

Sermon for March 17, 2024
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Saint Patrick

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.”

Good morning! Today is the Fifth Sunday in Lent, according to our Liturgical Calendar. All of our Scripture readings for today all give very powerful messages, as we continue to walk with Jesus through his ministry, his arrest, torture, death, and resurrection.

Today’s date is March 17th, the feast of Saint Patrick, considered a “minor feast” of the Episcopal church, and it is observed on the presumed day of his death in 461 A.D.

Everyone celebrates Saint Patrick’s Day! I am not Irish—not even a little bit—but every Saint Patrick’s Day I celebrate like a lot of other “honorary Irish,” mainly by eating corned beef and cabbage, Irish soda bread, Irish coffee and other edibles. Not so much the green beer and leprechaun hats! And of course we all know the wonderful hymn Saint Patrick’s Breastplate. But we don’t know that much about Saint Patrick himself. In fact nobody knows much about Saint Patrick. Almost all the information about his life and ministry is subject to dispute and controversy.

A lot of what we do know know is because he wrote both an autobiography and memoir. He was born somewhere in Britain around 387, during the last years of the Roman Empire’s occupation of the island. Several accounts give his birthplace as

being somewhere near Hadrian's Wall, in either northern England or southern Scotland; there is another tradition that says he was born in Wales.

The person we call Saint Patrick was not named Patrick at all, but Maewyn Succat; he came from a wealthy family who owned land. His grandfather was a priest and his father was a deacon, as well as being a tax collector and member of the local government. In his autobiography, Patrick states that as a child and young man he was not a believer. When he was a teenager, his family's land was attacked by Irish pirates and he was kidnapped. He was taken to Ireland where he was enslaved and put to work as an animal herder, either in County Mayo or in County Antrim. His captor was a high Druid priest, a sect which held major religious influence over the country at the time.

During his captivity, he became immersed in Irish and Druidic cultures and he learned to speak the Irish language. He also began to pray to God for help and to release him from bondage. Six years after he was captured, he had a vision in which he heard the voice of God, telling him it was time for him to go home. In his vision he saw the children of Ireland reaching out their hands to him, and he saw that as a sign that he should convert the Irish to Christianity. He ran away from his captor, and walked 200 miles to the coast where he found a ship to take him back to Britain. The voyage home was marked by further hardships, including a month of wandering and near-starvation.

Once he returned home, he continued to study Christianity. At one point he had another vision that prompted him to study for the priesthood. As time passed, he never lost sight of his vision to convert Ireland to Christianity. He traveled to Gaul on the continent, where he was ordained to the priesthood by Saint Germain, the bishop of Auxerre. Some time later he went to Rome, where he was ordained bishop by Pope Celestine I. The pope gave him the name "Patercius" or "Patritius".

This name is derived from the Latin words *pater civium* meaning the father of his people. The pope sent him back to Ireland on a mission to spread the gospel and to support the small community of Christians already living there. This little-known fact contradicts the widely-held belief that Patrick introduced Christianity to Ireland. In fact, there were several missionaries to Ireland before Patrick, but he got the credit.

After he returned to Ireland as a Bishop, there are a lots more stories and legends about him; most of these developed in the two or three hundred years after his death.

In the 400's, there was no central government in Ireland. There were local tribal leaders who practiced Druidism and other pagan religions. Patrick's relations with these leaders were sometimes contentious, and he was imprisoned and threatened with execution. He is known to have refused to accept any payments or patronage from the local leaders, which they resented and made his life difficult. Yet, for 30 years he traveled all around the island, baptizing and confirming thousands of people, and founding churches and monasteries.

Part of what made Patrick so successful was that he was able to incorporate nature-oriented pagan rituals into Christian practices instead of trying to eradicate native beliefs. For example, at Easter he used bonfires to celebrate because the Irish were already used to honoring their own gods with fire. It is believed that he introduced the Celtic cross, in which he superimposed a round disc representing the sun, which a powerful pagan symbol, onto the Christian cross so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the people.

Another popular legend is that of the shamrock, the three-leafed clover, which he used to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity, three persons in one God, by

showing that the plant had one stalk and three leaves. The number three was significant and there were other triple-deities.

The most famous legend is that he drove the snakes out of Ireland, that they all went into the sea and drowned. In reality, there were never any snakes in Ireland! This fact was documented as early as the third century but it was a much later legend that credited Patrick with banishing snakes from the island. It is very likely that this is a metaphor or allegory for the driving out of paganism, because snakes were a revered pagan fertility symbol.

Patrick became the patron saint of Ireland, but he was never formally canonized by the Catholic Church. Eventually, the worldwide wanderings of the Irish caused the influence of Saint Patrick to grow exponentially. Something that I was surprised to learn is that Saint Patrick is a prominent figure in many Voodoo shrines, in Haiti and elsewhere. His years as a slave who crossed the sea twice, and his reputation for having expelled the snakes inspired many Africans who were themselves enslaved by Europeans. After they were torn from their homes and brought to Haiti to labor for French Catholics, their own religion was outlawed, and they adopted Saint Patrick, equating him with their traditional serpent spirit Damballah. They were able to do this so they could demonstrate outward compliance with their enslavers' forced Christianity.

I find it fascinating how of these two traditions, many millennia apart in time and from different hemispheres, each associated the symbolism of snakes with Saint Patrick. As we think about how Patrick was able to transform and change the pagan Irish culture into a Christian culture, the inspiration of Haitians reminds us that humans can find their way under even the worst circumstances, and that we can find the inspiration we need to sustain ourselves if we are willing to seek it out.

In today's reading from Jeremiah, God proclaims a new covenant with the people. God says, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The tradition of Saint Patrick shows us that God can make a new covenant with his people whenever and wherever they need it. The old covenant was with the Israelite ancestors to lead them out of the bondage in Egypt. The new covenant of Jeremiah reflected the circumstances of the people in exile and after their return to their homeland. Jesus created a new covenant with his disciples, using the bread and wine of their communal dinner to represent his own body and blood. Patrick took the God of Jesus to the people of Ireland, so they he would be their god and they would be his people. Much later, enslaved Africans also found their own covenant with God through incorporating Patrick into their traditions and their lives. He became their god and they became his people too.

The Collect for Saint Patrick from our Lectionary reads: Almighty God, in your providence you chose your servant Patrick to be the apostle to the Irish people, to bring those who were wandering in darkness and error to the true light and knowledge of you: Grant us so to walk in that way that we may come at last to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.