

“Imagine That”

(St. Patrick – Part 3)

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For those of you who haven't been here the last couple of weeks, this is the third in a series on St. Patrick, because St. Patrick's Day was on a Sunday this year, and it just seemed interesting, I was going to give one sermon and it turned into three.

If you remember, we learned things about St. Patrick that a lot of people were not aware of. For example he was not Irish – he was British. But, when he was a young boy, all the way through early teenage years, he didn't believe in God; [and,] considered himself an atheist, which was pretty unique for somebody back in about the 400s AD.

Also, at the age of 15, he had been shackled around the neck. He came from a wealthy family, and Irish pirates came, killed the men, put the women and children, slaves and free, into slave ships, and took them back to Ireland. For six years he was a slave in Ireland. Because of God's help and God's visions, he figured out a way to get all the way back home to Britain. And, God continued those visions telling him he needed to go back to Ireland and minister to the people.

So, he worked for eight or nine long years, becoming a priest and, lo and behold, [they] sent him back to Ireland, and he struggled and he worked. He was up against all sorts of challenges from kings – they were more like chieftains – in these Irish territories and clans. He had to figure out a way to bribe them, so that they could understand and receive enough blessings, so that he [Patrick] could walk in their territory and proclaim the Gospel. He also had to struggle with the Druids and the pagan authorities who wanted him to fail, because the more Christians there were, the fewer pagans. Somehow, against all of those odds he continued to survive and to share the ministry.

That is where we begin today. As I said, Patrick figured out a way to handle the outward external problems in his ministry. He continued to bribe the kings – or the chieftains – in the local clan, and they let him provide opportunities to pray with and to baptize people in individual families – mainly slaves. And, Patrick would and did offer baptism to men, but he focused mainly on the women, because Patrick felt so bad for them, whether they were free or slave. Life as a woman, in that time, was horribly difficult if you were free, but if you were a slave you could be tortured; you could have unspeakable things done to you. It was horrific – and he cared for them and wanted them to do well.

His ministry grew, but he also had external issues, and I would like to go into detail about what those struggles were today.

It begins by reminding you that when Patrick would go into a particular area – a territory – he would bring a gift of usually some kind of gold that was given to him in the offering, and he would pay the king – or the chieftain – and then he would be able to baptize and teach and instruct; and, by the time I'm introducing St. Patrick today, he is older – he is in his 50s or early 60s.

By this time he had baptized children whose parents he had baptized. It was going so well.

The Druids, who were such a powerful force at the early part of his ministry, were not much of an influence at all anymore. Christianity, because of Patrick, had grown that much, in that relatively short period of time, and it was going so well. He would give to the husband of the group the gold. He [the husband] would let him [Patrick] proclaim the Gospel to the slaves. The slaves would all often proclaim the Gospel back to their owners, and some of them received baptism.

It was going so well, until one particular day.

It was Easter morning and Patrick had a whole line-up in this one particular group. A territory might have maybe 200-300 people in it, and he had dozens of people lined up for baptism on a particular Easter morning. They were immersed, and he immersed them all morning long, as part of the Easter ritual.

Back in the early Church, baptism was only done on Easter, because Easter was the day of new life – new beginnings. As Jesus had gone from death to new life in the resurrection, so we human beings go from death in baptism, to new life as new people of God.

They were so thrilled and they started walking home, back to their place, still wearing their baptismal gowns; and, all of a sudden, a group of British pirates came upon them, swooped them up, killed the men, took the women and children, shackled them and carried them back to Britain.

The world had changed so much in the 20 or 30 years that Patrick had been in ministry. The reason that the Irish had pirates that stole from the British and kidnapped Patrick, was because the Roman Empire was falling apart, and the Roman Empire no longer had a navy to protect Britain from Ireland.

Now, after 30 years, the British people – those who had power and influence – built their own private navy. The head of that group – their own pirates, of sort – was named Coroticus. Coroticus had several men, maybe a group of 50 or 100, and he had his ships. This time instead of the Irish coming, he killed all of the Irish pirates. Now, he went and did the same thing to the Irish that the Irish had done to him. He protected England and, to pay for himself, along with receiving money from the rich in England, he would take his own slaves – this time the Irish – and would take them off.

Now these were Patrick's own people. He had baptized them earlier that day, and you could tell how angry he must have been to lose his own people; and, he wrote a bitter, angry letter – and we still have it to this day. He wrote this letter not only to Coroticus and the men, but he wrote it to the British Church and to the Irish Church. In it he called them murderers. He went into detail about how horrific it was, and how he expected more from his own people in England; and, he finished it by saying that those men and Coroticus, in particular, were now citizens of hell.

Now, you think about the Roman Catholic Church that far back. You didn't joke about hell. It was a fiery place. You were there for eternity and burning in the cauldrons of Satan. It was the worst thing you could say to someone; and, he knew that Coroticus would be cut to

the quick and horrified by a bishop – because by this time Patrick was a bishop – and said to him, “You were going to hell.” He was scared to death.

He complained to the bishop of his own British Church and they were angry at Patrick. You see, in the Church, at that time, it was Church tradition that if a bishop had an issue with a person outside their territory – outside of their group – they would call or write a letter to the bishop of which the bad person participated, and let that bishop hold that person accountable.

Patrick, according to tradition, had no right to complain without going to the other bishop first; and, Patrick knew he would be in trouble. But, there were two reasons why Patrick did what he did: First, he knew that if he didn’t complain, if he just went to that bishop – they would push it all under the rug. See, Coroticus was powerful and he protected the British; and, there was no way his bishop would do anything to stop him, because they needed him so much. They put their safety and security above their ethics.

