

# A New Year Prayer

December 29, 2013

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## Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,  
*as the last days of year flow forward*  
to be renewed for another lease,  
*to worship, to dive deep and fly high*  
on sturdy wings of honesty and compassion,  
*so we can receive the coming year as a gift.*

**And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.**

**Singing: 1000 Morning Has Come**

**Ingathering: Zomo the Rabbit**

Zomo the Rabbit is not very big. He is not very strong. But he is very, very smart. But Zomo wanted to be more than smart. He wanted to be wise. So he went to the oldest woman in the nearby village, the woman who was revered for her wisdom. "Good morning, grandmother," said Zomo. "I want to be wise like you are. How do I do that?" "Oh Zomo, it's not that easy. You have earn wisdom." "How do I earn wisdom, grandmother?" "By doing three impossible things." "Three impossible things, yes. First, bring me the scales of the biggest fish in the lake. Second, bring me the milk of the Angry Wild Cow. Third, bring me the tooth of a leopard."

"Ok," said Zomo. "I will try and do all three things."

Zomo went to the edge of the lake. He began to play a drum. He played so loud, the music went to the bottom of the lake, and the Biggest Fish heard. The Biggest Fish came out on the land, and started dancing. Dancing and dancing. Zomo played faster. And Biggest Fish danced so fast his scales fell off. "Oh my goodness, I am naked!" cried Biggest Fish, who then dove back into the lake, quite embarrassed. Zomo gathered all the scales and put them in his hat.

Then he went to the forest and climbed a large tree. He looked around and saw Angry Wild Cow. Zomo said, "Hahaha! You are not so great, Angry Wild Cow. You are not very strong." "Are you laughing at me?" snorted Angry Wild Cow. "Yep, it's me!" laughed Zomo. "You are so weak, I bet you cannot even knock down this tree." Angry Wild Cow turned red with rage. Smoke came out of her ears. She cried out and started to charge the tree to knock it down. But Zomo had fooled her. The wood of the tree trunk was soft. And Angry Wild Cow got her horns stuck right in the tree. Zomo climbed down, and while Angry Wild Cow was stuck, Zomo milked the cow

and put the milk in his upside down drum. Then Zomo ran away before Angry Wild Cow got free and came after him.

Then Zomo went up a high hill, where the leopard walked every day. He scattered a few of the fish scales on the down slope of the hill, and spilled just a few splashes of milk on the path. Then Zomo hid behind a big rock at the bottom of the hill. Sure enough, Leopard came strolling along, and suddenly slipped on the scales and milk and rolled down the hill. Leopard bumped into the rock, and one of his teeth fell out.

Zomo grabbed the tooth and ran back to the Wise Old Woman with the milk, the scales and the tooth. She smiled at him and said, "You are smart enough to have done three impossible things, Zomo. Now I shall offer you wisdom." Zomo listened. "Three things in this world make you wise: courage, good sense, and thinking things through. Little Rabbit, Zomo," she said, "you have plenty of courage, a bit of good sense, but you don't think things through very well at all. So, next time you see Biggest Fish, Angry Wild Cow, or Leopard, you'll be wise if you choose to run very, very fast!"

And so it was; Zomo was not very big. He wasn't very strong, but now, Zomo has at least a little wisdom. And he learned to run very, very fast when they came chasing after him.

**Greeting** News of the Congregation

**Affirming : The spirit sings, the bottom drops out of my soul. And from the center, Love, louder than thunder, opens a heaven. New eyes waken, I send Love's name into the world with wings.**  
*Thomas Merton 1968*

**Singing #1024 When the Spirit Says Do**

**Communing** the Sequence (*mixture of song that follows and my own commentary*)

Send up the fireworks!  
Life is a short embrace.  
Celebrate that heaven is in this place,  
and that every day a new year begins.  
Scatter your seeds of risk,  
for hope is the ground we till.  
Make each day what you will.  
Really, there is nothing to fear.  
No judgment day drawing near.  
No trumpet will blow  
No throne will glow  
To send you down  
To grovel and groan.  
Put on your wings  
and rise up, then

Cut off the strings  
that move your limbs.  
And start to love  
the one you are,  
so you can practice loving  
all who are not you.  
Live in the mystery,  
Find your own harmony,  
Live in the world  
which offers you  
the simple faith that  
heaven, oh, yes heaven,  
is not later, later, later,  
but has already begun,  
as this silence now  
reveals...

