>If I feel that any follow-up should happen, please note it here. This is also a good place to note anything that comes to mind later.</p>

Field note blank form

Your Name:
Interaction With:
Date:
Location:
Description of Activity:
Reflections:
Emerging Questions/Analyses (curious questions):
For Follow-up:

Post-experience interview form

Your Name:
Interview With:
Date:
Location:

Labyrinth instructions for walking sign



1. Take a copy of *A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth* and follow the directions.
2. Once you are done, take a few moments to reflect on your experience with the journal that is provided.
3. Please turn in the journal to a Trail Guide (purple shirt) or leave it in the box. Return the *Guide* card for someone else to use.
4. Thank you for participating and may blessings go with you.

Labyrinth schedule



LABYRINTH HOURS at ROCKLEDGE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH FELLOWSHIP HALL

Thursday, April 6th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Friday, April 7th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Saturday, April 8th *from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.*
 Sunday, April 9th *from Noon to 5:00 p.m.*
 Monday, April 10th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Tuesday, April 11th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Wednesday, April 12th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Thursday, April 13th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Friday, April 14th *from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.*
 Saturday, April 15th *from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.*
 Sunday, April 16th *from Noon to 5:00 p.m.*

The labyrinth entered Christian prayer life during the Middle Ages, when architects incorporated it into cathedrals across Europe. One such installation occurred in 1201 in Chartres cathedral in France. Experts theorize it was installed as a “virtual” pilgrimage to a war-torn Holy Land. The labyrinth at Rockledge UMC is a 36-foot replica of the one that appears in Chartres Cathedral.

APPENDIX D

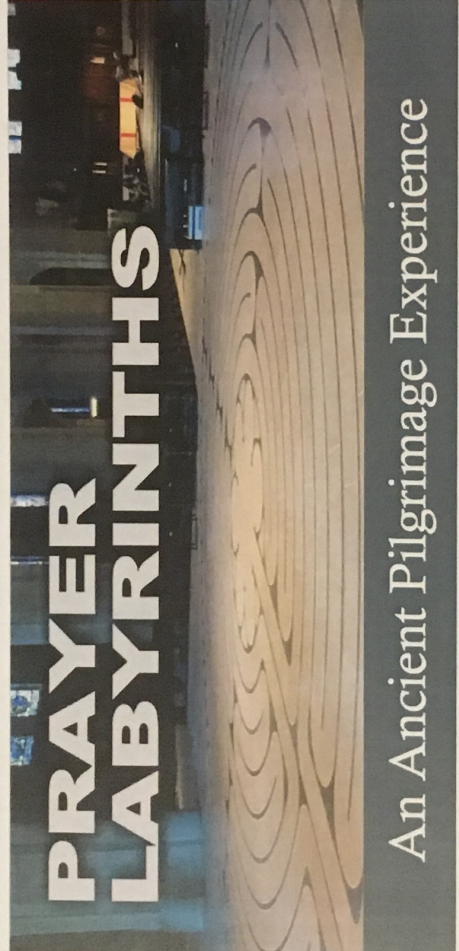
BROCHURES

Side one of labyrinth tri-fold brochure

<h2>The Labyrinth Experience</h2>		<h3>Rockledge United Methodist Church</h3>		<p>Labyrinth Hours April 6-16</p>	<p>Monday-Friday 10 am till 8 pm</p>	<p>Saturdays 10 am till 3 pm</p>	<p>Sundays Noon till 5 pm</p>
	<h2>How to Walk the Labyrinth</h2>	<p>The Labyrinth is not a maze. It only has one path and there are no dead ends. The path winds throughout and becomes a mirror for where we are in our lives, touching our sorrows and releasing our joys. Walk it with an open mind and an open heart.</p>	<p>The path is a two-way street. Those going in will meet those coming out. You may pass people or let others step around you. Do what feels natural when you meet.</p>	<p>Quiet your mind and become aware of your breath. Allow yourself to find the pace your body wants to go.</p>		<p>1935 Fiske Blvd Rockledge, FL 32955 www.rockledgeumc.com</p>	
	<h2>Walking with Jesus through Lent</h2>	<p>There is a reason we use the word "journey" a lot during Lent. These forty days and six Sundays of Lent can be an enriching personal and spiritual journey toward Easter's new life.</p>	<p>As disciples of Jesus, we are all pilgrims, trying to follow in his footsteps and keep our eyes on the cross as a powerful symbol of our faith journey.</p>	<p>With the labyrinth at Rockledge UMC, we have the opportunity to involve our whole selves in a walk with Jesus to the cross – and beyond, into renewal.</p>	<p>It can be a path of prayer, meditation, contemplation, celebration and inspiration.</p>		

