

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
March 17, 2024, The 5th Sunday of Lent
 Jeremiah 31:31-34, Galatians 3:25-29
The Real St. Patrick's Day

I want to start this morning by reassuring you that I am not here to take away your St. Patrick's Day parades, your love of shamrocks, looking for four leaf clovers, pots of gold at the end of rainbows, leprechauns and the wee little of people waiting to give you a wish, your corned beef and cabbage, and the singing of "When Irish Eyes are Smiling." I'm not even here to take away your singing in local pubs and drinking green beer, in moderation of course.

Those same things will be happening in Ireland today too.

Although the parades will be religious parades honoring St. Patrick,
 and I hate to tell you, but they may be laughing at how the Americans celebrate
 St. Patrick's Day more than they do.

This morning, I want to broaden your understanding of this day that honors St. Patrick because he is a good guide for us in the Season of Lent as we journey toward the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter morning. St. Patrick is so much more than the partying and symbols of this day; he was a man of faith who has left us a legacy of living the life of faith.

Patrick was born around 386 or 387 A.D. somewhere along the west coast of England or Scotland. When he was only 16 years old Patrick was captured by pirates, who took him by ship and sold him into slavery in Ireland where he was forced to care for a man's flocks of animals. Later in his autobiography *Confessions*, that you can still buy today on Amazon, he wrote of being "in forests and on mountains: watching animals," "through snow, through frost, through rain," where he was "humiliated by hunger and nakedness, even daily."

Alone, far from home, cold, hungry, scared, those years shaped his life and his faith, as God spoke to his heart. He wrote "then the Lord made me aware of my unbelief, that—however late—I might recollect my offenses and turn with all my heart to the Lord my God...He watched over me before I knew Him and before I came to understand the difference between good and evil, and Who protected and comforted me as a father would his son."

God's hand continued to be with Patrick who six years later, at the age of 22, found a way to escape and worked his way back home to Ireland and his family, where in time he became a priest and a bishop in the Catholic Church. That part of his training has been lost to history, but in time he was ministering in churches in the name of the God who had protected and loved him during his six years as a slave.

But then in time he began to have dreams of a man named Victorinus who kept coming to him in a dream. Each time Victorinus showed up in his dreams he held a letter with the "Voice of the Irish" people calling him to come back to Ireland to tell them the Good News of Jesus.

Patrick wrote that the "Voice of the Irish" were crying out "from beside the western sea":
 "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us."

Then he began to hear another voice Patrick identified as the Holy Spirit speaking to him in his dreams as well, telling him to return to Ireland to share the Good News of Jesus.

Ireland in the 400's was a rough and wild place of regional kings and kingdoms where the Christian church had not spread very far at all. Patrick chose to listen to the voice of God in his dreams and returned sometime in his late 30's or early 40's.

Can you imagine feeling called to return to a land where you had been held as a slave? A place where you had been scared, starving, cold and alone? But Patrick followed the voice of God and through his ministry, he baptized thousands into the Christian faith, established churches, ordained many into the priesthood, and came to love the Irish people he had once feared.

Patrick is remembered for his love of the Bible, his focus on the Trinity, his devotion to Christ, and his devotion to a people who once held him captive.

Joyce, Timothy, Celtic Christianity, A Sacred Tradition, A Vision of Hope, Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1999, pp. 29-32

One of the gifts of St. Patrick is the prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate. There is debate whether Patrick wrote it in the 5th century or it was written anonymously later in the 8th century. If we focus on that debate we miss the great gift of this prayer for protection.

One story of its origin is that Patrick had been summoned to meet with one of the High Kings of Ireland, King Loeghaire in what was going to be a dangerous and maybe life-threatening meeting. Before that meeting Patrick wrote this prayer calling on God to protect him. It came to be known as St. Patrick's Breastplate.

A breastplate was part of the armor worn by knights and soldiers going into battle, and as Roman soldiers had recently left that part of the British Isles breastplates were well known to the people. This prayer is also called the Lorica which is the Roman word for Breastplate.

