

Lent 2 Year C
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

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It takes a lot of moxie to stand up to a king.
Especially when a king has armies
and power
and wealth
and all you have is yourself,
and your small band of followers.
It takes a special kind of courage to throw down a gauntlet
and say to a king
“You want me? Here I am. Come and get me.”

Today, we celebrate the life of someone who did just that.
Happy St. Patrick’s Day!
Anybody here got some Irish in them?
Anybody here who celebrates St. Patrick’s Day as IF you were Irish?

Yes, everybody loves St. Patrick and likes to celebrate his feast day.
Much of what we know about him is shrouded in myth,
but we know he was a real person
and he left us two autobiographical letters
in which he tells us of his struggles and of his faith.

He was probably born in Scotland,
in about the year 387
the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest.
But while he was raised in a good, Christian family,
young Patrick cared little for the faith.
Then, at age 16, he was captured by a raiding party
and taken to Ireland and sold into slavery.
For six years, he spent day and night
as a shepherd,
tending flocks belonging to a Druid priest.

Spending all that time alone with the sheep,
in good weather and bad,

was actually quite a good thing for young Patrick.
With nothing else to do, he started praying.
He prayed and he prayed, for six years.
And while praying, he heard what he believed was the voice of God.

It came to him in a vision,
just as the Word of the Lord came to Abram
in the lesson we heard from Genesis.
And in this vision, Patrick saw how he could escape from slavery.
He made a perilous journey 200 miles across Ireland,
and at last convinced some reluctant pirates
to take him aboard their ship
and take him home to England.

His family of course welcomed him back.
But he had returned a changed man.
Now all that mattered to him was serving God.
He became a priest,
and pastored a British church for 20-some years.

Then, at around age 45,
which, in the 5th century, meant he was already an old man,
he had another dream.
In this dream, someone with an Irish accent
pleaded with him to come back to Ireland
to bring a new way of life
to the people who had once enslaved him.

Legend tells us that was in the year 432
that Patrick returned to Ireland
landing on the shores of Strangford Lough.
He quickly made a convert of a local chieftain
who gave him a barn for his first church.

Then, on the eve of Easter that year, Patrick made his way to Tara,
seat of the high king of Ireland.
At that time of year,
it was the pagan practice to put out all the fires
before a new one was lit at Tara,
just as we still do on Easter Eve.

We light the new fire.

But Patrick wanted to send a message to the high king of Ireland,
that he served a still higher king.

So he climbed up to the top of the nearby Hill of Slane,
which is some 14 miles away from Tara,
and there he lit the Paschal fire.

It was a huge bonfire that could be seen for miles and miles.
Indeed, it was a not-so-subtle way of saying
“Here I am. Come and get me.”

When the druids at Tara saw the light from Slane
they warned the king that he must extinguish it at once
or else its light would burn forever.

The King immediately summoned Patrick to Tara,
and it's said that on the way there
Patrick and his small band of followers chanted “The Lorica,”
or “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate” as we know it today.
We still sing that song at our Easter Vigil.
“I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same, the Three in One, and One in Three.”

As it turns out, the king didn’t kill Patrick.
Rather, according to legend,
when he met the king,
Patrick plucked up a shamrock
and used its three leaves to explain to the king
the paradox of the Trinity.
Thus convinced, the king agreed to let Patrick
continue his mission in Ireland.

It was not an easy mission.
He constantly faced opposition, and threats of violence.
But Patrick was courageous and devoted to peacefully spreading the gospel
among the Irish people.
By the time he died, some 30 years later,
he’d converted nearly all of Ireland
from paganism to Christianity.
And the light of that fire,

first lit on the Hill of Slane,
 still burns today as the light of Christ.
 And it surely will burn forever.

How fitting, that on this day when we celebrate St. Patrick,
 we also hear the gospel lesson for the second Sunday of Lent.
 It too, tells the story of a faithful, devoted man
 who bravely confronted another king.

King Herod was a tyrant,
 but he really was just a product
 of the systemic dysfunction
 that had plagued Jerusalem for centuries.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets!”
 Jesus says,
 “and stones those who are sent to it.”

“How often have I desired to gather your children together
 as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,”
 Jesus says.
 What a lovely, comforting metaphor:
 Jesus, as Mother Hen.
 And we, God’s children, as little chicks.

Jesus knows that if he goes to Jerusalem,
 He will be killed.
 Even the Pharisees warn him that evil is afoot.
 “Run away from here,” they tell him.
 “for Herod wants to kill you!”

Just like Patrick on the Hill of Slane,
 Jesus wouldn’t run.
 He was not afraid of Herod.
 Instead, he says,
 “Tell that fox, ‘Here I am, casting out demons.’”

Jesus, the Mother Hen,
 Is going to stay and fight the fox
 Who would harm God’s beloved chicks.

Now evil is a cunning, sly fox
 Armed with razor sharp teeth
 And a lust for blood.

But Jesus, the Mother Hen,
 Has no such weapons as that.
 A hen doesn't even have much of a beak.
 The only weapon a hen has
 is a powerful desire to protect her brood.
 She can only hope that by sacrificing herself
 she can satisfy the fox's appetite,
 so he'll leave her chicks alone.

You wouldn't think it would be much of a fight.
 And yet, as one preacher I know put it,
 "in that cosmic battle between good and evil,
 in which the power of fang and claw
 was up against the power of a Mother's love,
 God bet the farm on the hen."
 And ultimately, the hen won.

Evil can't win,
 because Jesus, our Mother Hen,
 didn't run,
 but chose to stay and protect us.

He didn't run and back away from a confrontation.
 He chose a path of loving non-violence.
 And he didn't flinch from the ultimate consequences of his actions.

We are still surrounded by evil today.
 It reared its ugly head this week in Christchurch, New Zealand.
 But we know that it all around us.
 It is all around us in the form of hateful speech,
 intolerance, violence, racism, xenophobia.
 And it tries to enslave us,
 Just as Patrick was enslaved.

But as the letter to the Philippians reminds us

we are citizens of a heavenly Kingdom,
and we have a Savior
who will not let his children be enslaved forever.

The forces of evil are prepared to use violence.
They are prepared use hatred.
They are prepared to stir up anger and fear and despair.
Those are their weapons.
And if we use those same weapons to fight back,
then we're going to lose the battle.
If we fight like they do,
we simply become enslaved to the evil
we say we're fighting.

But there is one weapon that the forces of evil
are utterly unprepared to do battle with.
It's a weapon that evil cannot defeat.

That weapon is love.
The selfless, self-giving, self-sacrificing sort of love
that Jesus, our Mother Hen, exhibited.
The courageous love that took St. Patrick
back to Ireland,
to bring a new way of life to the Irish people.
Not forcing a totally foreign set of beliefs
on an unwilling people,
threatening them if they did not accept this new religion,
but rather showing them
how they were already God's beloved children,
and making it easy for them to see themselves as Christians.

This is the love that we are all invited to accept,
and to show to each other.
It is the way of non-violence.
The way of kindness and inclusion.
The way of compassion.

It is the way that leads to the cross,
and during this season of Lent
we are asked to take that journey with Christ.

It is not an easy journey.

But remember:

For every fox who stalks us, there is a Mother Hen to protect us.

For every star in the sky, there is a reminder of God's promise,
a reminder that every Christian, every Jew, and every Muslim,
is a descendant of Abraham.

Like the shamrock, three faiths growing from the same stalk.

And for every cross we endure, there is a resurrection.

Christ be with us,

Christ within us,

Christ behind us,

Christ before us,

Christ beside us,

Christ to win us,

Christ to comfort and restore us.

Amen.