Side two of labyrinth tri-fold brochure

PRAYER LABYRINTHS



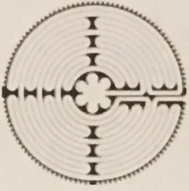
An Ancient Pilgrimage Experience

The Labyrinth is an ancient pattern found in cultures around the world in different forms. The oldest known form takes its name from the number of circuits of paths on it. The Classical Seven Circuit labyrinth is found on pottery and etched into cave walls. The oldest known examples date back five thousand years.



The labyrinth entered Christian prayer life during the Middle Ages, when architects incorporated it in the cathedrals across Europe. One such installation occurred in 1201 in Chartres Cathedral in France. Experts theorize it was installed as a "virtual" pilgrimage to a war-torn

Holy Land. Others theorize that it was danced upon as part of an ancient Easter rite celebrating Jesus' conquering of death.



Today, people around the world use the labyrinth to quiet the mind, find balance, and encourage meditation, insight and celebration. Think of it as a lens, not one for looking at distant stars and galaxies but rather to peer into the depths of one's heart.

Stages of the Labyrinth Walk

PURGATION (releasing)

The act of shedding thoughts and distractions enables you to let go of the details of your life. This is the time to open your heart and quiet your mind.

ILLUMINATION (receiving)

At the center, stay as long as you like. Sit or stand, meditate or pray. Allow yourself to receive guidance. Do what feels natural.

UNION (returning)

To leave the center, follow the same path back out. There can be a strange sense of strengthening and clarity. You might become more empowered to find and do the work you feel your soul called for. You may feel peace or even unrest. Everyone's experience is different. Take time to reflect and journal

Pilgrimage to the beach invitation

Front side



Pilgrimage to the beach invitation

Back side

Who: All members, leaders, staff, and friends of Rockledge United Methodist Church

What: A Pilgrimage to the Beach

Where: Hightower Beach Park, 815 Florida A1A, Satellite Beach, FL 32937

When: April 22, 2017. For those wishing to car pool to the beach, departure from the Church will be at 10:30 am or meet the group at the beach at 11 am. We will be finished between 12:30 pm and 1 pm.

Why: Pilgrimage is simply defined as travel with a holy purpose. This trip will be an opportunity to seek God in nature. We are fortunate to live close to the ocean so this *pilgrimage* should be possible for anyone who wishes to attend. Hightower Park has a boardwalk for those who cannot walk on the beach but you can still see the sand and the water. There is also easy access to the sand, bathrooms, water fountains and parking is free. This is not a worship service at the beach. This is personal time between you and God. Yes, we will travel together, but once at the beach, everyone will find a nice place to spend time with God. Each person will be given a meditation guide to use and there will be time for journaling and reflecting on your experience. We will conclude our time at the beach by gathering together and remembering our baptism in the ocean.

What should I bring and wear?

- Sunscreen
- Hat
- Shades
- Swim suit (or other clothing you don't mind getting sandy or wet if you wish to remember your baptism. For those who do not want to get in the ocean, water may be poured or sprinkled)
- Towel
- A beach chair (optional)
- A pen or pencil
- Your lunch and something to drink
- Flip flops
- An open mind and a willing spirit

Parking: The parking lot is rather small at Hightower Beach Park. If you choose to meet the group at the beach and the parking lot is full, additional free parking is available in the vacant lot directly across the street from the park.

APPENDIX E

JOURNALS

Journal
for Your
Comments
on the



Please share the thoughts, impressions, and emotions evoked by the experience of your pilgrimage at three stages: as you started, as you went through the experience, and as it concluded.

When this time has ended, say a prayer of thanks to God and tell God whatever you need to. Please give this journal to a Trail Guide (purple shirt) or leave it in the box on the table.

