

Walking into the scenes in Scripture


Our wholeness depends on it

Sally Longley

A story of transfiguration

Her walk was slow, apprehensive, tentative.¹ The light filtering through the trees caught in the tangles of her dark hair and sharpened the contortions of fear around her mouth and jaw. Like the Samaritan woman walking toward the well, Maggie (pseudonym) clasped an empty bucket close to her chest as she walked the path toward the center of the labyrinth, the center representing the well of Jacob. All her fears seemed to be dragging heavily around her feet, like chains pulling her back. As I held the space for her as her spiritual director, watching with soft eyes to keep safe company for her, it seemed the path inward was never-ending.

Maggie has a long story of childhood abuse and was exploring in spiritual direction how she could connect with the person of Jesus. After many years of counseling, together with spiritual direction, she had reached the



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point where she could relate to Mother God and to the Spirit. And although she had explored Sophia and Christa as possibilities for connecting with the Second Person of the Trinity, she felt an inexplicably deep desire drawing her to explore again a relationship with Jesus the man.

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she said, as she described her own sense of being an outsider, someone whose story was too uncomfortable for neighbors, too offensive and inhibiting for friendships. Her questions and anger swirled around her like

1 Warning: This article refers to abuse, and some people may find it triggering.

loose rags that she wore with discomfort, and fear emanated from her like an odor. How could she move toward this man Jesus?

After exploring the Samaritan woman as her friend, together we discerned that walking into the scene of John 4, and using her imagination and the labyrinth to do that, might be a place to start. We wandered out together into the grounds of the retreat center where I was seeing her and made our way to the labyrinth. On the way, she picked up a garden bucket, wrapping both arms around it. “This is my emptiness. My hollowness.

My nothingness,” she said, indicating with the tilt of her head the inside of the bucket.

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Sitting by the labyrinth, we read John 4:4–15 together, and she pointed to the path of the labyrinth, describing it as her journey toward the well, where Jesus would be waiting. She spoke of how the twists and turns of the path represented


specific events in her life thus far and how her empty bucket also represented her hope—empty at this point but holding the possibility of receiving something at the well. She decided the center of the labyrinth would represent the well, the place where Jesus would be waiting. Her body shook slightly, like a cold shiver, as she described the center. “I want to do this,” she said emphatically. “I want to do this alone, but if you can just wait here so I feel safe.”

And so she began her walk, tracing her way through trails of her life journey, pausing in the places where the shadows from the trees cast their darkness across her path, and then moving on to the sunlit patches. It was an arduous journey. I stayed on the edge, holding her in prayer, not having any idea how this journey might unfold.

Maggie described to me afterward what happened for her. As she walked, she gathered the threads of her life into a big ball of knotted wool, which she brought with her to the well. The well was circled with a wide stone wall about a meter high—just high enough to form a safe barrier between herself and Jesus, who was on the other side of the well. Feeling a surge of energy from a mixture of courage and anger, she began to address Jesus, holding the large ball of knots in her fist and shaking it at Jesus as she sobbed and poured out her story. Jesus didn’t flinch, which surprised her. He was attentive, calm, solid—not averting his gaze from her as she said all that she had been longing to say for so long. It seemed like he had

an expansiveness that was able to receive all that she was throwing at him: her questions, her fears, her pain. He listened almost too calmly. So she threw her big, fat ball of knots at him in sheer frustration, and quick as a flash, he caught the ball and held it to his chest. Her sobbing anger began to abate. Then she felt he was saying to her, “Come around to this side of the well alongside me.”

Shakily, she made her way nearer to Jesus, but not too close. He indicated the other side of the well from where she had come and said to her, “Now I invite you to look back to the village of your life and name those four people who abused you.”



The Maggie that left the labyrinth that day left with a lightness in her walk, and her face transformed into freshness, relaxedness, and openness. This was indeed a transfiguration.

So he knew, to her surprise, that there were indeed four, and it felt to her that he already knew them. With some trepidation, she voiced out loud the name of each one, and they came out of the village, one by one, and stood on the far side of the well. She felt apprehensive, but the well was between her and them like a protective barrier, and she

had a strange and new sense that she was safe next to Jesus. Jesus then turned to her and said, “Now you leave them to me, and you go free.”

Maggie exclaimed, “For the first time! For the first time ever, I felt that Jesus was on my side, and he was looking after me and taking action with those four people!”

The Maggie that left the labyrinth that day left with a lightness in her walk, and her face transformed into freshness, relaxedness, and openness. This was indeed a transfiguration: one that she still needed to learn to live into and fully embody, but it had begun. Jesus was now her friend for the first time.

The role of imagination in reading the living Word

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12, NRSV)

Scripture is more than a passage to study, a book to finish, or a verse to memorize. It is a place of encounter with the living God. I once had a

conversation with a minister about preparing a sermon, and he remarked that he had been trying to wrestle a Scripture to the ground to understand it. I wondered if perhaps he needed to let the Scripture wrestle him to the ground, for to understand is to “stand under,” as the saying goes. When we step into Scripture with our whole being, we leave the safe shoreline and plunge into the ocean of the Word of God, where we are not in control. We get thoroughly soaked and buffeted, sometimes feeling we are held softly afloat and other times feeling we are down far too deep for comfort.