The second reason is, if Patrick wrote his letter – it wasn’t like you could email it. It takes weeks, maybe even a month, to get it over to that bishop, who would read it and then decide the best point of action. By that time, his people whom he loved, would not only be all of the way to England, but they would have been sold and scattered to the four winds, by the time he ever found them. He couldn’t wait that long, but he didn’t need to send it all over.

He created enemies within his own Church. They were angry and they wrote back; and, all of a sudden, they said that Patrick needed to come back to Britain and to stand before the tribunal – the other bishops. In order to decide if he should be allowed to keep his ministry, he was going to be reviewed.

Patrick knew that if he ever went back and stood before the review, that he would never go back to Ireland. For years – for years they had been trying to get rid of him. Who was he that he thought that with not as good an education – without the ability to move up the ranks slowly? They – other bishops – were jealous that he became a bishop 20 years earlier than they had. What right did he have to be allowed to speak, and then, to not only speak to his own people, at the bishop, but then to try to overrule them. Now he was trying to become the Pope, and they would not allow that to happen.

So Patrick wasn’t really thrilled about the idea of going back to England, and they started sending out information – the British Church did – about what a sinner he was – how corrupt Patrick was – and they said it to the people of Ireland and the Ireland Church.

Nothing happened to Coroticus and he continued to steal slaves out of Ireland, so Patrick decided to write a second letter. It was later called “Confession.” The first part of the letter dealt with all of the corruption. He tried to explain to them why he had done what he did. One of the things you never do with the Church is mess with their money – same way today, really. [Laughter.] Money rules.

The bishops, even those who wanted to spend a little time to try and understand Patrick, couldn’t get their heads around where the money went, because Patrick took the offerings and he used it to pay off – or bribe – the kings, or the chieftains, so that he could go and proclaim the Gospel.

Patrick was, in some ways, naïve to the ways of the Church. Church officials could understand collecting a tithe and then taking a portion of that tithe, and giving it to the larger Church. They could not understand taking and using that money to bribe political officials. Somehow, they couldn't get their heads around that. They had never lived in a corrupt place like Ireland.

So, Patrick spent the first part of the second letter explaining that he was not a thief, that he was faithful; that he was doing what was right and here is why. And, he spent the second part of that letter talking about how wonderful the Irish people were, and that they were worthy of their respect and care, and they should not be enslaved.

Now that letter went over about as well as the first letter. The first part they couldn't understand, as I said, how he mishandled the money, if they weren't getting their piece of it. The larger Church had its own administrative costs and, if he wasn't giving to it, he was wrong, according to the Church.

But the second half was even worse. He tries to defend himself. He went on to explain how he had received his seven different visions. He talked about that in detail, and there were many others, and how God had led him back and forth. Those he was writing to were educated, sophisticated British bishops. They didn't buy his story. [They said,] "You can't trust the Holy Spirit. How do we know he is just not faking it, so he can keep hoarding the gold for his own wants and needs?" They were sure they were going to get him – and that is the last thing we know about Patrick.

It's kind of an awkward ending. We don't know if they brought him back and defrocked him. We don't know if they brought him back and said, "Here, early retirement." We don't know if they let him stay. He didn't want to leave Ireland, not just because he might get defrocked; he wanted to make sure his Church continued to grow and he still felt that it was fragile.

We don't know what happened. The last writing we have of St. Patrick was him stating that he did not want a marked grave. He wanted an unmarked grave, and isn't that wonderful. That tells us that he could not have been corrupt. He didn't want accolades. He was humble.

Think about what kind of shrine we would have for this man today, if we knew where he was buried; and, to this day, no one knows where he was buried. All we know about him was that the Church did not die because of him – it thrived because of him.

We know – and this is why I preached three weeks on this through Lent – we've learned what it means, as did the people who followed him – who celebrate him as a priest, as a saint – because he knew what it was to trust God amidst adversity. He knew what it was like to have no faith and then to come to faith. He described in such detail how we receive and hear the vision of the Holy Spirit speaking to us; and, he refused to buckle under the threat of kings, under the threats of Druid priests, under the threat of his own corrupt Church – and he continued to speak reconciliation.

The Church was so corrupt that even when he was 15 years old – as I told you a couple of weeks ago, somehow, we don't even know what it was – but he committed this horrible sin.

We don't know if it was idolatry, or whatever it must have been; but here he was, as an old man and they tried to get him defrocked for the sin he committed when he was 15 years old. Now, what is totally ludicrous about this whole thing is, if it was that bad, why did they let him become a priest in the first place? Patrick admitted his sin. He told them about it and now, 40 years later they want to throw him out because of it. That shows who the corrupt ones were.

And so, we end this passage of sermons, and we end, and start preparing for the end of Lent and the Holy Week, by recognizing that we, too, will face our adversity. The question is: Will we be able to stand tall? Will we trust that we have done what is faithful and right even when all around us say it's wrong? Will we be able to listen to God, when we are so low that we see no way out and believe that God can carry us home? And, will we have the faith to trust that even if we die in an unmarked grave, thinking we have not made a real difference, that everything is in God's hands and all we can do is our very best?

If that isn't what Lent is about, I don't know what it is. Lent is about finding out who we are, in our darkest moments, and finding God there – lifting us up, moving us forward and renewing our faith. We learn that from Patrick, who called himself a prophet of St. Paul's, an ambassador for Christ; and, I pray, on this day, that we can all follow that example and be ambassadors for Christ, as well.

Amen.