Please put your name on your reflection. Confidentiality is very important to this process. Having your name on it helps keep information organized. Phone and email are appreciated if Pastor Todd needs to contact you later. Your identity will not be part of Todd's dissertation. Thank you for being part of this research project!

Finally, you are invited to experience another pilgrimage, this time to a local beach! Please take an invitation from the table (and a few extra to pass out to friends) and join us on April 22! If you have questions or concerns about the trip, just talk to a Trail Guide or Pastor Todd.

Name: _____

Best Phone: _____

Email: _____

Journal for the beach trip

Pilgrimage to the Beach



Please return this packet to a Trail Guide (purple shirt) at the end of the experience.
Thank you for being part of this research project!

Pilgrimage to the Beach

Introduction

This time of meditation and contemplation makes use of our imagination. Using one's imagination is an ancient way to think about God. If this is new to you, be open. Give it a try. Find a quiet place on the beach. Have your lunch ready. Take your time. Do not be in a rush. Gather back around the flags at 12:30 pm.

Opening Prayer

O most gracious God, you are the stranger on the shore, inviting me to lunch, to share a meal. I am so grateful and excited to realize that you are here with me. Pour out your Holy Spirit on me. Help me to receive your good company and your sustenance. Amen.

[Begin your lunch after reading the Scripture passage]

Scripture Reflection

John 21:1-14 (CEB)

Read the scripture passage below, slowly, three times, at least one time out loud. Notice what catches your attention as you read.

“Later, Jesus himself appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberius. This is how it happened: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two other disciples were together. Simon Peter told them, “I’m going fishing.”

They said, “We’ll go with you.” They set out in a boat, but throughout the night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples didn’t realize it was Jesus.

Jesus called to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.” He said, “Cast your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they did, and there were so many fish that they couldn’t haul in the net. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It’s the Lord!” When Simon Peter heard it was the Lord, he wrapped his coat around himself (for he was naked) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they weren’t far from shore, only about one hundred yards.

When they landed, they saw a fire there, with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you’ve just caught.” Simon Peter got up and pulled the net to shore. It was full of large fish, one hundred fifty-three of them. Yet the net hadn’t torn, even with so many fish. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples could bring themselves to ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the bread, and gave it to them. He did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.”

Now, taking your time, use your imagination to think about the following list as you begin your lunch. As you move down the list, go at your own speed.

- Now, as you begin your meal, imagine that you are at this meal with Jesus.
- Imagine yourself in the story. You are one of the disciples and Jesus is there on the shore.
- Be aware that Jesus has prepared your food for you.
- Imagine what he had to do to fix your meal...got a boat, went out on the lake in the early morning, threw the net, caught the fish, built a fire on the lakeshore, blessed the fish, killed it, cleaned or filleted it and cooked the fish, for you...
- And now, imagine Jesus, there by the fire, eating beside you. In your mind's eye, in your imagination, see this place on the lakeshore where the fire is taking the chill off the early morning, where you can smell the smoke and the fish. Sit with Jesus on the shore...taste the hot, fresh, charcoaled fish...
- How does Jesus eat his fish? Does he lick his fingers?
- Does he enjoy the fish? Does he comment on it?
- What kind of fish is it? How big was it?
- How does the fish taste?
- Now, expand your view and take in the bigger picture: What is the morning like? Sunny or cloudy? Is the sky colorful? What do you hear: birds, water lapping the shore, logs shifting in the fire? Can you feel the warmth of the fire where you sit? Does the smoke get in your eyes?
- What does Jesus say? What does he talk about?
- How does he look at you?
- Is there anything you want to ask him?
- How do you want to thank him for the meal?

When the meal is finished, take a walk together. Pay attention to what you see in nature, knowing that Jesus walks beside you. If something grabs your attention, stop and look at it or watch it. In your imagination, feel free to converse with your companion about what you see. Perhaps he will point things out to you that you had not noticed. You may sit for a while together wherever you are. Spend a precious hour with Jesus on a walk. Just enjoy. When it is time to come in, say goodbye and thank him in your own way. Gather with the group to remember your baptism.

REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

Please share the thoughts, impressions, and emotions evoked by the experience of your pilgrimage at three stages: as you started, as you went through the experience, and as it concluded.

In your own words, say a prayer of thanks to God and tell God whatever you need to. When this time has ended, gather with the group at the flags. Turn in your journal to Pastor Todd or a Trail Guide (purple shirt).

