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Into the Labyrinth: Walking the Way of Wisdom

Douglas E. Christie

Loyola Marymount University, DEchristie@lmu.edu

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"WISDOM"

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ing expressions of the Spirit's vitality, which pulses through the entire body of the church, past, present, and future. These grandmothers speak in proverbs that say: the Christian life has to do with interconnection, nurturance, and intimacy with God and others. Catherine, Gertrude, and Julian were women who acknowledged him. In all their ways. And he directed their paths.

My grandmother Gunga probably wouldn't have known quite what to do with the witness of these medieval lovers of God. I'm quite certain their writings were not among the spiritual readings recommended for the Eastern Stars of Rosemead in 1955. But she knew a great deal about the primal connections that bind us, the arts of intimacy, and most especially about the loving circle of maternal arms that embrace us all. She lived God's wisdom as did they.

*In all thy ways acknowledge Him
and He will direct thy paths.*

Into *the* Labyrinth:

WALKING THE WAY OF WISDOM

by Douglas Burton-Christie



NANCY RUTH JACKSON

*I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found out, was really going in.*¹

—John Muir

IN THE FADING LIGHT of evening, I step out onto the pale white canvas and begin walking. All around me candles dance against the gathering darkness. Plainchant fills the air. I inhale the sweet fragrance of incense. My muscles tense and my feet crack as I walk. I struggle to maintain my balance on the narrow, winding path. I am intensely self-conscious. Am I doing this the right way? Am I walking too fast? What exactly am I doing here? What I am doing, I remind myself, is walking the labyrinth. I am embarking on a kind of pilgrimage.

Christians have practiced this particular form of walking meditation since at least the thirteenth century, when a labyrinth was placed on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France.² The actual design of the labyrinth is much older, with pre-Christian examples having been uncovered in ancient Crete and the deserts of the American Southwest, among other places. In its early Christian form, one of the functions of the labyrinth was to give Christians who would otherwise have been unable to make the journey to the Holy Land a way of emulating the experience of making a pilgrimage. By following the path from the outside of the circle to the center and back again they would, they hoped, experience something analogous to the transforming journey to the *axis mundi*, the center of the world, Jerusalem. In our own time, the labyrinth walk is being rediscovered as a powerful means of personal and communal transformation. As a path to wisdom.

This evening I am walking the labyrinth with a group of students, colleagues, and friends in the chapel of the university where I teach in Los Angeles. This particular labyrinth is made of canvas, and therefore portable. It has come to us courtesy of a friend, Marydith Chase, who together with her parishioners designed and created it. In her parish, the labyrinth has become a regular part of the community's liturgical life. But it is some-

¹ *Words from the Land*, ed. by Stephen Trimble (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1995), p.vii.

² See Lauren Artress, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool* (New York: Riverhead, 1995); Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

thing new for us. It now spans the space, forty feet by forty feet, usually occupied by the altar. None of us, save Marydith, has ever walked the labyrinth before. None of us is sure of what to expect. But in our class we have been preparing for this moment for weeks, reading, thinking, and talking about the significance of place, space, and journey in the Christian spiritual quest, about the meaning of a spirituality grounded in the Christian idea of the Incarnation. Now it is time to move beyond our detached ruminations and risk concrete exploration. It is time to step out onto the path and begin walking.

THE WAY

CHRISTIANS HAVE ALWAYS had a lively appreciation for the path, both as concrete reality and rich, suggestive metaphor. Consider how the earliest Christians used the term *hodos*, the Greek word meaning “way.” In its most basic sense, it signifies a physical place: a path, road, or highway upon which someone might walk (Matt. 2:12; Mark 11:8). A related meaning refers to the movement or journey along a road, as in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, where Luke speaks of “what had happened on the way” (Luke 24:35, NIV). But this concrete, literal meaning of the term slides easily and often into a more metaphorical sense, with rich moral and religious resonance. *Hodos* in this sense refers to “a way of life,” “a way of acting,” or “conduct.” This is how the Old Testament Wisdom tradition uses the term. Thus the Book of Proverbs exhorts one who would seek wisdom to walk in “the way of understanding” (Prov. 21:16)³, to seek the “way of insight” (Prov. 9:6). The Book of Job speaks of pursuing the way of light (Job 24:13). This is similar to Jesus’ use of the term when he points to John the Baptist as one who “came to you in the way (*hodos*) of righteousness” (Matt. 21:32). Eventually this sense of the word would be expanded even further as Christians came to refer to their entire personal and communal life in Christ simply as “the Way” (Acts 24:14).

