

“Trust in a Covenant”

(St. Patrick – Part 1)

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As I said, I thought I would talk to you today about St. Patrick. And, I don't want to talk about the myth – and it is a myth – that, whatever that story was, about St. Patrick chasing all of the snakes out of Ireland. (Jill's favorite story. She has hated snakes and she is Irish.) [Laughter.] But, like so many things, the medieval church retold stories, tried to make them mythical and make them so grand, that others would want to hold the faith, hone it and understand it, and believe in it; but the myth falls short of the truth of the Gospel, the truth of how God worked in St. Patrick's life.

So, I want to strip away the myth and share the truly amazing story of his life.

First of all, I was watching this morning on TV, Nancy Pelosi was saying when she was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, the priest told them that all of St. Patrick's descendants were actually Italian. [Laughter.] We all kind of grab St. Patrick and make him our own, and that's why this Polish guy can wear a green suit today. [Laughter.]

But, St. Patrick was actually British. He wasn't Irish at all. He was from England – the eastern shores of England – and he came from a very faithful home. His grandfather was a priest and, remember in the Roman Catholic Church at that time, priests were still allowed to marry – because this was still the end of the third century. (The marriage of priests, I don't think happened [was addressed] until the beginning of the fifth century.) So, a hundred years yet before that happened, and his father was a deacon in the church, and his father was also a local magistrate,

He [St. Patrick's father] was extremely wealthy and they lived on this huge acreage, with a wall about six feet high around the entire area of the compound. They had slaves. They had agricultural areas, and they were extraordinarily wealthy. But remember, this was the end of the third century when Patricus (he had a Roman name, because it was still the Roman Empire), but when Patricus was born, everything was in flux.

The Roman Empire was dissolving. The Roman Empire lost its army and, all of a sudden, there was a problem in the empire – especially way out in Britain and Ireland, without a navy. All of a sudden, the Irish – those dirty blokes – formed pirate groups. They had ships and they would go into England by night and hop out, and they would purge and steal. They murdered the men, but they gathered the women and the children, because they were less physically able to fight.

One night, because there wasn't enough in the Roman Empire to protect them, they went to the rich. It just so happened that Patricus' parents, because he was the local magistrate, was in the adjoining town, and that was the night that, it just happened that, the pirates from Ireland came over the wall, murdered all of the men, chained by the neck the women and the children – slaves and free alike – and dragged them to their ship.

Three days journey from England back to Ireland, and they were put on the block to be sold, and Patricus was sold to an Irish farmer who didn't have enough children, and that way he was able to herd sheep – not unlike King David – and here he was.

He (Patricus) didn't know the language, because the Gaelic language was just so different than British. He didn't have the ability to communicate very well. He was the lowest of the low. Slaves even had their levels. For Patricus, he, by doing the sheep, was lower than the slaves who herded cattle, or even herded the pigs; the lambs, the sheep, were the worst.

So he would sit alone, hour after hour, day after day, for six long years, all by himself. Sure, they put him in a room probably with 30 slaves in a little tiny room to sleep at night – almost on top of each other – but they were from all over and he didn't find relationships, according to his own writings, with any of them.

He struggled. Finally, one night, he decided that he would think about the faith of his family. You see, he was stolen and enslaved at the age of 15. Before that time, from the age where he was able to relate to his family – probably about the age of eight – through the age of 15, he was a dickens, as my grandmother would say. He was one naughty boy. He was selfish. He was self-absorbed and he belittled the faith of his family. He called himself an atheist before that was popular, and he claimed that he was so sinful, that at the age of 15 – just weeks before he was enslaved – he committed a sin that was so grievous that years later, when he became a priest, they were going to throw him out of the priesthood for it.

Now, to this day, no one knows exactly what that was. It could have been a sexual sin, but man, that had to be awful. It was probably more than likely idolatry. It could have even been murder, but if it had been murder, they looked at murder then the way we do now: they would have thrown him in prison. So, it was probably idolatry and, in that day and age, if he didn't give a hoot about the Christian faith of his father and his grandfather – maybe he did – whatever it was, it was so profound that he carried the guilt with him the rest of his life. He never denied it. He never walked away from it.

He said lying in that room, with all of those strangers, night after night, he started to pray, and he said, “It was like God had thrown me into this pit of mud, and one night he finally reached in and pulled me out.” He said, “The only way I'm going to survive is with the hand of God.”

He wasn't sure God was there, but he was at least going to give it a try. So, sure enough, he started to pray and he said, “If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it all of the way, so that I'm sure that if I do this, and God doesn't show up, I will know it.”

So he prayed a hundred times in the morning and a hundred times at night. Now prayer isn't like it is today, where we take that one passage from the Gospel that says when you go to pray go do it by yourself, so you won't be seen as arrogant. They didn't do that then. They prayed aloud. So, can't you imagine in the morning, before everybody is awake, he starts his prayers, and the rest of the slaves want to kill him; and, he is praying right before bed, and everybody is trying to go to sleep and he is praying, and another 94 to go, and then he will go to sleep.

They called him “holy boy.” I’m sure they had other names for him. I know I would have, if I were trying to sleep and he was praying out loud. [Laughter.] They made fun of him, because either they were pagans, or they had given up on their faith and their problems.