Please put your name on your reflection. Confidentiality is very important to this process. Having your name on it helps keep information organized. Your identity will not be part of Todd's dissertation. If you want to keep a copy of your reflection, he will be happy to make a photocopy for you. Thank you for being part of this research project!

Name: _____

Best Phone: _____

Email: _____

APPENDIX F

ASKING CURIOUS QUESTIONS

Asking curious questions involves deep listening. Deep listening (80% of the time) is focusing on the other person and listening intensely to what they are saying. Questions come from what they say.

Being curious is not about asking questions that we are curious about. A good curious question is for the benefit of the other person. It is a question designed to help them think more deeply about their situation or emotions. Silence is ok. Silence and Listen have the same letters! It is ok for them to be uncomfortable. It is ok to let them cry. Don't think ahead. Be in the moment with them. Our job is not to fix them, but to help them explore what is going on inside. In other words, their agenda, not ours.

Methods: Literal repetition, reflecting, reframe/paraphrasing, summarizing, open-ended questions, appreciative inquiry, tell me more.

- Here is a list of possible curious questions/phrases:
- That makes sense/I can see that...
- Help me understand...
- Tell me more about...
- You told me about (...) but I'm wondering how your spiritual life has helped you cope?
- What I hear you saying is (...) Is that right?
- What I am hearing is...
- Let me see if I am getting what you are saying (...) Is that right?
- So...(paraphrase)... is that right?
- How does that feel to you?
- I imagine that must feel...
- Are there other feelings you have about this?
- What is it like for you when...
- What was that like for you?
- You said...Tell me more...
- I hear (something positive), but I also hear (something negative). What about that?
- I'm curious, tell me more about...
- That makes sense.
- I can see that.
- Help me understand...
- How is that working out for you?
- How have you grown because of this experience?
- What is the next step from here?

Others?

Final Interview Process

Beginning the session:

This is a safe place.
All this is confidential.

During the interview:

Listen, don't fix.
You do not have to agree with them. It is not about you! Simply affirm their emotions or experience.¹
Let them lead. Don't do the work for them.
Ask curious questions.
Allow for silence.

Ending the session:

Did the Pilgrimage experience help you feel closer to God? How or why not? (Tell me more)
Is there anything else you wish to add now?
If you want to add more later, just call Pastor Todd.
If issues come up that seems like then need follow up for pastoral care, help them connect with Pastor Todd.

**Celebrate their journey!*

Thank you for taking part in these pilgrimage experiences! Being willing to try something new takes courage and faith. I am so proud of you for doing this.

¹ Mary Clark Moschella. *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 163.

APPENDIX G

GLOSSARY

Active Contemplative: Someone who practices stillness but leads a normal lifestyle (not a monastic).

After-pastor: A clergyperson who ministers in the aftermath of the betrayal of pastoral trust.

Contemplation: The act of prayer with breath as a means of focus and awareness.

Dualistic Thinking: Either/or thinking. The life of the mind. The idea that thinking about something is the same as experiencing it fully.

First-follower: A follower of Jesus who encourages others to follow Jesus too.

Liminal Space: The moments of transition experienced in the middle of a journey.

Meditation: Being in stillness.

Monastery: A set aside place where monks live and work.

Mystic: One who explores and practices engagement with the divine mystery of God.

Non-duality: A deeper consciousness through prayer and meditation. It is the area of silence where the mind is stilled and the mystery of God can be fully encountered. Both/and can be held in tension and it is ok.

Pilgrimage: A journey, often spiritual in nature, traveled by a person. This person is often referred to as a pilgrim.

Prophet: One who shares God's heart with the people.

Real Presence: For the purpose of this research project, I define this as: to be with and experience God. This is a nuanced way of talking about the presence of God that is different from the sacramental use of the term, which generally defines real presence as God being physically and totally present to us, particularly in the elements of Holy Communion.

Spiritual Sherpa: One who is knowledgeable in the methods and ways of ascending to God. A guide who leads, directs, and coaches those on a spiritual journey in both ascent and descent. Ascent is for vital piety while descent is participation in incarnation. Spiritual Director.

Thin Places: A physical place or location where a person experiences a very thin divide between the past, present and future. It is the Kingdom of God showing through to our reality.

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