

Prayer Path

For use at the

Walk Jones Wildlife Sanctuary
MONTREAT CONFERENCE CENTER

Written by

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Introduction

The Prayer Path is a relatively short (about 1/4 mile) walking pilgrimage that encircles the old Montreat reservoir. This beautiful area has been set aside as a place for quiet reflection, environmental learning, and meditation.

This booklet guide provides instructions for seven stations including a small, seven-circuit labyrinth. The Prayer Path combines environmental awareness, a brief history of the area, ancient spiritual practices, and physical movement all intended to help the participant experience a profound sense of God's presence at a number of different levels.

The gospels tell us Jesus considered that life's greatest task was to experience and love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. (The second greatest task, of course, was to love your neighbor as yourself.) Recent studies in human learning styles have brought to light what we call "multiple intelligences." We now understand that there are a variety of ways for knowing (including spatial, kinesthetic, and naturalist intelligence). The Prayer Path attempts to open our hearts and senses to communing with God through a wide range of approaches for "knowing." You are invited to take this self-guided walk at your own leisure. (Set aside about one hour to do so.)

The Walk Jones Wildlife Sanctuary is located about one mile north of Assembly Inn as you continue up Assembly Road to Greybeard Trail. It was dedicated on July 3, 2000, in memory of Walk C. Jones, III, and enlarged in 2009. Walk was the chairman of the board of the Mountain Retreat Association who loved and worked for the conservation of the wilderness area surrounding Montreat. Through the vision of friends and family members, this site which was once surrounded by a chain link fence has now been restored and opened to the public. Our hope is that the Wildlife Sanctuary, the new Sanctuary Trail and the Bridge of Hope will provide an opportunity for all who visit this place to experience the wonder of the Creator and cherish God's precious gift of creation.

(limited seating available at stations 2, 3, 5, and 6)

Station One:

(Just beyond entrance at stone path on right)

*I lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.
~ Psalm 121*

Look at the boulder that is before you. Take notice of the trees growing out of it, thriving even in adversity. As you move through the sanctuary become aware of the wide varieties of plant and animal life found in it. One of the marks of our Creator is a vast imagination evident in such wonderful biodiversity.

Take stock of all the different life forms around you. Listen for birds. Search for tiny insects. Notice the variety of trees, moss, and foliage. The Southern Appalachian Mountains contain over half of all plant species native to North America. Because of the drastic change in elevation, one hiking to a peak in Montreat may witness the same diversity of plant life as one would find hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine!

Look now at your own thumbprint. Consider for a moment that this tiny pattern on such a small patch of skin is so unique that our thumbprint is still used as a reliable identifying system for singling us out from every other human being on this planet! No other person on earth bears your same thumbprint! This is yet more evidence of God's limitless imagination and creativity. Why has God designed the human genetic code to produce so many billions of different thumb print patterns? It is an affirmation of faith that YOU are God's best new idea. You are God's best new story, never before told, and a story that cannot be replaced by another.

Before you start up the trail, pick up two stones. For now think of these stones as the fear or pain which can paralyze your own life's journey. At the same time, these stones carry the weight and volume of God's faithfulness and strength that give us power to walk on. Let the two stones represent both the fear that paralyzes and God's power that gives us strength to move on. You don't have to let go of these right now, but you must move forward as you carry these stones. Recite these words as you move up the trail to the reservoir, "One step at a time... one step at a time."

Station Two:

(bench facing reservoir at left of bridge)

*“As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”
~ Psalm 40:1-2*

Before you is an old Montreat reservoir, which for many years (until 1980) served as a main water source for this community. During much of the first half of the century, Montreat’s water supply was also stored in another reservoir not far from here. In the late 1940’s this reservoir was completed. These water sources served the needs of residents, conference participants, and Montreat College.

Water pressure was created by gravity. In 1980 deep wells were drilled to replace the reservoir. As you stand at the reservoir, hold out in your hand the two stones that you carried up the hill. Throughout our life’s journey we carry both those things that weigh us down and those things that give us strength. Take one stone, and let it represent those things that you need to leave behind. It may be a matter of offense for which you have difficulty forgiving another. Or it may be a memory of a failure on your part, an act of which you are ashamed, anger or hard feelings toward another, or anything which still burdens you.

Corrie ten Boom wrote that when we give such things to God, God casts them into the sea of forgetfulness and posts a sign that reads “No Fishing!” You have carried it long enough. It is now time to let go and leave it behind.

Throw one stone into the water. Reflect in silence.

