

Advent III (RCL/C): "Translating Worry into Prayer; Walking the Labyrinth"
Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18
December 14-15, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I was talking to a friend recently who had just attended a Jack & Jill baby shower. Who knows what that means? [Yup, shower at which both women and men are invited!] Anybody here been to one? What about Reveal parties?? I know some of you have enjoyed those: the dramatic Oscars' style opening of an envelope containing the news, pink or blue filling in cupcakes, pink or blue confetti exploding from a piñata, or other even more creative options! No reveal parties in the 1st century, no testing to decipher whether the stork was going to deliver a girl or a boy, making both Elizabeth and Mary the only ones on the block who were **sure** that they were going to have a **son**.

When I was pregnant with Kristiane, I didn't **want** to know the baby's gender; I wanted to be surprised. So the baby clothes I received at her shower were gender neutral, not because I said I didn't **want** my child to be pigeon-holed as a "pink" girl who played with dolls or a "blue" boy who loved trucks, but because I didn't know whether God was sending a son or daughter!

One of the funniest Christmas cards I've ever seen was a distant picture of the Nativity: the stable, star, little people and animals seen from afar, with a speech bubble overhead announcing, "It's a girl!" Well, here we are on the 3rd weekend of Advent and the color of the 3rd candle is **pink**! It DOESN'T signify, "It's a girl!" No, in Advent blue is the color of hope and **pink** is the color of **joy**. This weekend each of our Scripture lessons except the Gospel includes the word *joy* or *rejoice*. (The Gospel **does** say that John the Baptizer "*proclaimed the good news*" (Luke 3:18), and that certainly **is** reason to rejoice.)

Doesn't it seem like children have a greater capacity for joy than adults? We adults love a good **celebration**, we **can** be exuberantly joyful, but because we are more aware of **real and potential problems**, it's only natural that we worry more. And worry **displaces** joy, **crowds out** joy, **evicts** joy.

Paul was quite a correspondent. He wrote the Philippians, people he knew and loved in Philippi, Greece; his letter to them is called the epistle of **joy**. This is despite the fact that, objectively speaking, Paul had plenty to worry about. First off, he wrote the letter **from prison**. The Romans were being brutal to the early Christians. Paul probably expected that at some point he'd be executed, martyred. Ultimately he **was**. But even the prospect of his own death didn't pull the plug on his joy. Even the knowledge that some of the fledgling Christian communities he'd founded were being torn apart by internal dissension didn't suck the joy out of him. Even suffering caused by his "thorn in the flesh" didn't plunge him into darkness. The joy he experienced trusting in God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ kept him afloat.

So hear again and **marvel** at the words Paul wrote from a **jail cell**, possibly with **fetters** on his wrists and ankles:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... Do not worry about anything, but in everything... let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4, 6-7)

"Translate worry into prayer" is some of the best advice we receive in all of Scripture. Take a few moments now and think about the top 1 or 2 things that are worrying you this week.

Now hear *The Message* version of Paul's advice, spoken to **you**:

*Celebrate God all day every day. I mean, **revel** in him!... Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praise shape your worries into prayer, letting God know your concerns.*

Don't let the devil convince you that you don't know how to pray, or that you don't pray "right." Prayer is simply honest conversation with God, back-and-forth, speaking and listening. As you would talk to a dear and trusted friend about your deepest worries and darkest fears, talk to the Lord. Prayer isn't a substitute for practical problem-solving, when the worry is about something we could potentially control. Prayer isn't a **substitute** for practical action, but it **is** a helpful 1st step, a way to dispel panic and bring peace of mind, allowing us to think more clearly, mobilize internal resources, and seek whatever external help we may need. Deep anxiety paralyzes us; prayer frees us up to move forward **or** to wait patiently, trustingly, for the next development in God's plan instead of dreading the next shoe dropping or anticipating that the sword of Damacles is going to come crashing down.

Thanks to Jimmy Savaryn, Holy Trinity family member, high school junior, Boy Scout and nearly an Eagle Scout, we have new prayer space in addition to this sanctuary: the labyrinth he and his fellow Scouts created across the street on Osborn, to the right of the parsonage driveway. The labyrinth is a prayer and meditation circle. It looks like a maze, but it isn't: there is one path in and the same path out: no decisions to make about which way to turn. The labyrinth predates Christianity, but like many other elements of pre-Christian spirituality, it was "baptized," so to speak, Christianized along the way. It is not magical, but it can be mystical. It is definitely meditative, if we allow it to be. The best way I can describe the labyrinth is that it's "God space," "space outside of space," "time outside of time." We step into it, leave chronos, watch time and enter kairos, divine time. We are invited to take with us into the labyrinth a prayer concern, a praise, a burden, a question, consciously praying, "Come, Holy Spirit." We can ask the Holy Spirit to bring peace to our

troubled heart, to ease a burden, to inspire us with a new approach to a difficult situation, or to grant us grace to endure something we can't change. Some people walk the labyrinth in a spirit of thanksgiving, for a blessing newly received. Or they carry on their hearts a loved one who has passed away, setting their grief literally in motion, and perhaps finding themselves walking **with** the other person along the Way. There's no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth. Let your soul lead you in your embodied prayer. I haven't always experienced something profound when I've walked the labyrinth. But I have often found a peace I didn't have when I entered the sacred prayer circle.

Walk at your own pace. Stop and stand in place when that feels right. If others walking the labyrinth need to pass you, just step aside. No one else is clocking you or hurrying you. Often folks pause for a bit when they reach the center. It's the perfect place to follow the psalm's advice: "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) The goal isn't to think great thoughts; it's to let our thoughts go and allow God's thoughts to come in. The journey into the center is seen as a time of **release**. This makes room for us to **receive**. The journey out is time to **reflect** and prepare to **reenter** the world that awaits us outside the sacred circle.

I've walked labyrinths in exquisite places. One New Year's Eve close to midnight Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I walked a labyrinth carved out of deep snow in a meadow in the Northern Cascades of Washington State. In that wilderness the only light came from the stars, lanterns hung in the trees, candles encased in ice niches in the walls of the labyrinth, a blazing fire at the entrance, and the miner's lamps on our heads. It was a mystical way to close out one year and to open up the next. On my 1st sabbatical trip, Pastor Mark & I went to Chartres Cathedral in France, and walked the most famous of all

Christian labyrinths in a darkened cathedral with just a handful of people, as a light show illuminated the exterior of the cathedral and sent a stained glass river of light streaming into the sanctuary. We've walked a labyrinth in the desert of Arizona in springtime as the cacti bloomed. We've walked one in a sea breeze on the Isle of Lindisfarne in the North Sea, the first place Christianity landed in the British Isles, a lovely island where the seals sing at night. Some of us have walked a canvas labyrinth right here in Fellowship Hall.

If prayer words to express your worries seem to be escaping you, try wordless prayer by walking the labyrinth. It is a gift Jimmy and the Scouts have given to us and the larger community. We dedicate it together this Sunday after 8:45 worship. It is another source of joy, another reason for us to rejoice this 3rd weekend of Advent.

Emmanuel, God-with-us, is the most faithful companion on our journey, through the literal or figurative wilderness, beside the ocean or in the desert, in magnificent Gothic cathedrals or in our modest New England Colonial sanctuary, inside or outside, with or without labyrinths. If worry threatens to tatter your trust that "all shall be well," if anxiety makes God-with-us seem totally absent, remember joy-filled St. Paul's wise advice from a prison cell:

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praise shape your worries into prayer, letting God know your concerns. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

