

Lent 5—March 17, 2024 (St. Patrick's Day)
Text: Acts 17:22-34
Theme: Latter Day St. Patricks

Today is St. Patrick's Day. In lieu of drinking green beer and eating corned beef sandwiches, we're going to learn about St. Patrick and we thank the confirmation youth for putting this service together and helping to lead it as part of their capstone project in music. First of all, St. Patrick was not a leprechaun. Like Santa Clause, he was neither a myth, nor a legend but a real person. St. Patrick was born in Great Britain in 386 A.D. In those days, much of Great Britain was part of the Roman Empire so Patrick was raised as a Roman Citizen and being Roman, he was Roman Catholic. His grandfather was a priest and his father was a deacon in the Church so Patrick was a preacher's kid.

When Patrick was 16 years old, he was kidnapped by Irish pirates. They took him to their pagan king where he was sold into slavery. Eventually, he escaped from slavery and headed back to England. There, he continued his training and became a deacon. Shortly afterward, he sought to be sent as a missionary back to Ireland. Patrick was known for his creative ways of explaining the deepest mysteries of the faith, like using a shamrock to explain the Holy Trinity – not particularly theologically sound since every metaphor breaks down when trying to describe something for which

we have no comparison and no language to describe, but helpful to people who had never worshipped a God like ours. Ireland was primarily Druidic at that time. Druidism focusses on worship of nature, so a metaphor from nature, like the shamrock, made sense to the people to whom Patrick was speaking. We Lutherans have a fervor for being Biblically sound and doctrinally correct and that is a good thing, but we also need to remember that our audience is rarely comprised of theological scholars. Patrick is a model for meeting people where they are and using what they know to lead them to the next level of their relationship with God. Over time, Patrick saw the Holy Spirit convert many Druids to Christianity. Legend has it that he also drove all the snakes off the island but that is probably more symbolic of ridding the land of evil as Christianity replaced Druidism. [Lorelai May & Hank Pavlovsky]

Patrick was one of many missionaries to Ireland and over time, the island was converted and is largely Christian even to this day. If you read the legends of his methods of evangelism, you will see that they closely mimicked St. Paul in Athens, which is our Epistle for today.

“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said:...” St. Paul went into the midst of the pagan people to proclaim the

message of God's love and salvation. He didn't send them a letter or tell someone else to tell them just as Patrick sailed into the lion's mouth and returned to Ireland where he had been held as a slave. Sometimes, after worship, people will tell me that they wish someone else had been here to hear that sermon. That would be like St. Paul hearing the Gospel and saying, boy I wish those Corinthians could hear this! Take the Gospel to the people who need to hear it! That's why I print out my sermons, put them on YouTube and put them on the website. The goal is for the people of Trinity to be like St. Paul and St. Patrick. Take what you hear in this place and carry it into the pagan territories wherever they are. If you hear something that someone else needs to hear, take it to them. Paul continues,

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious." Start by praising people for what they are doing right. We tend to get frustrated with people who are faithless. How can they be so stupid? Especially if we reared them in the faith! How can they let their faith wither and die? Or how can they think that some kind of idol is more important than God? But frustration cannot be where we start. We start by praising them for what they are doing right. Paul praised the Athenians for being very religious. That's something they had in common and we need to find common ground if we are going to be heard. If you haven't figured it out already, nagging and

criticism never works to help a person change direction. It alienates people and makes them feel as though you do not care about them. The Law always condemns. The Gospel heals and empowers. Find common ground and praise them for what they are doing well. St. Paul continues,

“For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Here is the mastery of St. Paul. Understand that ALL the religions of the world find their roots in Christianity because everyone on this earth descends from Noah and his family who were children of God. In fact, they were the only righteous people left on this earth when God decided to destroy it. So, whatever a person believes, his belief is somehow connected to Christianity. Find that connection and use it like St. Paul did.

Once St. Paul had them with him, he went in for the kill. He told them who God is and what He has done for them. Now comes the hardest part of this whole thing. We need to trust the Word of God. We believe that it has power unto itself, but putting that belief into action is not easy. We build the relationship with people so that they will listen and then we tell them the truth. Don’t argue. Notice that

St. Paul did not stand around to argue. He made his point and left. But some men, we hear, believed, and followed him. That is how it works. We build the relationship, find common ground, and deliver the message. The Holy Spirit does whatever He does and we move on to the next place.

St. Patrick was a latter-day Paul. We are all latter-day St. Patricks. We are filled with Word and Sacrament, and we go into the world around us whether that is our living room or the far reaches of outer Mongolia and find people who do not know Jesus or people who have forgotten Him. We praise them for what they are doing well and find common ground with them. Then we deliver the good news that Jesus has died for their sins and procured their eternal life in paradise. Like it was for St. Paul and St. Patrick, this is a lifetime calling with which we are not finished until the day the Lord calls us home whether that is death or His return. Our calling is not to end global warming, gun violence, poverty, or hunger. Those are fine goals, but none of them matter if people are going to Hell. Our calling is to proclaim God's Word to the world and to give the Holy Spirit the tools with which He will bring people into the family of God.