

A Lenten Labyrinth

This week we're pleased to bring you another sermon from Marcus Felde, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Indianapolis and frequent Crossings writer. (We last featured one of his sermons in Thursday Theology #808.) Marcus preached this sermon on Ash Wednesday of this year, on the Old Testament reading of Joel 2:1-2, 12-17.

With his usual eloquence, Marcus vividly illustrates Joel's message in terms of the six-step Crossings matrix, here framed as a journey into and out of the center of a Lenten labyrinth with God as our ultimate guide.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

“Fast, Weep, Mourn; or, A Lenten Labyrinth,” A Sermon for Ash Wednesday, March 5, 2014. Bethlehem.

INI

Let me walk you through a labyrinth.

A labyrinth is not a maze. Mazes are intended to befuddle or confound. You must solve a maze, or you will get lost.

A labyrinth, on the other hand, is intended to lead you somewhere, the way a pilgrimage takes you somewhere. The physical journey coordinates with a spiritual journey. Spiritual labyrinths are intended to lead us to God.

This evening, I want to take you somewhere, with the help of the prophet Joel. But this labyrinth is not one you will walk.

Instead, the Word of God will lead you in, and the Word of God will lead you back out. Pilgrimages or labyrinths might usually be thought of as means by which you find your way to God, but I am not talking that way. I want to adapt the practice so that the labyrinth represents the way *God* leads lost people back to God.

Joel—his name means “the Lord is God”—invites us on this journey. He will lead us into the labyrinth. At the center of the labyrinth we will “cross” a bridge. Then the Word of God will take us back out into the “real world” we left behind a few minutes earlier, changed.

Remember, the Word of God will do the work in this labyrinth. Our task is simply to hear God, so that God can work in us to make us new. David prays in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart, O God.” The labyrinth we will go through is simply a way of representing how God does that in people like us.

We begin outside the maze, in the “real world.” The prophet Joel tells us that the Lord is angry. He wants people’s attention:

*Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the
Lord is coming.*

Joel expresses the danger of the present situation; and he suggests that the way out is for the people to listen to God.

*Even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with
fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.*

There may be hope, but people must listen to what God says. And the first three words of God are: Fast. Weep. Mourn. Each command represents a stage of the labyrinth through which God

will take us.

I

The first stage of this labyrinth is “fasting.”

Why would God tell people: “Stop eating”? Don’t we have to eat in order to stay alive? Food is good, and eating is natural!

The reason God tells people to stop eating is that they are eating “obliviously,” and that is a sin. This is not *only* true of eating. It applies to satisfying any of our other needs or appetites. But it is *even* true of eating, that to enjoy the good things of this world, without a concern for whether others are able to enjoy them, is sin.

The specific commandment which covers this sort of sin is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Do you remember the story about the rich man and Lazarus? The rich man ate sumptuously *without concern* for the needs of Lazarus, so he was condemned.

God says to all of us: “Stop eating.” Until you are ready to see what others need, you yourself don’t deserve to eat. The reason for giving *anything* up for Lent, is not to make you more virtuous. Or help you lose weight. It is, by making you more conscious of your own need, to make you more aware of the needs of others.

(Let me make the distinction again here, which applies throughout this labyrinth. You do not get through the labyrinth by following orders. “Fast” is not the first thing on a checklist of what you must do to get to God. It is the first thing you have to *hear* from God, for God to get you through.)

2

The second stage of our labyrinth is labeled “Weep!”

But why cry?

We ought to cry because of what we learned about ourselves in stage one of the labyrinth. The fact that we are able to eat “obliviously” means something is wrong with us. Luther says in the Small Catechism that we “should fear and love God so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, **but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.**” Which means, if we do not “help and support our neighbors in all of life’s needs,” we do not fear and love God as we ought. And if we do not fear and love God as we ought, well, we should weep.

3

Stage three of the labyrinth: “Mourn.” We are now about as far from “the real world” and as close to the center of the labyrinth as we can get.

What does it mean to mourn? The prophet Joel is telling us how serious our problem is. He is telling us we are done for. “Like blackness spread upon the mountains—(the way the shadow of a great cloud sweeps inexorably across the side of a mountain)—a great and powerful army comes.” The army of God coming to destroy those who do not love their neighbor as they ought. God is angry with us for being oblivious to others.

Living for ourselves always seems like a good idea at the time. “Every man for himself (every woman for herself).” But such living is the curse of the world. It is like living without God. It is like...not living.

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We have reached the center of the labyrinth. We have been brought as low as God can bring us. Things are as dark as they can be. We are truly sorry. And we are a long ways from the security of our former existence.

Joel is not able to lead us out of this labyrinth he got us into! All he can do is offer hints. But here in the middle of the labyrinth you and I find a man on a cross, Jesus of Nazareth, with an offer: Jesus wants to take us out of the labyrinth, back to the real world, changed. He is acquainted with our sin and guilt. But he is a physician. We are who he came to serve. He lives to make us better. To flip us. Turn us inside out. Make us people who *do* fear and love God as we ought.

4

So, stage four of the labyrinth begins. Jesus says, as he once told Mary and Martha's brother Lazarus, "Come on out of that grave!" When we emerge from the dark side of the labyrinth into the clearing in the middle, we are in for a surprise: good news about our prospects. "You shall not die but live," the Gospel says to us. God has redeemed us!

I would call this fourth stage of the labyrinth "Rejoice!" Here is our God we were looking for! Just as Joel hinted he might, he has in fact relented from punishing. Christ on the cross is the sign of a God who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." God has sent his Son to save us who were enslaved to our own needs so that we can live for God. We are as glad as glad can be, to hear what God has done for us by his Son.

5

Stage five is where, by the work of the Holy Spirit, the laughing starts, as our hearts catch (by faith) the ball that is tossed to us by grace. We laugh to see that, like a Samaritan leaning over a man in a certain ditch, God has come to save us. Warmed by his love for us, we are drawn to love the God whom we cannot see. We are well on our way out of the labyrinth when we believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting...*not counting* our trespasses. Not counting how many

times we ate obliviously, but drawing us to see himself and others with love.

6

Stage six takes us back out into the world, for a feast. (The opposite of fast.) Joel said that the Lord might leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord, our God—and lo, there it is! The feast of victory for our God, and the feast of love between God's children. This, too, is the work of the Word of God, that we now look to the needs of others, in love.

“Fast, weep, mourn”; “rejoice, laugh, feast!”

A Lenten labyrinth. Amazing grace, by which the word of God teaches our hearts to fear, then relieves our fears. Teaches us the truth that takes us down, then gives us the truth which lifts us up.