*silence*

Remember that you are  
who you are because of others,  
who loved you, and still do,  
whom you love, from whom  
you learned by both yes and no,  
those who you dearly miss  
with each heartbeat, those whom  
you cradle in your heart forever.  
Name them inside the temple within,  
or sound their names aloud,  
for we would not be who we are  
without all who now rise up within us.

*naming*

Ours is a simple faith  
of heart and mind,  
join to the land  
on which we stand  
with trust, and where  
we sing with joy.  
Send up the fireworks!

*A Simple Faith* by David Tamulevich, Victoria Parks and Peggy McKee, soloists  
CHORUS: (2X-1st Peg and I, 2nd with congregation)

Ours is a simple faith. Life is a short embrace,  
Heaven is in this place, everyday.

Hope is the ground we till.  
Make each day what you will.  
Thankful for dreams fulfilled, everyday.

Verse 1:  
No room in this heart for fear.  
No judgment day drawing near.  
Trust that inner voice you hear, everyday.  
Life's not a goal or race. It's about heart and faith,  
And living a life of grace. Everyday.

CHORUS:

Verse 2:  
Trust is an open hand, making an honest stand.  
Rooted here, in the land...everyday.  
Live in the mystery, seeking the harmony  
Here, between you and me...everyday.

CHORUS:

**The First Reading** is from Alice Walker's book *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*, 2010. She won the Pulitzer for *The Color Purple*, a novel now banned in many schools, even though a well-praised movie was based upon it.

I will not deny my lips their smile.  
I will not deny my heart its sorrow.  
I will not deny my eyes their tears.  
I will not deny my hair the wildness of my age.  
It is profound selfishness.  
I will deny me nothing of myself.

**The Second Reading** is from Lawrence Rabb's 2009 book, *The History of Forgetting*. It's called, "*The Great Poem*"

The great poem is always possible.  
Think of Keats and his odes.  
But we shouldn't have to be dying,

What I'm writing now is not  
the great poem. After a few lines  
I could tell. It may not even be

a particularly good poem, although  
it's too early to decide about that.  
Keep going, I say. See what happens.

But trying hard is one of the problems.  
since it shows in the lines as a strain  
or struggle that reminds the reader

too much of the writer, whereas  
most readers want to listen alone.  
The great poem, I think, will arrive

when I no longer care. Perhaps  
I'll have abandoned art altogether,  
and I won't even want to write

the poem down. But then I'll remember  
what I once would have given  
for this moment, and I'll go back

to my desk. And I'll write the poem  
as though I were another person,  
someone I will never be again.

## **Preaching**

What's that phrase about the elephant in the room that no one is talking about? I think I have to begin my talk this morning by pointing out something much bigger than an elephant, namely, the great labyrinth that takes up almost half the usable space in this room.

It's an old design, the labyrinth, going back to the island of Crete before the golden age of Athens, hundreds of years later. We think the Cretan civilization which produced the idea of the labyrinth was destroyed because of a volcanic eruption, and that the survivors who emigrated away from the disaster were refused settlement by the Egyptians, and eventually settled on the coast of Canaan, becoming after a while the people known to the Bible as the P'li'stim, or the Philistines.

Despite the volcanic destruction, the image of the labyrinth survived into the Christian era, and its pattern, found on many ancient coins, including those found in Crete, was much like the one in this room now, although it's fair to say that this design can be either compacted much smaller, or expanded very much larger. For centuries during the middle ages, this exact pattern was found in the floors of many a great cathedral. I walked the labyrinth myself in the stunningly beautiful Chartres Cathedral some 30 years ago. It's an indelible and saving memory for me.

