

Proof
2nd Sunday of Lent
March 17, 2019
Trinity Bixby
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Psalm 91: 1-2, 9-16](#) (NLT)

[Luke 4: 1-13](#) (CEB)

Today is one of the best-known feast days in the Christian calendar – the feast of St. Patrick, patron saint of Ireland. Now, as Presbyterians, we don't necessarily observe the feast days – they're more found in the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions. But St. Patrick's Day has become a celebration of Celtic heritage in these United States – and as the Presbyterian church traces back much of its roots to the Scots-Irish, we too can certainly celebrate a bit of Celtic heritage, even if nary an ancestor ever set foot upon the Emerald Isle of Éire.

To that end, let me tell you the story of Patricus, called Pádraig or Patrick. In the very beginning of the 5th century, Patrick was born in the far north-west corner of the Roman Empire. His family were Latin-speaking Romans, a noble family in the Welsh-speaking lands of Roman Britain. Indeed, his name, Patricus, means “noble, upper class.” His grandfather was a priest, and Patrick was baptized as a child – but did not learn to read or write as a child. When he was sixteen, an Irish clan attacked his home, and took him and his brother captive, as slaves. Initially, they were made to row the galleys, until they made landfall in Ireland. After forcing him and his brother off of the ship, they were sold to a druid and forced to work as shepherds, tending sheep and cows for six years. While out in the Irish wilderness, Patrick felt the presence of God continuously, later writing, “More and more the love and fear of God came to me, and faith grew and my spirit was exercised, until I was praying up to a hundred times every day, and in the night, nearly as often.”¹ During his captivity, Patrick learned about the ways that Irish society functioned -

¹ St Patrick's Declaration, translated by Liam de Paor in *Saint Patrick's World: the Christian Culture of Ireland's Apostolic Age* (1993, p 99.) qtd in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism* by George G. Hunter III, 2010, p. 2

and began to pray for the people who had enslaved him, hoping that God's love would be able to bring about reconciliation. Later, he would say that he identified as much with the Irish as he did as a Roman.

One night, Patrick heard a voice, telling him to get up and go to the shore, where a ship would be waiting for him. Sure enough, he was able to get passage back to Roman Britain, where he would be ordained as a priest after twelve years of study in Gaul, Rome, and Britain. Another vision came to him in a dream, where an angel brought him letters from his former captors, begging him to return, saying, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk with us." Patrick heard this as his call, applied for permission to bring the Word of God to Ireland, and was ordained as one of the first Missionary Bishops.

He – and an entourage of priests, seminarians, and laypeople interested in forming new Christian communities - arrived near the place that he had been enslaved, and was greeted warmly by his former master, who had become a Christian himself in the intervening years. Together, Patrick and his entourage went around the countryside, asking permission to build churches and teach people the Christian faith. His approach was one of openness, honesty, and connection – helping people see that, just as Patrick had experienced God's presence while being out in the natural world, so had they. This wasn't a "new god" – but the old familiar Divine presence. He engaged their love of learning, and as he moved from clan to clan, he was followed by many young people who wanted to learn the stories he taught. These would become the next generation of priests, planted in the various churches across the countryside. Patrick kept up this work until his death - around 460 CE – having helped thirty to forty of the hundred-and-fifty or so clans convert to Christianity.

Patrick followed in the footsteps of Jesus in his life in some surprising ways, including being tested in the wilderness! In the Gospels, we learn that Jesus' ministry began with a time of exile in the Wilderness – where he fasted for forty days and nights – the same forty days and nights we recognize during the season of Lent, now nine days in. The Gospel of Luke tells us that, after the forty days were

over, Jesus was tested by Satan. Now, I say “tested” rather than “tempted,” the usual translation, because “tempted” often has overtones of “something you want,” and the Greek doesn’t have that. Plus, the Hebrew word for the wilderness, *hamassah*, literally means “the testing place” or “the proving grounds.”

