

icy coldness, in rain, and I used to feel neither ill nor any slothfulness, because, as I now see, the Spirit was burning in me at that time.”

As Patrick embraced the Triune God at work in him, he began to empathize with the people who enslaved him. He learned their language and culture, understood their view of the world, and studied their religion. In time, he even came to love them as people who might one day turn to the Triune God. Patrick, who once lived with the privileges of Roman high-society, came to identify with the outcasts, viewing them as God’s children and not as the barbarians most Romans considered them to be.

The “Macedonian Call.” Still, Patrick was a slave and sought his freedom. After six years in captivity, he received a vision in a dream. A voice said to him, “You are going home. Look! Your ship is ready.” He awakened the next morning, walked 200 miles to the seacoast and negotiated his way on board a ship bound for Gaul (present-day France) and eventually made it back home to England.

Shortly after rejoining his family, however, Patrick had another vision. In this dream a man named Victorius, whom Patrick may have known while in Ireland, came to him with letters from his former captors in Ireland. These letters, written in “The Voice of the Irish,” said: “We beg you, holy youth, that you shall come and shall walk again among us.”

When Patrick awoke, he interpreted this dream as a “Macedonian call” much like the apostle Paul experienced (Acts 16:9-15). Patrick believed this to be God’s call to go back and live among his former captors. Patrick would now be the captor, however, capturing the hearts of the Irish with the good news of Jesus Christ. Patrick studied for the priesthood and received permission to go to Ireland despite the protests of his family and church superiors.

Patrick faced a difficult task. There was no organized Christian mission in Ireland. In fact, the church considered the Irish barbarians to be illiterate and insufficiently enlightened to understand the Christian faith, and thus unlikely to become civilized enough to become good citizens of the empire. All Church officials knew about the Irish was that the Irish were fierce warriors, who were known to practice human sacrifice and to carry the heads of their defeated enemies around on their belts. The Irish were a tough crowd, to say the least. But while the Roman church knew little about the Irish Celts, Patrick did

know them and knew them well. He survived in that violent and superstitious culture, knew the language and had in his own soul a burning desire to bring a new hope and a new future to the Irish people.

Sacramentalizing the mundane. Typically, the Roman church expected new converts to be “Romanized” culturally (read and speak Latin) and “Christianized” religiously (adopting Roman Catholic church customs). Patrick adopted a radically different approach, however. Rather than set up a church as the center of a parish and get people to come, Patrick and his followers chose a more relational strategy. Arriving at a tribal settlement, Patrick would engage the chieftain in conversation, hoping for his permission to camp nearby. These evangelists would then meet with the people, strike up a conversation, and identify those who receptive to Christ’s Gospel. They prayed and ministered to the sick, fed the hungry, and mediated conflicts.

On at least one occasion, Patrick blessed a river and prayed for the people to catch more fish. In this way, Patrick made sacred the mundane. He found God and revealed God in the plainest and most ordinary of circumstances. Patrick and his team engaged in some open-air speaking, using stories and parables that engaged the Celtic imagination and connection to nature. Legend tells that when Patrick preached about the Trinity, he would pluck a shamrock — a three-leaf clover — and use it to describe how God is one and three at the same time.

Patrick encouraged the people to ask questions and express their hopes and fears. After a while, a community of faith emerged, and Patrick and his entourage would move on, leaving behind a priest to nurture the fledgling community. Patrick planted about seven hundred churches and monastic communities in this way.

The effects of ministry. Patrick’s ministry transformed Ireland. By the end of Patrick’s life on March 17, 461 A.D. or shortly thereafter, the Irish abolished the slave trade. The previously illiterate Irish became the people who, according to Thomas Cahill, “saved civilization,” copying by hand many of the classic works of Europe lost forever in Europe’s Dark Ages. Irish missionaries moved out to places like Scotland where they converted the Picts to Christianity following many of Patrick’s methods.

Oh, and that legend about Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland? Just a legend. There never were, nor are there today, any snakes in Ireland. That legend is symbolic of Patrick's desire to drive out much of the evil and violence that existed in Ireland for centuries. Patrick first came to Ireland as a slave, but it was there that he would voluntarily spend the rest of his life capturing people with the love of God.

Now what? On this Saint Patrick's Day, we celebrate someone who used a tragic and unfair circumstance in his life as a springboard to make a difference among the very people who wronged him. Rather than run away from conflict or opposition, Patrick moved toward it. Rather than buy into fear and write the Irish off as a lost cause, Patrick grew to love them and gave his life over to them. His tenacity, dedication, gracious hospitality, and devotion to Christ serve as a model for all of us who call ourselves Christians.

So, let me offer some ways to honor Patrick's legacy: Offer some holy conversation to a person who needs to know the love of Jesus; Engage that person at work who may be difficult for you; Help a neighbor without being asked; Respect those with whom you disagree; Drop a note to someone who could use encouragement; Give a few hours to support those in our community who have needs; Build a relationship with someone you don't know.

Know that the second you walk out the church doors you are a missionary who, like Patrick, is called to "walk among" the people of our community, offering them hospitality, friendship and the good news of Jesus Christ. It's the kind of missionary work that can transform a community and even the world. When we can do that, we can say with conviction that there is a wee bit of the Irish saint in all of us!

Prayer: May the Strength of God pilot us. May the Power of God preserve us. May the Wisdom of God instruct us. May the Hand of God protect us. May the Way of God direct us. May the Shield of God defend us. May the Host of God guard us: against the snares of the evil ones, against temptations of the world. May Christ be with us! May Christ be before us! May Christ be in us, Christ be over all! May Thy Salvation, Lord, always be ours, This day, O Lord, and evermore. Amen. (St. Patrick's prayer)

Source: Hunter, George G., III. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.

Patrick's Legacy

Sunday, March 17, 2019
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Acts 16:9-15

Today is Saint Patrick's Day and many people, Irish or not, will wear something green, maybe drink a few green beers, wear shamrock pins, and perhaps even wear a t-shirt that says, curiously, "Kiss me, I'm Irish." Parades will march, pipes will play, and the City of Chicago will dye its river green to honor Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.

All of this, however, tends to miss the real impact of Patrick on the history of the world. Millions of people will celebrate his day today and most will have no clue as to why. So, today, we have a great opportunity to tell the "rest of the story" in a way that will both inspire and motivate the church toward its mission.

The story begins in the late fourth/early fifth century after the time of Christ. The known world – the Roman Empire – was officially Christian by order of the Emperor Constantine nearly two hundred years earlier. On the fringe of the empire, somewhere in northeastern England, there lived a Roman Briton named Patricius (later known as Patrick). Patrick's came from an aristocratic and Christian family. Patrick's grandfather was a priest, but Patrick himself only marginally practiced his Christian faith. Patrick was a bit of a rebel: he ridiculed the local clergy and, by his own admission, lived on the wild side of "alienated" and "ungoverned" youth.

When Patrick was sixteen years old, a band of Celtic pirates sailed from Ireland and raided parts of England, captured Patrick, and took him back to Ireland. They sold Patrick to a tribal chieftain, a Druid named Miliuc, who promptly put Patrick to work herding cattle in the hills. It was lonely and dangerous work. Patrick had little food or clothing. He was constantly exposed to the elements. Alone with his thoughts, Patrick prayed to the God he once ignored.

Patrick writes in his *Confession*: "After I reached Ireland, I used to pasture the flock each day and I used to pray many times a day. More and more did the love of God, and my fear of him and faith increase, and my spirit was moved so that in a day [I said] from one up to a hundred prayers, and in the night a like number; besides I used to stay out in the forests and on the mountain and I would wake up before daylight to pray in the snow, in