Let the remaining stone stand for something you may wish to take from this place, which you may discover today as you meditate and pray. It can be a lesson learned, a new relationship, or a renewed commitment. Carry it with you as a memorial and symbol of your life in Christ.

(walk left around reservoir to the pavilion)

Station Three:

(at the pavilion)

*“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your
ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”*

~ Isaiah 55:8-9

You are invited to walk the labyrinth. Before you begin, it is helpful to spend a few moments sitting quietly at the periphery, allowing yourself to become stilled and attentive. Listen to the sounds of creation. Listen to the sounds and rhythm of your own breathing – remembering the word for “breath” is the same word for “Spirit.”

When you are ready, step onto the design to enter the path. Walking toward the center of the labyrinth has been thought of as a process of “letting go” or shedding. Ask God what are those things that serve as obstacles to intimacy with God and obedience to God’s will.

As you walk along the path do not be hurried. Use the time to reflect on the twists and turns of your own life journey. If others are on the path, you may acknowledge each other with a smile or a touch as you pass, or maintain your inward focus by refraining from eye contact.

Time spent in the center of the labyrinth has been described as a time of seeking awareness of God’s presence, of union with God, of asking for clarity as to God’s will, and of self offering. You may wish to make use of additional suggested readings located in the back of this guide.

When you are ready, begin to move along the outward path. The outward walk can be thought of as a returning to the outward life, with renewed commitment, centeredness, and purpose.

*“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”
~ Psalm 32:8*

Station Four:

(at wildflowers and blueberries)

“Consider the lilies of the field...”

~ Matthew 6:28

The area before you is an old roadway that has been cleared of stones and planted with indigenous plants and wildflowers... Milkweed, Echinacea (Purple Coneflower), Tickseed, Columbine, Trumpet Honeysuckle, Coreopsis, Black-eyed Susan, Jack-in-the-pulpit, Jacob's Ladder, Solomon's Seal, Joe-Pye Weed, Cardinal Flower... In the summer these flowers attract and become a habitat for many species of butterflies and birds.

Each flower is robed in color painted by God's own hand. Each plant also plays a unique role in the web of creation. Echinacea is used for the prevention and healing of colds and illness. It has been discovered that the toxic nature of Milkweed is actually a lifesaver for those Monarch butterflies that feed upon them. It was once thought that birds refuse to prey upon Monarch butterflies because these beautiful insects are inherently toxic creatures. We have now learned that it is actually the Monarch's diet of toxic Milkweed (although not harmful to the butterflies) that serves to make them a danger to what would otherwise be their natural predator.

Consider the care with which our Creator has clothed and designed these flowers of the field. Even the common Milkweed is a lifesaver! Consider also the care with which God has created and sustained you.

Use the following breath prayer and meditate upon these words:

Breathing in: Renewing God.

Breathing out: Clothe me with your grace.

(When you are ready, proceed to Station 5. It is located overlooking the reservoir. If this station is filled with others, you may wish to go on to Station Six, which also has benches overlooking the pond.)

Station Five:

(at bench overlooking the reservoir)

On the journey of life we need to pause periodically and take the long view of life. The pond that lies below looks differently seen from above and through the trees than it does when you stood beside it at Station Two. The pond also looks quite different when covered with ice in the winter than it does in the springtime, summer, or fall. So too, our lives appear different, even feel different, when seen up close or in the broad perspective on our time on earth. It is important to step back and reflect on the journey of our life, where we have been and where we are going.

PRAYER:

“God has created me to do some definite service. God has committed some work to me which God has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this world. But I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in the chain, a bond of connection between persons. I shall be a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I but keep God’s commandments. Therefore I shall trust God. Wherever, whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. God does nothing in vain.”

~ Cardinal John Newman

*There is no plant in the ground
But tells of your beauty, O Christ.*

There is no creature on the earth

There is no life in the sea

But proclaims your goodness.

There is no bird on the wing

There is no star in the sky

There is nothing beneath the sun

But is full of your blessing.

Lighten my understanding of your presence all around, O Christ

Kindle my will to be caring for creation.

~ Celtic prayer

(Retrace your steps up the hill 20 yards and then turn right to Station Six, remembering that often in life we need to take a few steps back in order to move forward again.)

Station Six:

(also at benches overlooking reservoir)

Listen for the sound of water pouring into the pond. It pours in day and night, in all seasons, and year after year, keeping the pond fresh and alive. Sometimes it gushes in, other times it may trickle in. Without constant replenishment the pond would evaporate, dry up, and exist no more. So too, our lives depend on God's life-giving Spirit which is always available to us. Our openness to God and desire for God's power are important if we are to derive the full benefit. Jesus is recorded as saying: "The water I give will become a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 6:14). Write down your thoughts about how God and God's presence is like living water.

