

The Heart of a Stranger

A weekly contemplative practice following Sunday's sermon, "Send Them Back?" Use any finger labyrinth, printed or carved. Allow 10 to 15 minutes, and return to it as often as you like this week.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Find a quiet place and set the labyrinth in front of you. Take three slow breaths, letting your shoulders drop a little with each one.

Read these words slowly, twice. God spoke them to a people who had once been foreigners and slaves in Egypt:

You know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 23:9, paraphrased)

Now rest your free hand over your heart. Feel it beating. Remember a time when you were the new one, the outsider, the one who didn't quite know the language or the rules. Let your hand stay there for a moment. Then let it rest in your lap, and place a finger of your other hand at the labyrinth's entrance.

RELEASING · THE PATH INWARD

Begin tracing slowly toward the center. The path will turn back on itself many times, the way a long journey to a new home often does. You are not lost; you are on the way.

As you go, let go of what keeps you from welcoming others: fear of people who seem different, the urge to protect what is "ours," the times you have looked away from someone who needed a place to belong. You might pray with your breath:

Breathe in: Holy One, · Breathe out: I release my fear of the stranger.

Breathe in: Holy One, · Breathe out: I remember that I was a stranger too.

RECEIVING · REST AT THE CENTER

When you reach the center, stop and rest your finger there. Turn your free hand palm up in your lap.

Remember Ruth, a foreigner gathering leftovers at the edge of a field, and Boaz turning to her at mealtime to say, "Come here, and eat some of this bread." Imagine God speaking those words to you. You are not a guest on the edges. You are welcome at the table. Rest in that welcome for as long as you like.

Breathe in: Come here, · Breathe out: and eat some of this bread.

RETURNING · THE PATH OUTWARD

When you are ready, trace your way back out. This time, bring to mind the people around you who are far from home: new neighbors, coworkers learning a new language, refugee families, children starting over at a new school.

Breathe in: Open my heart, · Breathe out: to those who are far from home.

Breathe in: Open my table, · Breathe out: to make room for one more.

The way out is the same path as the way in. Carry the welcome you have received with you. When you reach the entrance, pause and take one more slow breath.

CLOSING PRAYER

*God of the wanderer and the welcomer,
thank you for meeting me on this winding path.*

Where I have been a stranger, you made room for me.

Where I have drawn lines, teach me to draw circles.

*Send me out like Boaz, with an open hand and an open table,
to love the stranger as myself.*

Amen.

A WORD FOR EACH DAY

If you return to the labyrinth during the week, carry one word inward with you each day.

DAY	WORD TO CARRY	PRAY IT THIS WAY
Monday	Remember	When was I the stranger?
Tuesday	Notice	Who around me is far from home?
Wednesday	Release	What fear keeps me from welcoming?
Thursday	Share	What edge of my field can I leave for someone?
Friday	Learn	Whose story do I need to hear?
Saturday	Rest	Simply receive God's welcome.
Sunday	Gather	Bring a new neighbor's name to worship.