For early Christians there was an intimate relationship between the pursuit of “the Way,” the quest for wisdom, and life in Christ. Jesus himself was steeped in the ancient Jewish

³ All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise indicated.

wisdom traditions and embodied many of the characteristic qualities of a Jewish sage. He was, as Marcus Borg and others have noted, a charismatic teacher of wisdom. But “Jesus was not primarily a teacher of information (what to believe) or morals (how to behave)... [he was] a teacher of a way or path of transformation.”⁴ Through his aphorisms, parables, and prophetic actions Jesus challenged his hearers to abandon the wide, easy path of conventional wisdom and embark upon the hard, narrow path leading toward a life centered in God (Matt. 7:13-14). To embark upon this path of wisdom was, according to Jesus, to open oneself imaginatively to an ever deepening experience of God’s gracious love.

For the post-resurrection Christian community, this experience was grounded in a growing awareness of Christ’s power and enduring presence in their midst. So profound and far-reaching was this presence that Christians gradually came to think of the one who had invited them onto the path of wisdom as the very Wisdom of God incarnate. This conceptual leap was made possible in part because the Jewish wisdom tradition had spoken of wisdom not only as a path or way of life, but also as a personification or manifestation of God, God’s very creative presence in the world. In the Wisdom of Solomon, written

It is time to step out onto the path... near the time of Jesus, Wisdom is seen as having qualities usually attributed to God alone. Like God, Wisdom is everywhere present: “she pervades and penetrates all things.” She is “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty.” She is “a reflection of eternal light.” Like God she is omnipotent and sustains all of life: “Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things” (Wisd. of Sol. 7:22-27).

If we listen carefully to the way the early Christians spoke about the risen Christ, we can hear echoes of this late Wisdom tradition.⁵ This is true not only of the direct use of wisdom language, such as when Paul speaks of “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). It is also noticeable in the use of the wisdom imagery to speak of Christ’s significance within

⁴Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 75.

⁵Borg, “Jesus, the Wisdom of God: Sophia Become Flesh,” in Chap. 5 of *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, pp. 96-118.

the life of the believing community. When Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, says, “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6), he is attributing to Christ the same creative power and cosmic significance traditionally associated with divine wisdom. The letter to the Colossians speaks in similarly exalted terms, calling Christ “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). But nowhere, perhaps, is the association between Christ and divine wisdom seen as clearly as in the prologue to the fourth Gospel. Here the divine power and presence of God in Christ, the *logos*, is expressed in language almost identical with that traditionally used to describe divine wisdom. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1, 14). Divine wisdom, the very creative power of God pervading the whole of reality, has now become

... and begin walking



localized in the person of Christ.

For early Christians, walking the path of wisdom became indistinguishable from the ever deepening experience of life in Christ already unfolding within them. This was a mystery not easily grasped. The farewell discourses of the Fourth Gospel remind us of just how difficult it was for the disciples to understand how Christ could both lead the way to wisdom and be the very flowering of wisdom within them. Jesus tells them he is going ahead to prepare a “place” for them, and promises to return to “take you to be with me” (John 14:2, 3, NIV). But Thomas, likely echoing an anxiety felt by many early Christians, protests: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (14:5). Thomas’s concern is understandable. How *could* Jesus’ friends be sure they would be able to find him again once he had departed from their midst? Jesus’ response is as startling as it is consoling. He reveals to them that the one who had invited them to embark upon the narrow way of wisdom is himself the way, the very terrain they must enter to discover God’s mysterious presence: “I am the way (*hodos*), and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). He also reveals to his friends that they have already embarked on that journey: “If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (John 14:7).

To walk along this way, to journey toward this place of wisdom, is to waken to the presence of the risen Christ. It is to risk discovering the mystery of God alive at the very center of one’s being.

INTO UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

NOT EVEN HERE, in this exalted space where the way of wisdom is revealed as the creative presence of God alive in our midst, has the humble imagery of the path been left behind. Even as *hodos* takes on richer and more complex moral and religious significance, it never ceases meaning simply a “road” or “path.” The metaphorical significance and the concrete reality of the path cannot be entirely distinguished from one another. They are woven together in an intricate web of meaning. Perhaps this is why the language of the path, the journey, has continued to resonate so deeply within the history of Christian spirituality.

Consider the metaphorical resonance of the path for Christian mystics: John Climacus imaged the journey to God as a “ladder of divine ascent”; Dante Alighieri envisioned it as a treacherous and exacting trip through the netherworld of hell and up the mount of purgatory toward paradise; John of the Cross spoke of the ascent of Mount Carmel, Teresa of Avila of the journey to the center of the interior castle. Here, the spatial imagery of movement along a path becomes an indispensable metaphor for evoking the gradual discovery of God’s intimate presence and the mysterious awakening to the deepest center of the self. Yet, the path has also remained an utterly concrete reality within Christian experience. From at least the fourth century onwards, Christian pilgrims set one foot in front of the other as they made their often arduous journeys to the holy places in Jerusalem and to the tombs of saints and martyrs. The early Christian monks withdrew into the depths of the desert, literally and symbolically embodying Jesus’ call to embark upon the “narrow path.” The Celtic monks later demonstrated a similar abandon, hurling themselves into the sea in their tiny currachs, becoming exiles for the sake of Christ. Christian liturgy and architecture provided the ritual space in which the worshipper could give physical expression (processing, circumambulating, gesturing) to the soul’s deepest impulses.

