

Patrick the “saint”

(Acts 16:6-10)

Last week we learned about John Wycliffe, his journey to becoming a hero began when he was just 15 years old. He learned many lessons of unwavering devotion to God despite the bullies from outside and within the church. Today's hero of the faith also experienced a radical wakeup call when he was a teenager.

Patrick was 16 (in the year 405), when he was taken in a raid to become a slave in what was still pagan Ireland. Far from home, he turned to the faith he had ignored as a boy. Though his grandfather had been a priest, and his father a deacon, Patrick "knew not the true God." But forced to tend his master's sheep, he spent six years becoming *reacquainted* with the God who never left him.

Today is, “St. Patrick’s Day” though, Patrick isn’t actually a Saint in the formal sense. It’s said that the reason we celebrate this hero of the faith on March 17th is that this was supposedly the day on which Patrick died.

Were you to do an image search of St. Patrick’s Day you’d have a screen filled with leprechauns green shamrocks and beer, but there’d be no sign of a missionary or his legacy of converting the Celts to Christ. Here in western Pennsylvania, in Pittsburgh, the nation’s second largest parade took place yesterday. This year's event involved approximately 23,000 participants, with over 200 entries including 20 marching bands; but this is no church function. I love a parade just as much as the next person but I’m willing to guess if someone were have walked the parade route and ask attendees if they knew the name of a British man who in 460AD became a missionary to Ireland, you would receive a lot of blank stares.

Another similarity to John Wycliffe is the age at which Patrick engaged in his calling, both men were in their early 40’s when they made a significant impact on their corners of England.

It’s said that Patrick escaped captivity after witnessing a vision of God telling him to flee to the coast where a waiting ship would take him home. He escaped and eventually found a captain willing to take him to Britain where-in time-he became a priest. After many years, he had yet another vision, and decided to return to Ireland to bring Christianity to the Pagan druidic people.

The scripture passage I chose today also includes followers of the Lord seeing a vision and the effects of the Holy Spirit. The thing that stands out to me isn’t the dream of a man in Macedonia calling for Paul, Silas and Timothy to come over to him, but the way in which the Holy Spirit forbade them to enter Asia. No doubt this was upsetting to him but Paul submitted to the will of God.

This reminds me of a non-Pauline passage of scripture from James4:13-15: “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” Some translations say, “If the Lord wills it..”, this is a good way to approach life.

We may have personal opinions but a follower of Christ ultimately allows for the will of the Lord to have the final say. The Apostle Paul was a visionary with plans but ultimately he submitted them to the will of God.

The text leaves out how God’s message was sent to Paul. We know about the man from Macedonia but **how** was it that he Silas and Timothy were also stopped from entering

Bithynia? Interestingly the word “vision” only appears twelve times in the entire New Testament; eleven of them are here in the book of Acts.

Most people appreciate a visionary, it’s also true that if someone’s vision forces uncomfortable changes that such a vision comes under scrutiny. Some people are especially drawn to these kinds of purpose filled pursuits in either their corporation or church. The basic assumption made is that people want to be a part of something with significance and not merely members in the status quo.

Yet, a challenge that established organizations face is that we become accustomed to order. I wonder if the reason that Paul’s spiritual interactions sound so odd is that we don’t consult the Holy Spirit enough? We have task forces, break out groups and committees for the purpose of “doing the things that need done.” Yet a church is not just a non-for-profit that holds weekly gatherings; we’re a people on a mission, on the move!

The early church was on the move; its leaders were motivated by the direction of the Holy Spirit and correspondences from partners in the mission. Every once in a while these partners made a visit to their home, meeting place. In Acts 15 Paul describes his conflicts with gentile and Jewish believers as well as other leaders such as Barnabas, Peter, James, Judas (Barsabbas), Silas and John (Mark). The mission work continued but not without conflicts among its leaders.

We shouldn’t be surprised when conflicts occur within our church. We can be a hindrance to the move of the Spirit if we only desire things happen that align with our own vision. The temptation we face most often isn’t becoming a pagan, but a passive participant in the life of the church. When was the last time you heard someone say that they had their minds changed by the will of the Spirit?

Each of us can be the solution to the challenges we face if we’re open and pray for the will of God. Paul and Patrick faced an uncertain future but were willing to follow the Spirit into the unknown. Our sin of pride often prohibits us to see more than one possibility to our plans. So, one of the practical lessons we learn from Patrick is the way in which he found local connections to his Christian faith.

Patrick often chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity instead of attempting to remove their native beliefs. For instance, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire. He also overlaid a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that adoration of this image would seem more natural to the locals.

Although there were a small number of Christians on the island when Patrick arrived, most Irish would’ve practiced a nature-based pagan religion. The Irish culture also had a rich tradition of legends and myths. So it is no surprise then that the story of Patrick’s life became exaggerated over the centuries. Though there are too many to repeat today some include his magical walking stick, his rhetorical power which subdued pagan gods and of course the famous one about the snakes.

The legend suggests that Patrick drove out all the snakes from Ireland, however the problem is there never were snakes to begin with, it’s an island surrounded by waters too cold for them to survive. Most scholars believe the snake story is an allegory for St. Patrick’s purge of pagan beliefs.