I learned this week that in ancient times Christians wrote Lorica prayers to protect themselves from evil. Knights in the Middle Ages would write Lorica prayers on their shields or breastplates and recite them going into battle, wearing God's protection and carrying it with them.

<https://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/saint-patrick/what-is-st-patricks-breastplate-prayer.html>

You'll notice the prayer is also called The Deer's Cry. A legend that later rose up around Patrick going to meet King Loeghaire, told that the king had stationed armed soldiers to ambush and kill Patrick and the monks who travelled with him. But God warned Patrick, who prayed for Christ's protection and he and his followers were able to pass by them. All the soldiers saw were a herd of deer and a fawn walking past them in the woods. While this story was a later legend, it was loved by those who loved the Saint and name stayed with the prayer

<https://www.thelastleprechaunsofireland.com/stories/the-deers-cry-st-patricks-tale/#:~:text=Knowing%20the%20king's%20intentions%2C%20Patrick,a%20bundle%20on%20its%20shoulder.>

So here we are in the nearing the end of Lent and St. Patrick speaks to us this morning with a powerful prayer for protection, and his story asks us in the middle of our own faith journeys:

What do we need protection from?

Where in our own lives are we not feeling safe?

Where do we feel enslaved or far from home?

Where do we feel like we are out in the cold, hungry and alone?

Where do we long, in the words of Jeremiah, to have God's words written on our hearts?

Where do we, in the words of Galatians, want to be children of God in Christ?

Is there something keeping us from feeling like we are clothed in Christ?

I invite you to take St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer out of your bulletins. I believe this prayer offers us help, strength and protection as we answer these questions this morning. This prayer is a

powerful gift to us on this St. Patrick's Day and beyond. I truly hope you will take it home with you today.

Would you pray the first stanza with me?:

*I arise today,
Through a mighty strength,
The invocation of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
Through confession of the oneness,
Of the Creator of Creation.*

What would our days be like if we would read this each morning before getting out of bed and then took it with us? We'd be like the knights of old carrying with us this reminder of the power of the Creator of Creation throughout our days! It would be our own Lorica! Because you'll notice that each stanza begins with the words "I arise today." I was clearly made for our mornings!

Looking at the prayer, next we arise through the strength of the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and return to earth.

Then we arise through the love of the angels, the hope of the resurrection to eternal life promised to God's people, and our ancestors, the prophets, apostles, and people of faith.

It will change our mornings to start our day with those who have gone before us and the angels of God who surround us.

Then we arise through the power of creation: the power of the sun, moon, fire, lightening, wind, sea, earth and rocks.

Our closeness to the gifts and power creation is one of the gifts our Celtic mothers and fathers of faith have left to us.

Will you pray the next stanza with me and imagine beginning each morning with these words. We are at the stanza that begins: "I arise today through God's strength to pilot me; it continues onto the 2nd page..."

Let us pray:

*I arise today
through God's strength to pilot me,
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me,
From snares of devils,
From temptations of vices,
From everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear,
alone and in multitude.*

Then Patrick calls on all the good and strong powers he has named in the beginning of this prayer, and he puts those powers between himself and all the evil that he now names. He knows that there is evil in the world that he takes seriously, but he is trusting in the power of God to be always stronger.

I'd like to challenge you in this final week of Lent to start tomorrow morning to read this prayer every morning before you start your day, and to do this until we meet again on Palm Sunday next week. Pay attention to what your day, and your week, feels like beginning with this Lorica, this Breastplate Prayer reminding you of God's protection.

In the words of Galatians, you will be clothing yourself with Christ.

In the words of Jeremiah, you will be reminding yourself that God has written the Law of Love on your heart.

In the words of Patrick, you will be reminding yourself that Christ is all around you.

It is with those wonderful words that he ends his prayer, reminding us that Jesus Christ is all around us all the time. Will you please pray these words with me to the end of the prayer. Let us pray:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
 Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
 Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me.

I arise today,
 Through a mighty strength,
 The invocation of the Trinity,
 Through the belief in the threeness,
 Through confession of the oneness,
 Of the Creator of Creation. Amen and Amen.