

Thin Places of Waiting
Psalm 27

In a few days – actually this Thursday – it will be St. Patty’s day. When you hear “St. Patty’s Day” what are your first thoughts...the “leprechaun”, the “color green”, of course, the “Irish”. Since my son-in-law’s, my grandchildren’s, and my daughter’s last name is McGarry, I thought it only wise to learn a bit about the legends and traditions surrounding St. Patty’s – No. No. “St. Patrick’s Day” – and especially about the distinctive Celtic Christianity with which St. Patrick is associated.

The origin story of the man who would become known as St. Patrick is fairly well known. Born to an aristocratic family somewhere in Roman Britain in the late 4th century C.E., at the age of sixteen, he was captured by Irish pirates and sold into slavery. For six years he was compelled/forced to work/labor for his captors until he managed to escape by walking 200 miles to a port city and haggling with a ship’s captain to take him away. Eventually, he made it back to his home, where he began to study for the priesthood. When he finished his studies, he requested a mission to return to the land where he had been a slave, bringing the Christian faith to the Celtic people. However, it was a distinctively different form than the Roman Christianity in which he was trained.

Now, much of what we have come to identify with St. Patrick is mostly the stuff of legend. But we know from his autobiography titled, “The Confession of St. Patrick” that the years he spent in captivity were critical to his spiritual development. Although he did come from a Christian family, he admits that he was only marginally practicing his faith before his enslavement, even ridiculing the local clergy in his alienated youth. But the time he was forced to spend herding cattle in the hills of Ireland changed things for Patrick. The lonely and dangerous work, the constant exposure to the elements, and the bleak prospects for a better life turned Patrick’s thoughts to the God that he had previously more or less ignored. He wrote in his Confession:

“After I had arrived in Ireland, I found myself pasturing flocks daily, and I prayed a number of times each day. More and more the love and fear of God came to me, and faith grew and my spirit was exercised, until I was praying up to a hundred times every day and in the night nearly as often.”

We could go on about Patrick’s life and motivations, but it is here that I want to stop. Because Patrick’s story, while unique in its details, is also common in its course, in its trajectory - even among the common saints like ourselves. Think how often you have read a biography, or heard someone talk about their life, and learned about a significant time of struggle, or pain, or tragedy that proved to be a life changing event that shaped that person’s life and faith? Sounds familiar, right? Whether it’s the life of a favorite celebrity or our own life, when we look back over time - it usually isn’t the moments of comfort or ease or happiness that stand out as having had the most impact on a person’s life. Rather it is the dark and stormy and painful seasons of life that often make us – that shape us...But who wants to go through such times of suffering – no one! And very few are able to maintain enough perspective that they are able see their way through to the other side when they are in the midst of pain or despair or disaster. It is simply too close. It's often looking back over the time that the shaping takes place.

It seems that the author of today’s Psalm, thought to be David, was well acquainted with such times. While the Psalm opens and continues with defiantly strong and grounded words of faith and confidence in God, it also takes pains to describe the kinds of troubles that plague the Psalmist – attacked by enemies; approaching and surrounding armies pressing for war; witnesses testifying falsely and “breathing out violence”; even being forsaken by parents. In addition, there is a somewhat concealed suggestion that the Psalmist feels less than 100% sure of God’s protection, feeling the need to plead with God saying: Hear my voice and answer me! Don’t hide your face! Don’t turn [me] away! Don’t reject me! Don’t forsake me! Don’t give me up to my enemies.

Within these verses, there is a kind of messy, real-life faith which feels quite familiar. There's neither 100% belief nor 100% doubt, but a blending of the two. Here is how one commentary put it: *The tension between verses 1 and 12 feel palpable. Real fear lives alongside honest faith. Bona fide doubt holds hands with genuine trust. In this psalm, as in life, both are unavoidable. And, perhaps unexpectedly, both are also essential. Vigorous faith and animated doubt both insist that we take God seriously, that we ask God real questions, and depend upon God in tangible ways....Learning to hold doubt and faith together takes patience, which is why the last verse of the psalm – “Wait for the Lord” – holds all fourteen verses together.*

I can only imagine that such was the case for Patrick as he endured those long stretches out on the hills of Ireland as an enslaved livestock herder. In fact, thinking about all those prayers that Patrick said he prayed, I can very easily imagine him praying very similar words as this psalm. The threats and the hopes might be different, but I think the spirit and the pleas would be much the same.

That is why the psalms still resonate with us so often, even though the circumstances, rituals, and metaphors are so foreign, so different to us. Who among us has not known suffering and hardship? Even the most faithful know bitter disappointment and crushing pain. Even God's own know the feeling of abandonment – of being “turned away” by God and kin. And when the event, the time is viewed in hindsight, it is often at those moments that we, like Patrick, find that our struggles are a kind of “thin place” for getting in touch with the divine.

If you aren't familiar with that phrase “thin places”, it comes from the ancient Celts, meaning those “areas where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we are able to catch glimpses of the divine.”

In the Celtic Christianity worldview, Heaven and Earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter...perhaps even as thin as a veil.

Now in its traditional usage, thin places are actual geographic places – somewhere that you can physically go - to have a better chance of glimpsing a bit of heaven or coming in contact with a bit of the divine. But I think this idea of thin places can be helpful to describe particular times or seasons of life as well. There is perhaps no more predictable opportunity to encounter the divine than in the midst of hardship and distress. It is why chaplains are employed by hospitals and armies and prisons. The pain and the struggle inherent in such settings create thin places for those who venture through them – occasions when the distance between heaven and earth, faith and doubt, trust and fear, narrows to almost imperceptible, faint proportions – where the eternal meets the temporal, the divine touches the human.

Which brings us to the final words of our Psalm. “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord!” Sometimes that is all we can do – wait. But when that is where we find ourselves, we might remember that we are likely in a thin place. And that our God is very near...Amen.

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