So it is with the labyrinth. Here is a path to wisdom filled with endlessly rich metaphorical associations. It serves as a reminder that the quest for God and for self-knowledge always involves venturing forth from the place where one now stands into an as yet undiscovered country. Yet the discovery comes only if one is prepared to embark along the *hodos* unfolding before her or him on the labyrinth. One must be prepared to walk.

This is easier said than done. Standing before the labyrinth, I feel hesitant, uncertain. I am not sure what to expect. The prospect of wandering aimlessly for an hour or more on a spiraling path that goes nowhere seems foolish, even childish, to me. But there is another reason for my hesitation: I am not sure I want to risk this journey. Perhaps there is real power to this ritual. Perhaps I will have to face myself more honestly than I have done until now. Beyond these personal concerns, I also worry about the students. What if they don’t come? What if the whole experience doesn’t work? Some of my students, I dis-

I
am not
sure I want
to risk this
journey

cover later, share my anxieties. They too worry about looking foolish. It is important to look cool and this seems on the face of it like a suspiciously “uncool” thing to do. Some simply have low expectations; we are, after all, in a church, a place that has long since lost its meaning and significance for some of them. Still others share my sense that something profound may happen to them this evening if they open themselves to the journey. They appear to greet this prospect with distinctly mixed feelings, expressing both longing for and fear of the deep encounter with God they imagine the labyrinth might elicit.

But there is only one way for them and for me to discover what we have come here for. So, we begin walking. For three hours we walk. We follow the twisting path, moving now toward the center, now toward the perimeter, now back toward the center, eventually returning to the same point at which we entered. We move at different paces, some walking slowly, others more briskly. Some are beginning while others are finishing and still others are making their way toward the center.

Moving through the space of the labyrinth, putting one foot in front of the other, was itself immensely instructive. “The walking was powerful,” one woman noted. “When I tried to hurry, to move too quickly past certain reflections, my body would not move on. We cannot be human at prayer without our bodies.” Nor can we know, much as we would like to, what lies ahead on a path that moves so unpredictably: “While I was

walking, I could not gauge how far I had walked and how much farther I had to go to the center. This led me to focus on the journey and not the distance.”

To follow the path without expectation, without the illusion of control, teaches one humility:

“Oftentimes when you expect that you are coming closer to the holy, another turn takes you farther than ever before. When searching for the holy, it is important to realize how small you are in relation to God. Instead of searching for ‘the end,’ it

is wise to stay on the path and seek the holy in a humble way.” Still, the labyrinth is not a maze. There are no dead ends. The path leads surely, if mysteriously and circuitously, toward the center. “No matter where you are in the labyrinth you feel some sort of connection to the center . . . where God is found. With each step, I felt a greater sense of balance, groundedness, a feeling that the present reality we stand on resonates

with spirit and that we are one with that spirit.”

This was another of the surprises yielded by the labyrinth: in spite of its solitary character, walking the path is an intensely communal experience. While walking, one easily becomes lost in thought, paying attention to the part of the path directly ahead, to all that is unfolding within. But then, suddenly, there is another person coming toward you. You are traveling opposite directions on the same path and must yield to make room for one another. Or you find yourself walking beside someone for awhile on adjoining paths. Then the paths diverge and you each move off in your own directions, perhaps meeting again later, perhaps not. To walk the labyrinth means traveling together with others. “I began to notice how important the other people were in this experience,” a woman noted. “We had to do this together, to respect each other’s space. It became a metaphor for the earth and the people on it. We are not here alone and we need to move around the planet in a compatible way.” Another commented: “I thought it would be more isolated, but to my surprise it seemed to be a sharing experience. Everyone connected together on a journey toward the same destination—the center. Yet, at the same time, each had individual and separate experiences. . . .”

FOR SOME this meant confronting themselves more honestly than they had done previously. One young man commented: “Things I thought I had forgotten were suddenly in my mind. Many things I had done in my past came to my mind and made me feel ashamed. It was almost like I was in confession but with my soul. After a while I started to feel reconciled with myself. Then and only then could I enjoy the experience fully. I felt free and filled with grace.” For another person, movement through the labyrinth brought a profound sense of resolve, a clarity about issues that had long been unsettled. But reaching this point required overcoming her fears and hesitations: “It was a bit unsettling beginning the journey. Towards the middle of it, I had managed to clear my mind and feel comfortable. By the time I felt a sense of ‘rightness’ I discovered I was only two turns away from the center. That was so right. I walked away from the labyrinth experience with a clear sense of what direction my life needs to take, and with a centered, inner feeling of wholeness, peace.”