Let me be clear. The labyrinth is ***not*** a maze, even though some folks use both of these words loosely to mean each other.

But they are visibly different.

In a maze there are false starts and blockages, and you often have to retrace your steps in order to get out. But in a labyrinth there is only one path to follow. You follow it into the center, then you follow it out to the edge. A maze can be aggravating. A labyrinth is more of a meditative walk, something more soothing than a maze, even though it looks almost as complex.

A maze is an image of life lived without reflection, without deep self-questioning, without real focused consciousness. A maze speaks of a way of life where we make decisions, not out of reason or thoughtfulness, but because they remind us of our best friend, or grandmother whom we loved; or the maze of life is where we reject ideas believed by abusive family members or neighbors. Our choices, the maze tells us, are not to be based on reason, but on reaction. A maze is designed to confuse us by offering promising paths that dead end, and unpromising paths that can either lead us out, or leave us in endless circles from which we have no clue how to exit... endless circles: addictions, unforgiving grudges, habits that are clearly not supportive of our health.

A maze keeps us reactive and panicked...am I stylish enough? Do I have the most desired game to play, or tablet to use? Madison Avenue often constructs this maze, aided by knot-like bureaucracies that feel like dead ends because they slow us down in our path.

A thousand charities doing good in the world need us...which do we choose? How do we make that choice? The maze tries to speak to us by its baffling path to tell us we can't make that decision. We are not equipped to do so. We don't have all the data. We will *never* have all the data. So why choose any charity. Pay for a new whatever instead.

A thousand injustices call out to us, from homeless children, to assaulted women, to the denial of long term benefits to those who still have not found work after vainly paddling in the deep end of the recession for years. The maze tells us to block our ears from the voices crying out to us...after all, if you listen to everyone, says the maze, you'll lose the chance to get lost in dead ends within me, and you will then never figure how to get out of me.

The labyrinth, however, offers us a different theory for living life than the maze does. You know right off the bat the basic reality of the labyrinth...that you will go in and come out. There is nothing to panic about. Oh, there are sharp curves, sure, but like Buddha or Jesus suggested, such curves are a part of life, not some punishment for you being a bad person. The labyrinth does not have dead ends...you just keep going, even though you may want to stop now and then to grieve, or remember, or go deeper into your own grounding hopes and loves. The labyrinth does not offer you indispensable trinkets and communication devices you simply cannot live without. The labyrinth offers you time with yourself that is not impinged by urgencies or calls. The labyrinth ask us to join Alice Walker in accepting the fullness of who we are...our emotions, our age, our whole lives:

*I will not deny my lips their smile.*

*I will not deny my heart its sorrow.*

*I will not deny my eyes their tears.*

*I will not deny my hair the wildness of my age.*

*I will deny me nothing of myself.*

The labyrinth is like the wise grandmother in the African story of Zomo the Rabbit. Life asks us to do impossible things all the time, and the maze theory of life suggests that life is just that...a series of clever moves. The labyrinth reminds us, however, that you need to pause to reflect on your life, and your clever moves, to think things through all the way to possible consequences, to wear your seatbelt and get a check up at your doctor's, to take time for yourself, and not think it something lazy or shameful (as the maze suggests it is), but central to the living of a great and good life.

Lawrence Raab compares a great and good life to a great and good poem. A *great poem is always possible*, he says without hesitation. A poem that is not just a list of words, one after the other, randomly, but a work of tight beauty, crafted from somewhere deep inside you, a set of words...or in the case of life, a set of days...which enlightens, moves and teaches rather than self-destructs. Raab uses the idea of the poem to talk about our lives:

*What I'm writing now is not  
the great poem. After a few lines  
I could tell. It may not even be  
a particularly good poem, although  
it's too early to decide about that.  
Keep going, I say. See what happens.  
But trying hard is one of the problems.*

Yes, great lives like great poems don't start off great. There are a lot of mistakes on the way. But it's important to keep going no matter what. However, says the poet, trying *too* hard, as the maze theory of life suggests that we do, only leads to panic and an unwarranted sense of failure. The maze always is making sure we take time to dump on ourselves for not doing enough, for not folding in all the loose ends, for not taking on someone else's idea of what perfection and greatness looks like.

