

Pastor's Ponderings...

I am not sure about you, but I like to know what I am doing and which direction I am headed. Yet, often we find ourselves entwined in a maze of the unknown. That happened to me the other day. My heart was a bit heavy and I felt like I needed something but was not exactly sure what I was longing for. So, after I finished my errand at Rite Aid, I found myself at the Mary & Joseph Retreat Center which is at the tip of Crenshaw Boulevard. It is a lovely spot if you have not been there before. It is just past St. John Fisher Church. The grounds are welcoming, the smell of the evergreens filled my soul and the ability to be still and silent in and amongst the chaos was refreshing.

It was a hot day, so I found a shady tree and sat under it. However, I was intrigued by this large labyrinth embedded in the dirt surrounded by bricks placed in a pattern on the ground and sitting directly under the hot sun. It was inviting me to step closer and go inside. For those who may not be familiar with such, labyrinths are usually circular in nature and they provide a meandering path to the center. This is often used as prayer or a time of reflection.

Walking labyrinths is a 4,000-year-old tradition. Something that has been around that long I felt deserved my attention. As I approached the entry, I had to decide which way I was headed. As I mentioned earlier, I like to know where I am headed so surrendering was not easy. At first, I tried to guess where I was going just to be turned back around. After some time, I finally surrendered to the motion and movement that this labyrinth had to offer. I finally made it to the center where I was greeted by a large rock, an altar.



This motion and movement of walking and breathing through this labyrinth reminded me how precious life's journey is. This was a powerful way to walk and pray and be reminded that even in the midst of chaos and heartache, we are called to trust. When we surrender to the unknown and trust, the hope is, we will have strength for the journey.

Try this hand labyrinth and enjoy the journey.

Be kind to yourself and others,

Grace and peace,
Pastor Lisa

 *Prayer Requests*

It is with much sadness that I share the passing of Steve Johnson. He was a dear friend and some of you may remember his parents Rev. Marvin & Mae Johnson who served this church in the late 60's. Prayers of Lynn Mihovil as she adjusts to the loss of her husband, Don. Nelms' family, their granddaughter's husband, is being treated for acute pancreatitis. Kurt Weston who is undergoing treatment for cancer. Prayers for Joy Weston and her daughter Kimberly who is caretaking for the family. Andrea Luse who is struggling with a chronic rash. Joyce Byrd, glaucoma in her right eye. Pam and Ken Haas, Ken is awaiting test results. Beverly Richie whose mom is in hospice. Christy Stepehnson's step sister Rebecca, who is undergoing intensive chemo. Belinda Brodin's father who is home and recovering. Marilyn is asking for prayers for Brenda who had two surgeries and will need to undergo another surgery for her lungs. Jan, her daughter-in-laws mother, is home after surgery and will need chemo; Jake, Jan's 1/2 brother will have a pacemaker put in next week. John Stephenson's friend, Bill Levine. Sutherland family. Carol's friends: Angel and her daughter Sydney who is struggling with an eating disorder, Heidi whose brother is in critical condition and Keith's family. Solorzano family.

Idle Thoughts from an Idle Lay Leader...

Some of you may have read this article this past week in the Times. It rings true for all of us. Many times I look around our sanctuary on Sundays and wonder why so many of you sit in certain seats and with certain people. Someday I hope to get us some more comfortable seats, but

for now most of us would just be happy to be in the sanctuary at all. I want acknowledge the writer, Tom Fields Meyer and thank him for sharing with all of us.

John Stephenson

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One Saturday morning last fall I arrived at my synagogue, only to discover that someone had taken my seat.

I've never been a regular at a bar or a restaurant or even a gym. But on Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, I go to synagogue. And I always sit in the same place: on the aisle, not too close to the

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front, not too far from the action. A couple of rows behind Ruth and Reuven, across the aisle from Cheryl, just in front of Len.

What happens when you get bumped from your regular place, your set routine? We've all faced that question as the pandemic has scrambled schedules and shuttered shops and cafes.

And I keep thinking about my spot in shul.

To be clear, my Los Angeles temple doesn't have reserved seats. Like every congregation I've ever belonged to, though, it does have an unofficial, unspoken seating chart. The young families cluster near the back, the older folks up front. There's the woman who positions herself near the entrance to catch friends as they arrive. And the guy who stakes out an inconspicuous spot to read novels undetected.

Anyone who's ever been in a college seminar or group therapy knows that it's human nature to settle into a regular place. When it comes to synagogue, though, there's more at play. The Talmud venerates anyone who prays in what is called in Hebrew a *makom kavua*, a regular place. It is said that Abraham, the first Jew, made a practice of talking to God from one particular spot.

For good reason. Being in a familiar space makes it easier to focus. Losing that place throws you off — as I learned when I found that a family of guests, early arrivals for that week's bat mitzvah, had unwittingly displaced me. I glanced around and settled into a spot one row back and a few seats in.

It was OK. It was a place to sit. But it wasn't my *makom kavua*.

It felt like putting on someone else's sneaker. Even if it's my size, it's not my shoe. Same room. Same rabbi. Same prayers. But everything felt a little ... off. The whole place looked different. The whole world seemed askew.

Kind of like now.

After five months without in-person services at synagogue, I miss the singing. I miss the rabbis' sermons. I miss seeing my friends. But mostly I miss being in my seat — that fixed place I could return to week in, week out.

I miss the routine. I miss knowing that whatever life has thrown my way — work stress, awful news in the headlines, tension or disappointment or celebration — I could return at week's end to that same spot. I could watch the light stream through the window at the same angle. I could

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stare at the same ceiling. I could close my eyes and hear familiar voices from all sides singing the same prayers.

Yes, I've tried Zoom services, even enjoyed them. But I end up missing my spot even more — and contemplating why I go to synagogue in the first place. Theological conviction? A sense of obligation? Or just rote habit?

Those are all factors. But the pandemic has made me realize that what I value even more is something else: knowing that for a couple of hours on Saturday morning I'm in the right place — in the room, in the world, in my life. For that one brief stretch of time, I'm where I belong.

That's what I long for now — more than the familiar tunes or the cookies afterward. When we're feeling unmoored, it's natural to yearn for the familiar.

That explains another Jewish custom: After a loved one dies, when you return to synagogue, you don't sit in your usual place. At the moment you most crave the comfort of routine, you're expected to forgo it.

Why? Perhaps it's a way of manifesting outwardly what's happening inside. If you feel disoriented, confused and lost, why pretend otherwise?

But before long, the custom goes, the time comes to return to your regular spot.

When will that day arrive for us as a society? Lately, I spend my Saturday mornings at home with my family and a prayer book. Sometimes I close my eyes and envision the morning when we can return to the rhythms of daily life. I'll walk the half-mile to my synagogue, smile at the security guard, stroll inside and make my way to my seat.

There's a good chance that when I get there, I'll find that somebody's already taken it.

That's all right. It's all part of the routine.

Tom Fields-Meyer is a Los Angeles writer. His memoir "Following Ezra" was a finalist for a National Jewish Book Award.

