

Karen Hollis
Sermon – March 17, 2019
2nd Sunday in Lent
Psalm 27
Faith of St. Patrick

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

What's your St. Patrick's Day tradition? Wearing green? Gathering at the pub? Telling stories about the saint? Which one's your favourite? The shamrock he used to teach the doctrine of the Trinity? Driving the snakes out of Ireland? As one story goes, Patrick stuck his ash wood walking stick into the ground upon entering a community and it took so long for his message to sink in there that by the time he was ready to leave, the stick was taking root and had become a living tree. They're lovely stories, but none of them are factual . . . it's been so long since Patrick lived, the stories about him long ago became legends. It says something about Ireland's relationship with him – these kinds of stories don't emerge about just anyone. One might say he was extraordinary . . . though in Patrick's own words, he was a simple country person . . . with, I would add, an extraordinary faith and his very own remarkable story.

Patrick was born about 400 years after Jesus – just to put that into context, 400 years ago in Canada 250,000 first nations inhabited this land and the French were beginning to arrive and make settlements.

Patrick was born in the east midlands of England in the Roman British town Bannaventa. He came from an educated Christian family: his father a deacon and his grandfather a priest. Even though they were raising him in the faith, in his own words, he didn't know God. (pause) Did you ever make plans for your future, only to have life throw you a curve ball? Patrick was thrown a huge one . . . when he was 16 he was kidnapped by pirates and taken to Ireland. He lived in terrible conditions and for several years spent his days tending sheep. What do you do when you find yourself in a life you didn't choose? When you're held against your will and there appears to be no way out? Patrick prayed. He describes it this way: “after I arrived in Ireland, I tended sheep every day, and I prayed frequently during the day.

More and more the love of God increased, and my sense of awe before God. Faith grew, and my spirit was moved, so that in one day I would pray up to one hundred times, and at night perhaps the same. I even remained in the woods and on the mountain, and I would rise to pray before dawn in snow and ice and rain. I never felt the worse for it, and I never felt lazy – as I realise now, the spirit was burning in me at that time.”¹

It was in this season that the God Patrick’s family taught him to worship, made a personal introduction. It was a confirmation in the truest sense – he claimed for himself the faith he was taught as a child, and he relied on his relationship with God the rest of his life. He writes: “I turned with all my heart to the Lord my God and he looked down on my lowliness and had mercy on my youthful ignorance. He guarded me before I knew him, and before I came to wisdom and could distinguish between good and evil. He protected me and consoled me as a father does for his son.”²

After 6 years a slave, God spoke to Patrick in a dream that soon he would return home. Shortly after he learned of a ship that was some 200 miles away . . . he escaped and ran for it and made his way home. Returning home after going through such a formative experience was challenging – his family begged him never to leave again and was sure they had the right plan for his life, but Patrick knew he was called to serve God. After becoming a priest he had a dream where he heard that voice again that led him out of slavery. This time the voice called him back to Ireland to share the message of Christ. The only way Patrick was going to return was by practicing forgiveness for the way he had been treated there. He held onto this call; after several years, perhaps decades, Patrick became a bishop and was commissioned to Ireland.

Even when we’re in alignment with our path, the way still brings its challenges. Patrick writes at length about his unworthiness to the task ahead of him. He describes himself as a simple person . . . he only had school boy Latin because he missed out on his schooling . . . it made him feel inferior to others.

¹ Confessio by St. Patrick

² Ibid.

On his journeys through Ireland he constantly faced opposition, threats of violence, kidnapping, and even criticism from jealous church officials.³ Patrick was not the first Christian or bishop to try and evangelize Ireland; as a scholar writes: “what made Patrick successful was his dogged determination and the courage to face whatever dangers lay ahead, as well as the compassion and forgiveness to work among a people who had brought nothing but pain to his life.”⁴

We’ve already prayed this morning portions of the prayer attributed to Patrick . . . it’s certainly in the spirit of the devotion to God that enabled him to serve in this way. He rose early, perhaps before the sun and prayed: I bind to myself today God's Power to guide me . . . God's Wisdom to teach me . . . Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me.

Patrick often quoted scripture, especially the psalms. Within his prayer are echoes of today’s psalm 27, attributed to King David: “the Lord is the stronghold of my life . . . though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident . . . God will hide me in his shelter and conceal me under the cover of God’s tent . . . teach me your ways, O Lord.

David’s is a prayer of thanksgiving and relationship with God, confident in God’s protection, while Patrick’s takes this relationship and makes it a kind of ritual, taking that devotion and worship and putting it into practice in his life.

I know there is a veil of mystery between our prayer and God’s response, yet I still invite us to wonder how a prayer like this becomes manifest as protection. Did his prayer cause the spirit of Christ follow him around like an orb of protection? Christ within me is not a prayer that he would literally become Jesus . . . but Jesus was 100% authentic, fully human, fully himself, fully in his call and in communion with God. Perhaps that prayer helped Patrick step more fully into his own self, develop his own personal authority, which brings its own kind of protection. Perhaps it helped keep his self-criticism at bay while speaking to a community that was particularly suspect of his message. Perhaps

³ <https://blog.oup.com/2014/09/real-story-saint-patrick/>, Mar 16, 2019

⁴ Ibid.

the ritual of the prayer helped him be “on” (as we say) and engaged in his day, or gave him quick reflexes and discernment when he needed to respond to physical danger. Perhaps the more he prayed, the easier it was to hear God speaking to him in real time. Perhaps the more he prayed for Christ to be in and around him, the more he was able to be Christ in the world as a way of life, offering unconditional love and acceptance, even while being persecuted. God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called, giving us the tools and the skills and the personal growth we need along the way.

I like the intentional aspect of Patrick's prayer. I like the way it sets the tone for the day, for our relationship with God, intentionally putting ourselves in God's hands for protection, growth, guidance. Many of us think of prayer as a very personal thing . . . Patrick's prayer is perfect, because it is a personal, ritual . . . it's actually beautifully crafted as a morning devotional. It helps us to only rise with confidence in God, but to put it into practice, asking God to be active in our day . . .

Pray with me . . .

I bind to myself today

God's Power to guide me,

God's Might to uphold me,

God's Wisdom to teach me,

God's Eye to watch over me,

God's Ear to hear me,

God's Word to give me speech,

God's Hand to guide me,

God's Way to lie before me,

God's Shield to shelter me,

Christ with me,

Christ before me, Christ behind me,

Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ at my right, Christ at my left,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks to me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
I bind to myself today
The strong virtue of an invocation of the Trinity,
I believe the Trinity in the Unity
The Creator of the Universe.
Amen.