

Walking a labyrinth as I prepared for more chemo

I held ten stones. My friend held two more.

by [Lisa Bernheisel](#) in the [January 27, 2021](#) issue



(Photo by Jake Blucker on Unsplash)

I love walking labyrinths. I enjoy the spiritual practice of moving my body while I pray and listen for the Holy Spirit. Recently I walked a labyrinth with a dear friend, who is also named Lisa. On this occasion we walked specifically because I have cancer, and I was getting weary of my aggressive chemotherapy treatments.

On St. Patrick's Day, the day after my four children started virtual school from home in the midst of a global pandemic, I was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer that had spread to my lungs and liver. I am 42 years old, a Lutheran pastor serving an Episcopal church, a spiritual director, a wife and daughter and sister and mother—and I thought I was going to die. I know and trust in God, pray to Jesus the healer, and deeply believe the Holy Spirit is with us. I also know the seemingly fatal reality of what I was facing. If the cancer didn't kill me, surely COVID-19 would. That night my husband and I told the children. We all cried for three days.

Since then, I have undergone ten rounds of aggressive chemotherapy. It has been brutal on my body, and it wears on my spirit. It has also been successful. A scan in June revealed the cancer in my colon and lungs was gone and the liver tumor was a third of its former size. I kept reading the scan results, “positive response to treatment,” and thinking, *Thanks be to God*. Thanks for the prayers lifted up by hundreds of companions who have sustained me. Thanks also for a combination of Western medicine and holistic practices like yoga, dietary changes, and walking labyrinths.

In a labyrinth, I can turn off my brain for a while and simply follow the path’s many twists and turns until I find the center, a place of calm renewal. One guide told me that simply offering my time to the Divine in that space creates a new path for the Holy Spirit to connect with me. She said to pay attention for days and even months after my walks. The moment of grace may happen in the shower or while making lunch the next day. I like that—God’s grace revealed in the sacred moments of everyday life.

Lisa and I have walked labyrinths together for a few years. We’ve walked together when we were grieving, angry, or learning to let go of past hurts. I was there in the hospital with her and her family on the day her father died. I was honored and humbled to preach and preside at his funeral. We also share the same name, and that makes us smile. As we walk together in a labyrinth surrounded by gardens, we sense God is walking with us. I have had those kinds of profound and intimate experiences after my walks.

I knew I needed that kind of spiritual support to face the last two rounds of my chemo regimen. I needed to return to God—my center, my rock. So I asked Lisa to walk with me again.

Before we entered the labyrinth, wearing masks and socially distanced, I picked up ten large stones, each representing a round of chemo I had endured. Each stone was heavy. Some were rough, some were smooth, one was intricate with beautiful fossils, and some were plain with a few spots. Lisa also picked up two large stones that fit in the palm of her hand. Those were the next two rounds of chemo. She said she would carry them for me until we got to the center.

It was early morning, and the sun and clouds were beautiful. The green grass and trees shimmered with morning dew. The birds flying nearby seemed to have

something on their minds. Bees went about their morning work, collecting pollen from the flowers. I followed Lisa into the labyrinth, each of us holding our stones.

I dropped my rocks as I went. Number one shortly after entering, two and three as I turned a corner. Number four, my favorite rock with the fossils, fell out of my hand, which made me so mad that I threw rocks number five and six. As I let them go, I felt lighter, but I recognized each as its own blessing, unique in shape, size, look, and feel. Like my chemotherapy rounds, hard and painful and yet still sacred.

Seven, eight, and nine dropped easily. But ten did not. By the time I finally let it go, I had reached the center. Lisa gestured for me to take the last two stones from her. They were so large, so heavy. I wanted nothing to do with them. My hands were lighter now, and I did not want to feel that weight again. I wanted to just go into the center and commune with God without taking them on.

But when Lisa said, “I could only carry them so long for you, now these are yours to take,” I knew she was right.

Reluctantly, I took the stones and held them in my hands. They fit perfectly, and they felt familiar. I squeezed them tight and found they felt good. I saw they were both actually quite beautiful. These next two rounds of chemo will be hard, I thought. And yet, there will be beauty and mystery revealed there too.

Standing there holding the stones my friend had carried, I continued to reflect on the previous five months. Those ten chemotherapy sessions are now part of the labyrinth of my life, but what comes next is uncertain. It had felt good to let Lisa carry the weight of that fear for a while. Now it was time to release it to the one who could bear it all.

I stacked the last two stones on the labyrinth’s center rock like a cairn, a memorial to another sacred moment on this journey. I remembered the words of Hannah, “There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no rock like our God” (1 Sam. 2:2). Then Lisa and I walked out of the labyrinth, together.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Two more stones.”