This went on and on, but he never gave up – until one night. One night, he heard a voice in his dreams that said, “Get ready, because you are going to go home.” He woke up and it was so real to him; and, he said, “I can’t go home. How can I ever go home?”

In those days, even if you were a Druid priest or the King of Ireland, you would have to return a runaway slave, and then they would be murdered, so that no one else would ever do it again. There was no way to be free.

“Well,” he said. “This had to be a mistake.” He went to bed the next night; and, the next night he dreamed again, and this time in his dreams he heard God say, “The ship is ready.”

He woke up and he said, “Now, once maybe that is just me; but twice, when I don’t want it, has to be real.” But how in the world? He got up that morning, and decided he was going to leave.

There was another problem, though. Here he was, on the northwestern side of Ireland. If he stood and looked out on the shoreline at the sea, he could stand there for 60 more years and never see a ship sail from that spot, anywhere within his line of sight to Britain. He was on the wrong side of the country. He had to walk, without being seen, all of the way to the southern part of Ireland, to go to the harbor where the ships sail – and if he was seen he would be killed. He decided there was nothing else he could do. He had to go. He had to hear this voice. He had been praying one hundred [times] in the morning and one hundred [times] in the evening, and he was going to go ahead and do it.

So he started to march, hiding, sneaking around. He went along through the bogs in the northwestern part of the country. There were boards laid out by previous travelers to try to keep them on. Archeologists, to this day, are still digging in those bogs in northwestern Ireland, and are still finding the remains inside the bogs, almost perfectly held, of people who stepped off the board and were sucked into the bogs, like quicksand in the desert.

The bogs follow the River Suck. (I’m not making that up. The truth is so much more fun than fiction.) The River Suck ran from the north to the south, on the western coast of Ireland; and, Patrick would lay in the mud and cover himself, so if he were seen in the night, they would think he was part of the mud. He would go maybe five or ten miles a day, putting a foot out, to make sure it wouldn’t sink in; that the board hadn’t rotted enough that it would fall into the bog. Finally, he made it to the other side, days and weeks later. Now, the most difficult part of his journey began – because now he was coming into more populated areas.

The struggle now became, “What do I do? Because, if I open mouth, they know my accent. I don’t speak the right word, because it is English – but it’s not. And, how am I going to get there? And, if anyone sees me I’m not wearing the right clothes – but I have to continue.” He made it all of the way to the harbor and he waited; and, he saw a ship that looked like it was getting ready to leave port. He sucked it up and said, “If I’m going to die, it might as well be now.”

He had no money. He had nothing to offer except himself, so he walked up to who he thought was the ship's captain and he said, "Take me. I'm strong (and he was after six years of slave labor), and let me work for you, to get me home."

Now, any ship's captain would say, "No," because he would be caught. He and his crew would all be killed for taking in a slave. So he turned him away and said, "Get out. Get away from me," and Patrick turned and started walking away, pondering how in the world he would ever continue to live, hiding in the bogs, days, months and year after year.

All of a sudden, about seven steps later, he heard the captain yell back, "Get back here. I want to talk." Apparently the captain struggled, because he said, "As difficult as this is, I'm just about ready to get on that ship, and sailors are hard to come by. The journey is dangerous. It's terrible work and it is hard to have enough of these sailors who are willing to do it for the small pay they receive."

Plus, he could work him to death and then turn right around and sell him again, anyway, and get his money doubled. So he [the captain] said, "Get on." The impossible happened. He got on that ship, and he got all the way through three days. He got back to England and, of course, he is on the wrong side.

So, they get all of their work – all of these men, who had worked to take that ship, many times rowing hour after hour, day into third day – exhausted. They didn't have backpacks. They were carrying wood cases on their backs for another two and a half days. They ran out of food, and the captain and some of the men, because they were all pagan, were teasing him for his prayers that continued day and night, said, "Come on. Where is your God?"

Patrick told them a story about the men wandering in the wilderness. The families who trusted God for 40 years, and that God never stopped providing manna and quail, and they laughed until they were so hungry, they couldn't carry their stuff any longer. At that very moment, a herd of wild boar ran across the road right in front of them. The sailors, as tired as they were, saw hope. They killed them, they cooked and ate them; and, all of the men and the captain treated Patrick with a great deal of respect, from that moment on. They kept walking and, the minute the food was out, they walked into the settlement. And, because of his faith and how it impressed both the captain and the men, they let him go back to his family unharmed and free.

That is a very small beginning.

I'm going to share this story in two more parts over the next couple of weeks; but, I share it because it reminds me so much of Abram, who was not a man of faith. but God brought him to the faith he needed, to survive and grow. And, I pray in my heart, that the same covenant that Gordon Kenneth is making today in his baptism, or is being made for him in his baptism, that God will watch over him in the very same way; and, that we cannot just sit idly by and say, "God, take care of me"; but through prayer and our own actions, invite God into a relationship that can transform the darkest moments of our life and bring health, hope and wholeness. I hope we learn from St. Patrick today. and trust in the promise that he provides in God's holy name. Amen.