But Raab is not worried. He writes: *The great poem, I think, **will** arrive.* "When?" you and I may ask. And he answers in a surprising way: "when I no longer care."

Wow. That seems counter intuitive, doesn't it? Aren't we supposed to care a lot? About love and life and truthfulness yes. About what Madison Ave thinks we should be buying to make them happy? No. And again no.

*I'll have abandoned art altogether, and I won't even want to write the poem down*, he continues. Even the word "art" makes it sound too structured, too judged, he's afraid. *But*, he then realizes, *I'll remember what I once would have given for this moment, and I'll go back to my desk.*

What is this "moment" he would have given everything for? What gets him to go back to his desk, to keep going forward with either poem or life? The very creative moment when he decides he is free to live his own life, not have his life be lived by some template of perfection, drive, guilt, shame and rage installed in his soul by someone else. *That* moment.

Come to think of it, I would give everything for that moment myself. The poet concludes:

*And I'll write the poem  
as though I were another person,  
someone I will never be again.*

There, he clinches it. The good life, the great life, is the one where we not only remember that we don't have to care what Madison Ave thinks, but we have to remember that we are not even going to be the same person tomorrow that we are today. New experiences will change us a bit. We are not permanent, but flowing; not rigid, but growing; not ignorant, but knowing.

However, the maze theory of life counters by telling us that we only "flow" on New Year's Day, January 1st, when we make resolutions to change our diet, our exercise plan, our spending habits etc. As every comedian I know suspects, these resolutions last about two weeks tops. Why? Because, I think, they are not based on who we are, but on clock time, determined entirely arbitrarily. These resolutions do not rise out of who we actually *are*, and *are becoming*, with all of our emotions and knowledge and experience. Because if that were true, we would begin to look at our diet and exercise habits today, December 29th, not this coming Wednesday. I mean, the very idea that New Year's Day begins at midnight this coming Wednesday is also absolutely arbitrary. New Year's Day used to be on the Spring Equinox here in the West. Iulius Caesar changed it to the first of January to honor the god with two faces, Janus, or, as we say in English, Janus, giving us our name for that month. But none of us offer sacrifices to Janus, anymore, as far as I know. For the Chinese, New Year's begins on the second new moon after the Winter Solstice. Why the second new moon and not the first? All arbitrary.

The labyrinth offers us something that the maze refuses to offer us.... namely, ourselves as we are, and are becoming, not as others are trying to create us. The labyrinth offers us a chance to respect our own deeper selves, not to wear masks to satisfy someone else's need to control who we are for profit's sake.

See. The elephant in the room is quite amazing. Wonderful, I mean. Astonishing. And the word amazing is not at all related to the word "maze," which is a word that originally meant "confusing" or "baffling." Amazement just means *wonder*.

I'd rather live my life in amazement, not in a maze. I'd rather reflect on my life, and come to know some heartbeats of wisdom, than have my life lived for me by others for whom the heart is not quite as important. I'd rather go in deep and come out deeper. This is my New Year's Prayer for myself, and for you.

### **Offering**

Because our community encourages personal spiritual growth with events like the labyrinth, or various circle groups; because so many find a way to impact the world around us regarding women's health issues, insufficient wages, corporate irresponsibility through the organizational connection to this congregation, we now give and receive the morning offering, sharing the responsibility for this place and its gifts to us.



If you give in other ways, electronically, for example, thank you. And thanks for your generosity this morning. If you write a check, and want it to go to the Holiday Appeal, please enter that word on your check. Thanks.

**Returning #544**

**Singing #1057**

**Blessing**