Did Maggie understand the John 4 passage? Was her experience just a figment of her imagination and therefore not real? It would seem Jesus certainly expected us to use our imaginations, for without imagination the parables remain skeletal. However, when we engage our imaginations—such as Henri Nouwen does in his well-loved book *Return of the Prodigal Son*—not only does the Spirit breathe life into Scripture, but we

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also become embodied in the stories of Scripture. Metaphors and similes likewise hold a world of meaning in a raindrop of a word and invite us not only to analyze them but also to engage our imaginations to release the life held in that tiny orb. Imagination is a portal through which we can enter inside these images and stories in great detail, discovering more about God and ourselves, facilitating a more powerfully transformative experience. Within Western societies, the creative role of imagination

has often been subordinated to reason. Yet we need both the reasoning, didactic mind *and* the imagination; like the two wings of a bird, both are necessary to embark on journeys into Scripture. God’s transforming Spirit uses both. Reason can help us approach a mystery or a truth with some comprehension, while imagination allows us to apprehend and *be apprehended* by such mysteries. Hence, imagination becomes not a “retreat from reality, but [rather] an essential power with which we engage reality.”²

2 Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, 95.

Entering Scripture with the labyrinth—transforming our somatic narrative

Maggie entered the Scripture not just with her mind but also with her body, by walking into the scene where she imaginatively overlaid the Scripture onto the landscape of the labyrinth. When Maggie left the labyrinth, not only had her verbal narrative begun to change, but her somatic narra-



When Maggie left the labyrinth, not only had her verbal narrative begun to change, but her somatic narrative was also beginning to take on a new shape.

tive was also beginning to take on a new shape. A new narrative within the physical body is healing and transformative, particularly for trauma survivors.³ Maggie's way of walking in the world had been tentative, fearful, almost furtive, always on guard. Her body depicted her sense of self: unworthy, alone, fearful, and expecting the worst. After this labyrinth walk, she emerged walking taller, straighter, and even with a hint of self-re-

spect. She needed to continue the journey to live more fully into this new self, but her body was already telling a different story.

As Gernot Candolini observes, "If life is viewed as a maze, every mistake is an unnecessary detour and a waste of time. If life is viewed as a labyrinth, then every mistake is part of the path and an indispensable master teacher."⁴ A maze is a puzzle to solve with the mind, with the aim of reaching the center. A labyrinth, however, has only one way in and one way out, so instead of engaging our minds to make decisions, the labyrinth engages the body with the aim of getting in touch with our own center. Walking the labyrinth enables us to pray with our whole being, including our bodies, and opens up the concept of peregrination—a pilgrimage of personal or spiritual significance that also engages the body. Body engagement is a central element in processing trauma and abuse.⁵ Esther de Waal refers to such a journey as a quest for the resurrected self, the true self.⁶ The labyrinth provides a path for prayer and reflection that engages all five senses (touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell) and other senses such as a sense of "presence," comfort, strength, release, and so on. Because

3 See, for example, Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*.

4 Candolini, *Labyrinths*, 52.

5 See Levine, *In an Unspoken Voice*.

6 See De Waal, *Celtic Way of Prayer*.

body movement is so important in the healing process for abuse and trauma survivors, the labyrinth offers a contained, guided, and safe pathway. Even medical practitioners are testifying to the value of labyrinths in their increasing number of requests to build labyrinths at hospitals and hospices for patients and their loved ones to walk.

The inward journey of the labyrinth can provide a place to journey into the chosen passage of Scripture. The time at the center allows for encounters with God to unfold. And the path outward offers the beginning of a journey toward new ways of being, new ways of living.

Some cautions to remember

Just as God is the one behind the spiritual direction process, so God is also the one behind the healing process. Discernment with each person regarding the passage that seems to be inviting them and their readiness to enter fully into the passage with their bodies is important. The spiritual director must clearly offer freedom to withdraw at any point. Spiritual direction is the director's agenda with God and their choice always.

Personal and spiritual growth is slow, and it is worth reminding each other that "the end can't be assured; it can only be trusted."⁷ We also need to monitor our own and others' expectations. Sometimes we can see and feel almost immediate effects from such exercises, as I have described in Maggie's story. Yet at other times it may feel like nothing is happening

and we are never going to move toward wholeness in a particular area. Here we can remind ourselves that with God "nothing never happens."

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Our imagination is a central part of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in us, and our bodies are avenues through which we incarnate Christ to others. Just as having a word to offer another pilgrim is important, so too is noticing what word

we are being invited to inhabit with our bodies. What word or verse of Scripture are people reading when they read our bodies? God invites us to incarnate the Word, to be the aroma of Christ. As we greet someone, do they sense the hospitality of God in us in such a way that they read in our body language a verse such as Romans 15:7, "Welcome one another,

⁷ Allender, *Healing the Wounded Heart*, 218.

therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God”? Would they sense something of Christ’s profound, unconditional acceptance and love of them, deep within our very being?

Engaging our reasoning and our imagination, we can walk deeply into passages of Scripture with our whole bodies, engaging all our physical and intuitional senses. And as we do so, we make ourselves available, as Maggie did, to the Spirit’s work—transforming and transfiguring us bit by bit toward wholeness.

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Sally Longley has been involved in spiritual direction for many years, having studied spiritual direction both in the United States at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and in Australia. She has been a member of the Australian Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction and served for six years as the president of the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction (2014–2019). Sally is a qualified Giver of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. She is author of *Walking the Labyrinth as the Beloved in John’s Gospel* (2015) and *Conversations with Silence* (2021) and producer of the 3-part video “5 Ways to Pray.”