

**Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday March 1st, 2009 by
The Reverend Meg Buerkel**

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from....

(a few lines from T.S. Eliot's 'Four Quartets')

Here we are at a beginning – the beginning of the season of Lent, our forty days in the wilderness. Forty days marked by meditation and penitance, fasting and prayer, temptation and trial, suffering and death. We have just ended the season of Epiphany, with its wonders and marvels, its stars and kings, its miracles and transfigurations. We are beginning from an end, as TS Eliot writes. And thankfully, we begin from a place where we have heard the awesome power and glory of God in Jesus. Because, from this place, we descend the mountain towards Jerusalem, that city beloved by God. We descend to the Holy City who 'kills the prophets and stones those sent to it.' We descend into that place where Jesus will be hailed as King and sought after as Rabbi, the place where he will host his Last Supper, the place he will be betrayed and arrested. We go knowing that the cross and its shadow of death loom over our path. We go, we wave palms singing Hosanna, and we yell "Crucify Him!" We witness his death and we mourn at his tomb. Lent is a march toward the end: death. And Lent is a march within the steadfast love of God to a new beginning: resurrection.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the story of John the Baptist, and the first time we see Jesus is as he walks toward John to be baptised. Immediately, according to Mark, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days (a long time). The ministry of Jesus doesn't begin until after the wilderness ends and after the end of John's ministry. It's almost as if Jesus was a regular sort of guy until that water was poured over him and he heard that voice calling him Beloved Son. Something happened in that awe-filled moment... it was an end and it was a beginning.

It is good to be here with you at Holy Trinity. I think of you often, and always warmly – you are a good people doing good work here, carrying on a fine tradition begun 150 years ago. I will always be grateful to you and to Alan for the three years I journeyed in faith with you. Thank you. I bring greetings from the town of Davidson, North Carolina – where I serve as associate rector at St Alban's and Episcopal Campus Minister at Davidson College. Yes, the Davidson College, sweetheart of the NCAA – home to the famous Stephen Curry. But basketball is not the only thing happening at Davidson.

Monday of this week, I attended the blessing and dedication of a labyrinth on campus. The effort to bring this meditation tool to campus was spearheaded by a student and supported and funded by many groups – including the Canterbury Episcopal Fellowship. It will be used for many purposes – from reducing stress to challenging mathematicians to drawing near to God. The campus labyrinth is made of paving stones laid in the traditional circular pattern – like the one at Chartres Cathedral near Paris - twisting and turning, circumnavigating the center, and switching back and forth, until eventually the one who walks its path arrives at the center. A labyrinth looks a lot like a maze, but, in a labyrinth, there is only one path in and the same path out, there are no dead ends, there are no tricks, there are no wrong choices. It is one, unobstructed path to the Center.

As I stood at the dedication of that labyrinth, I thought 'walking the labyrinth must somehow be akin to Jesus' time in the wilderness – that time in-between, after God's call and before beginning his ministry.'

We all experience wilderness times in our lives – those times in-between. Something signifies an end and it calls us on to a beginning – but, before we get to that new place, there is a time of wilderness, of searching, of mourning, of anticipating, of waiting, of watching, of unknowing. That time is like the path of the labyrinth.

We walk a labyrinth, entering with our eyes fixed on the goal - the center, God - and our path leads almost straight to that place, but then it turns and circles the center, then switches back, and we walk away from God. Another turn, and we can see God from the corner of our eye, as we walk around God, from a distance. Sometimes we wish to skip ahead, to forget the path, and other times, we want to turn around. There are times we even lose sight of our goal, the Center, we lose sight of God. A lot of ground is covered until eventually, the labyrinth, the walker, and life all end up in the Center of All there is – in God. And then, there is the exit from the labyrinth, we emerge the same, yet changed from what we have experienced.

Lent is a journey through the wilderness labyrinth. We began on Ash Wednesday, when we were *thrown* into Lent, with reminders of how far away from the Center we really are. We confessed our sins, we lamented our unholiness, we mourned the times we turn away from God and from our neighbor – and we reoriented ourselves to face God. We will continue this journey, with its twists and turns and switchbacks – dancing close to the center, then retreating, until we arrive at the place where we will joyfully throw our robes under his donkey and call him King, then we will call for his execution, and finally, we will stand under his cross. And three long days later, we will arrive at the Center of All there is, and celebrate the love of God who empties the tomb and resurrects the body.

Entry to the wilderness labyrinth is daunting: I think, How much time will it take? How will I make it through? What will happen to me? I feel the entry into Lent is just as daunting: it's a long way – how will I make it through? I feel so far from the Center, so distant from God - what will happen to me along the way? and I wonder if Jesus felt the same as the Spirit drove him into the wilderness? I wonder if he repeated, over and over to himself, 'I am the Son of God, I AM the Son of God, I am the Son of GOD!?' I have this good news, how will I share it? What will happen to me along the way? How will I survive?'

Yet, there is something that happens to us after we enter the labyrinth, something that causes the mind to still – yet employs the whole of the body - walking, standing, praying, continuing on the path with our *whole* self. We enter Lent with our whole self – and we bring to the God of steadfast love and mercy our entire being.

When we enter the wilderness, let us also enter it with our whole self. Our wilderness is like the wilderness Jesus entered - we are tempted, we are with wild beasts, and angels do wait upon us. We are tempted to retreat, to turn around, to stop. And the wild beasts that are our fears dwell with us – intimidating and fierce until we learn that we cannot banish them, but must live with them, peaceably. And thankfully, there are angels - those moments where we catch a fleeting glimpse of God, or feel the Spirit's warm breath in our ear, or see a fresh footprint left by Jesus. The angels are those people and things that reassure us of God's love and presence, and inspire hope within us, however reluctant we are, to continue forward, trusting that the path upon which we tread leads to the Center – the end that is the beginning. The angels remind us that the path upon which we tread IS God. Jesus said, "I am the WAY, the truth, and the life."

Yes, we are only at the beginning of the wilderness labyrinth that is Lent. Yes, we are far, far away from the Center. Yes, there is a long road ahead. Yes, there is suffering and death along the way. And yes, God's love will lead us and guide us and comfort us and strengthen us. And, yes, once we come to the Center, to God, to the end, there WILL be yet another beginning.

TS Eliot again:

We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, unremembered gate

When the last of earth left to discover

Is that which was the beginning;

At the source of the longest river

The voice of the hidden waterfall

And the children in the apple-tree

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half-heard, in the stillness

Between two waves of the sea.

Quick now, here, now, always—

A condition of complete simplicity

(Costing not less than everything)

And all shall be well and

All manner of thing shall be well...

Amen.