

Contemplating St. Patrick

In March, along with the continuation of Lent and Holy Week, we think about St. Patrick this year. Although St. Patrick's Day is not commemorated as a church holy day, the story surrounding Patrick is worth a review.

St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, is one of Christianity's most widely known figures. But for all his celebrity, his life remains somewhat of a mystery. Many of the stories traditionally associated with St. Patrick, including the famous account of his banishing all the snakes from Ireland, are questioned. Many historians believe they are the products of hundreds of years of exaggerated storytelling.

What is known is that St. Patrick was born in Britain to wealthy parents near the end of the fourth century. He is believed to have died on March 17, around A.D. 460. Although his father was a Christian deacon, it has been suggested that he probably took on the role because of tax incentives and there is no evidence that Patrick came from a particularly religious family. At the age of sixteen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a group of Irish raiders who were attacking his family's estate. They transported him to Ireland where he spent six years in captivity. During this time, he worked as a shepherd, outdoors and away from people. Lonely and afraid, he turned to God for solace, becoming a devout Christian.

After more than six years as a prisoner, Patrick escaped. According to his writing, a voice, which he believed to be God's, spoke to him in a dream, telling him it was time to leave Ireland.

To do so, Patrick walked nearly 200 miles from where he was held to the Irish coast. After escaping to Britain, Patrick reported that he experienced a second revelation. An angel in a dream told him to return to Ireland as a missionary. Soon after, Patrick began religious training, a course of study that lasted more than fifteen years. After his ordination as a priest, he was sent to Ireland with a dual mission: to minister to Christians already living in Ireland, and to begin to convert the Irish.

Familiar with the Irish language and culture, instead of attempting to eradicate native Irish beliefs, Patrick chose to incorporate traditional ritual into his lessons of Christianity. For instance, since the Irish were used to honoring their gods with fire, he used bonfires to celebrate Easter. He also superimposed a sun, a powerful Irish symbol, onto the Christian cross to create what is now called a Celtic cross, so that veneration of the symbol would seem more natural to the Irish.

Today St. Patrick continues to inspire us to listen for God's voice in the midst of our daily lives. God is speaking in the good times, and in the hard times, giving us direction in daily life. Patrick can help us too, consider the symbols of daily life, sun, snakes, clovers, when telling the story of God's love and grace.

In the words of St. Patrick: "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."

Remembering the Saints that surround us, blessings and joy, *Pastor Karen*