In most cases, the particular character of these struggles, these resolutions remained hidden from view. But with one

*Walking
the path is
an intensely
communal
experience*

member of the class, the source of her struggle was known to all of us. She had already shared the story of the tragic loss of her brother four years earlier in a drive-by shooting, and the painful circumstances that had led to her sense of living as an exile here in Los Angeles. She felt, she said, displaced, with little sense of direction, no center to her life. But something remarkable happened as she walked: "When I reached the center, I felt the need to sit down and pray. I asked God to help me understand. I was amazed when I received an answer. I couldn't believe it and I kept telling myself that what I was hearing was not God but my own desire. Yet, God persisted and repeated over and over again, 'Rejoice and be glad! I will show you wonders that you have never seen. Follow me and trust. You are on the right path.' Could it be that after all these years of searching that I was finally on the 'right path'? The experience was completely overwhelming. I sat unable to move."

BY WALKING

HOW IS IT that the simple act of walking can yield such revelation, such resolve, such healing? I do not know. Perhaps it is the movement itself. Perhaps it is the unfolding path. Perhaps it is the circular motion, the sense of being drawn toward the center. Or the space itself, shared intimately with others. Whatever the explanation, surely one of the most remarkable elements of the labyrinth is this: how, in walking, wisdom long forgotten or never before fully grasped is drawn forth from the depths.

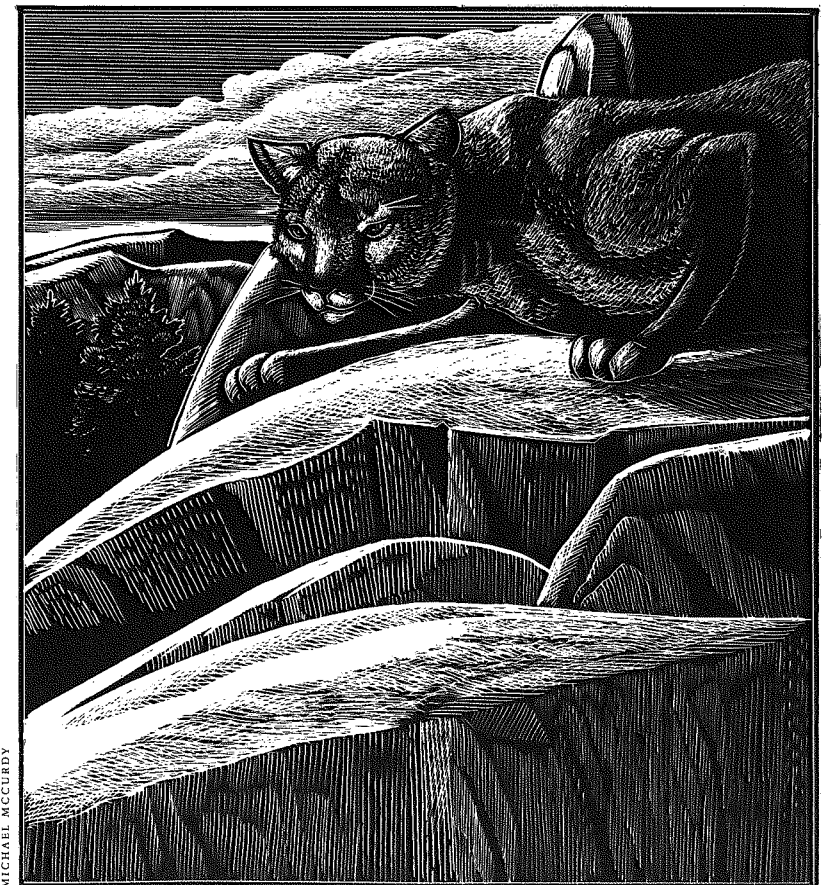
"Wisdom sits in places." I found myself thinking about that Apache saying as I emerged from the darkened church that evening. For the Apaches, as for many of the indigenous peoples of this continent, there is an integral and intimate relationship between place and spirit. To set out in search of wisdom is to allow oneself to be drawn into relationship with particular places, sacred places. I wonder whether the labyrinth can teach us something similar, namely that wisdom, the creative power of God residing deep within the living world and within each of us, can be discovered only when we place our feet on the path before us and set out on the way.

The Journey to Wisdom

by Kristen Johnson Ingram

*On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads
she takes her stand.*

—Proverbs 8:2 (NRSV)



MICHAEL MCCURDY