Though Patrick found local customs as a way to bridge the gap his goal was still to teach about the faith. I don’t know what his drinking and eating habits were but even if he drank beer I’m positive Patrick would have a hard time understanding the rampant abuse of alcohol associated with today’s holiday.

St. Patrick's Day was once a Roman Catholic feast day only observed in Ireland—without the boisterous partying of today's celebrations. Many spent the occasion in quiet prayer at church or at home. The change occurred when Irish immigrants living in the United States organized parades and other events on March 17 as a show of Irish pride. So, it's fair to say that Irish American Immigrants really made this the holiday the wild party it has become.

On St. Patrick's Day, some eat corned beef and cabbage. In Ireland, however, a type of bacon similar to ham is the customary choice. Where did we get this? In the late 19th century, Irish immigrants in New York City's Lower East Side supposedly substituted corned beef for their traditional bacon, which they bought from their Jewish neighbors, in order to save money. That's not to say salt-cured beef isn't a traditional Irish dish; yet it's pork-not corned beef—that's the traditional meat.

While Pittsburgh certainly has its share of Irish American history it is Boston that has long staked claim to holding the first St. Patrick's Day celebration in the USA. On March 17, 1737, more than two dozen **Presbyterians** who migrated from the north of Ireland gathered to honor St. Patrick and form the "Charitable Irish Society" to assist distressed Irishmen in the city. This oldest Irish organization in North America still holds an annual dinner every St. Patrick's Day.

Historian Michael Francis, however, recently found evidence that St. Augustine, Florida, may have hosted America's first St. Patrick's Day celebration. While researching Spanish gunpowder expenditure logs, Francis found records that indicate cannon blasts or gunfire were used to honor Patrick in 1600 and that residents of the Spanish garrison town processed through the streets in honor of St. Patrick the following year, perhaps at the request of an Irish priest living there?

Even the color most wear today hasn't always been a given. Today we associate the day with green but there are two shades of **blue**, St. Patrick's Blue and Presidential Blue, which are more widely used by the Government of Ireland. So, what changed? A teaching tactic of Patrick may have been the use of a green shamrock as a way to explain the Holy Trinity to the pre-Christian Irish. The phrase, *'the wearing o the green'* likely meant to adorn oneself with a shamrock. It should be noted that the four-leaf clover is in no way a faith related symbol. The so-called "good luck" of the Irish is not a Christian belief at all.

So, it is believed that beginning in the mid-1700's people mistook the phrase "wearing o the green" to mean wearing actual green clothing. However, there's an even less religious reason that most wear green—so as to not get pinched! According to The Christian Science Monitor, in the early 1700s, Irish-Americans bought into the folklore that wearing green would make you invisible to leprechauns.

If you didn't wear green, a leprechaun might pinch you, so the legend goes. As a part of the St. Patrick's Day tradition, people would pinch anyone who wasn't wearing green, as a reminder of the leprechauns lurking around. Yet, if you're not Catholic, don't mind being pinched and are a proud Protestant, you too have a color from which to choose, it's on the other side of the Irish Flag, orange!

Protestants in Ireland have been known as "orange" ever since 1690, when William of Orange (William III), the king of England, Scotland, and Ireland, defeated King James II, a Roman Catholic, in the Battle of the Boyne near Dublin. King William's victory has been a source of tension for generations.

There's even a folk song by Anthony Murphy entitled *"the orange and the green"* in which a man describes his trials as the product of religious intermarriage between a protestant Father (orange) and Catholic (green) mother and how "mixed up" he became as a

result. Thankfully the days of major tension between Orange and Green have past, but I certainly grew up in a home that joked about wearing orange instead of green because we Loudons are Scotch-Irish Presbyterians!

A few final things to remember, Patrick was commissioned by his local church in Britain to be a mission-worker, not the Roman Catholic Church. It may be true that the Roman Catholic Church claims him now but it's not true that he was a Catholic in the same sense that other missionaries were in the 5th Century. As Dr. J. Lewis Smith points out in his book, "*Patrick of Ireland: Not a Romanist*," there is not a shred of evidence out of 140 letters from Pope Leo the Great that he, nor any other Pope, was even aware of Patrick or the Gospel work being done in Ireland.

What makes Patrick a hero isn't that he is an official saint, it's that he assisted in bringing belief in Christ to Ireland. His mission work occurred one thousand years before the Reformation but its seeds of faith were certainly well planted. To this day there is still a strong Evangelical tradition among Northern Irish Protestants who see Patrick as one who spoke out boldly for his faith, yet often in creative ways.

The title of today's sermon is a quote attributed to St. Patrick, "If I have any worth, it is to live my life for God." I like this thought and its way of re-orienting our lives from only the accomplishments of our own goals to that of being worthwhile people who live our faith with purpose. Remember, the Apostle Paul's response to the vision of the man from Macedonia was immediate; so too our commitment to Jesus comes before a denomination, family or the influences of any culture.

Don't get me wrong, today's festivities need not be serious, it's meant to be a fun day, however nor should they just be an excuse to get drunk on green drinks. It's certainly not wrong to wear shamrocks, green socks or even a bit of orange for fun but I do suggest that we refrain from placing too much merit in **luck** and instead give a word of thanks for the missionary who was the real life Patrick, *the saint*.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

AMEN!