What are these tests that Jesus faces, specifically? First, in Luke, is a test of Constitution. Will Jesus turn stones into bread to feed himself after 40 days of fasting? No – because using spiritual gifts to gratify your own desires is wrong. Jesus’ response is from Deuteronomy 8:3 “Humans shall not live by bread alone – but from every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Second is a test of Compromise – Will Jesus accomplish a good end – unifying and ruling the world – by means of an evil act – worshipping Satan? No – because, as Buckminster Fuller said, “Those who play with the devil’s toys will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.” Jesus responds again with scripture, from Deuteronomy 6:13 – “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.” You see, when you feel that the only way to do good is to perform evil acts, you’re missing another path. It may take longer – like walking to Jerusalem rather than flying there – but it’s sometimes the effort in the meanwhile that makes the difference.

The third and last test that Jesus faces is the test of Clarity. Will Jesus make a spectacle in order to show the world God’s power? No – because sensationalism will not last. Jesus’ response is this time from Deuteronomy 6:16 “Do not put your Lord God to the test.” Even though Satan is quoting scripture – Psalm 91 – Jesus recognizes that Satan is trying to get him to test God, when it is Jesus who is being tested. Self-aggrandizement is very different from Jesus’ teachings – his miracles are all granted through the power of the Spirit to help others, and usually, Jesus asks people not to say anything about what had happened.

Both Jesus, and Patrick following in his footsteps, were tested, and in the testing, revealed a greater strength – the strength of God. Now, maybe you’re aware that medieval armor – like that on the cover of your bulletin - was often tested for strength in a process called “proofing.” The manufacturer would shoot the armor with a crossbow – or later, a pistol – from a certain distance. If the armor dented,

but didn't break, the place where the projectile hit the armor was sometimes surrounded by an engraved circle. This was called the "bullet proof" – bullet then meant any projectile – and was part of the quality test for armor, to show how effective it was.

Just as the armor was tested before being used in battle, Jesus and Patrick were tested before beginning their ministries. Jesus' armor was based in scripture, specifically from the book of Deuteronomy, which often acts like a grand summation of the Torah. We see that Jesus' "armor" of scripture is "proofed" – tested – and thereby, Jesus' ministry is seen to be reliable. If Jesus hadn't studied the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew scriptures, he would not have passed his testing. Luke, in describing this scene, is encouraging new converts to Christianity to do likewise – to know the scriptures so well that when you are tested, you too will be proofed by the Word of God.

Now, I've described the armor of Jesus – the Hebrew Scriptures – and Patrick certainly knew these well. But Patrick showed an additional armor in his time of testing – the armor of God's presence. Remember how Patrick wrote that he often prayed more than a hundred times a day? Part of that involved praying in everyday circumstances, for everything from protecting the animals to guiding his feet on the road. Tradition holds that Patrick would pray a prayer of protection every morning, a prayer later known as the *Lorica*, or breastplate of St. Patrick. There's a long (and, rather slow) version of this in the Glory to God hymnal, #6 – but I'd like to sing a version of it for you that's quite a bit more energizing, something that could get you moving in the morning, a version that we sang in Galveston this year for the Association of Presbyterian Christian Educators conference.² May these words be a blessing for you, a reminder that you, too, can withstand the testing of evil through the presence of Jesus.

*I bind unto myself today
the gift to call on the Trinity*

² The Lorica – composed by Gayle Samond, originally performed by Steve Bell. Listen to his version here, on SoundCloud. https://soundcloud.com/steve_bell/the-lorica-st-patricks

*The saving faith where I can say
Come, Three in One, Oh One in Three.*

*Be above me, as high as the noon-day sun.
Be below me, the Rock I set my feet upon
Be beside me, the wind on my left and right
Be behind me, oh circle me with your truth and light*

*I bind unto myself today
The hope to rise from the dust of earth
The songs of nature giving praise
To Father, Spirit, Living Word*

*God's ear to hear me
God's hand to guide me
God's might to uphold me
God's shield to hide me
Against all power deceiving
Against my own unbelieving
Whether near or far*

*I bind unto myself today
The gift to call on the Trinity*