*Deep peace of the running wave to you,
Deep peace of the flowing air to you,
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you,
Deep peace of the shining stars to you,
Deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.*

~ Celtic Blessing

(proceed down to the pond to the right of the bridge)

Station Seven:

(back at bridge on right side)

*“You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”
~ Isaiah 52:12*

*“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who
announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to
Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”
~ Isaiah 52:7*

Look again at your remaining stone. Try to imagine into its color, contour, shape and weight some of the lessons and sensations you have experienced along this prayer path. Carry these learnings with you as you leave this place.

Remember that each ending is also a new beginning. Recite this ancient blessing as you prepare to end this prayer path and enter the next new thing God has in store for you.

*On my heart and on my home
The blessing of God
In my coming and in my going
The peace of God
In my life and in my seeking
The love of God
At my end and new beginning
The arms of God to welcome me and bring me home.*

(proceed back down to the Entrance of the Wildlife Sanctuary)

Suggested Readings:

Jesus, light of our hearts, since your resurrection, you always come to us. At whatever point we may be, you are always waiting for us. And you tell us: Come to me, you who are overburdened, and you will find relief.

~ Brother Roger of Taize, France

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have always been, and before you nothing has been. There is no one to pray to but you. The star nations all over the heaven are yours, and yours are the grasses of the earth. You are older than all need, older than all pain and prayer. Grandfather, Great Spirit, fill us with light. Give us strength to understand and eyes to see. Teach us to walk the soft earth as relatives to all that live. Help us, for without you we are nothing.

~ from an American Indian prayer, Dakota

If I had not suffered,
I would not have known the love of God.
If many people had not suffered,
God's love would not have been passed on.
If Jesus had not suffered,
God's love would not have been made visible.

~ Mizuno Genzo, Japan

Bless to us, O God,
The earth beneath our feet,
Bless to us, O God,
The path whereon we go,
Bless to us, O God,
The people whom we meet.

~ Based on an old prayer from the Outer Hebrides, Scotland

From the cowardice that dares not to face new truth, From the laziness that is content with half truth, From the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, Good Lord, deliver us.

~ Prayer from Kenya

I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It was very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about.

~ Toyohiko Kagawa

The real atheism is to exclude God from our worldly concerns or to exclude the world from our religious concerns.

~ A Chinese Christian

Almighty God, grant that we may listen with deep attention to those awesome words from the minarets of the Muslim world, and listening, hopefully gain a hearing for those other resonances of your divine nature embodied in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

~ *Prayer by Raymond Lull, stoned in Bugia Algeria, June 30, 1315*

Grant to us, O Lord,
to know that which is worth knowing,
to love that which is worth loving,
to praise that which pleases thee most,
to esteem that which is most precious unto thee,
and to dislike whatsoever is evil in thy eyes.
Grant us with true judgement to distinguish things that differ,
and above all to search out and do what is pleasing unto thee,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

~ *Thomas a Kempis, 15th century*

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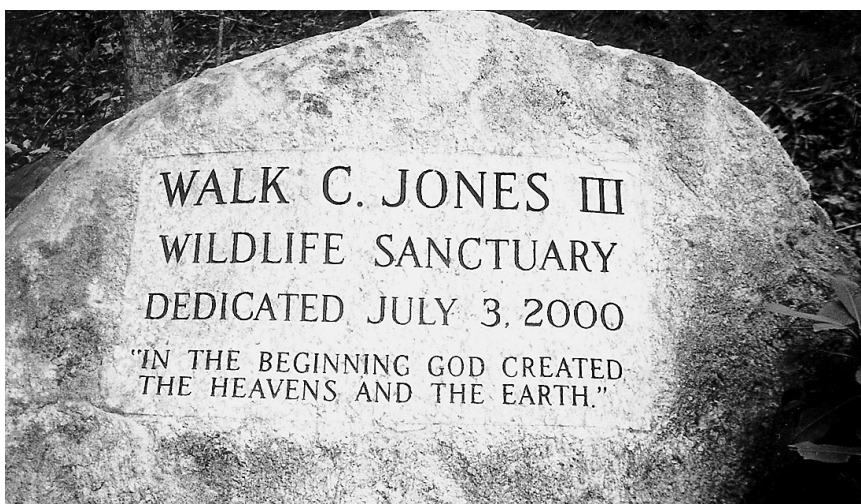
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