

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
The Second Sunday in Lent (C)
Sunday, March 17, 2019

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18 | Psalm 27
Philippians 3:17 – 4:1 | Luke 13:31-35

Well, a very happy un-St Patrick's Day to you all! Today would have been St. Patrick's Day but, because this is the Lord's Day, the Church keeps St. Patrick tomorrow. The Church may transfer the feast, but, of course, the secular world still keeps the feast today regardless, with parades in New York and all over the country. Irish jokes will no doubt abound with many jibes about stupidity and the like. We Scots are supposed to be mean, and the Irish are supposed to be dim. But you know, of course, why all Irish jokes are so stupid don't you? It is only so that the English can understand them!

*I bind unto myself today
the strong Name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.
Against the demon snares of sin,
the vice that gives temptation force,
the natural lusts that war within,
the hostile men that mar my course;
of few or many, far or nigh,
in every place, and in all hours
against their fierce hostility,
I bind to me these holy powers.*

These words from the great hymn, St. Patrick's Breastplate, attributed to him, speak to us with particular power today, I think.

The whole hymn uses a heroic analogy that was common in early Celtic and Anglo-Saxon times. We are perhaps less attuned to casting ourselves and our faith in terms of a warrior binding to themselves, or putting on, spiritual armor in this way. We have some sense of the spiritual life as a struggle perhaps, but living in our relatively safe and peaceful western modern society, the image of ourselves as warriors in a fight seems perhaps quaint or jarring.

Yet, today we are reminded that the struggle between good and evil is very physical, very urgent, and very real.

Christchurch in New Zealand experienced on Friday just how real the threat of St Patrick's 'hostile men in every place and at all times' is.

We pray for those innocent people crushed by this evil act. We try to understand the mentality of this, and all the outrages that have been the curse of our lifetimes from 9/11 onwards, but it's hard. The terrorist knows very well what he is doing. For all the blood and carnage, this, and all such acts, are attempts to inflame hearts and souls everywhere to a much bigger conflict. Against this, only

reasonable human beings that have bound to themselves spiritual armor such as described in St Patrick's Breastplate, can ever prevent the terrorist succeeding in that wider fell design. Reason alone will not do it because this is a spiritual and a visceral struggle as well as an ideological one.

The recent Lent Quiet Day, led by the excellent Kathy Staudt, provided something of a spiritual coincidence for me this year. In it she used a poem called 'Wild Geese' by a poet I had not come across before called Mary Oliver.

In it she describes how fruitless so much of our negativity and self-criticism and introspection is, how pointless all our angst-ridden and despairing, actually is. "You tell me your despair and I will tell you mine" she says,

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

It is a great thought, because it points us away from ourselves and reminds us, in this season of reflection and introspection, that God is always calling us out from the dark corner of self, and toward the wider horizon of his purpose and his love.

Well, the next two days, after hearing that poem, I found myself twice staring up at the sky transfixed, as great V-shaped wings of geese flew over Georgetown crying out, just as Mary Oliver said, "with harsh and exciting voice."

They were all flying due north, of course, because the migrating kind all head north at the first signs of spring to breed. They apparently know instinctively where north is because they have some iron in their beaks that acts like an internal compass.

As I watched them, like great squadrons of aircraft heading off to their targets far away, I thought about this ability of theirs, and this inherent purpose that drives them all to such extravagant and focused effort. 2,000 to 3,000 miles they fly, driven by something in them that they must answer and cannot ignore. I found myself envying them.

How different it is for we human beings who are cursed and blessed with choice! We have an internal compass too: our conscience, our deep knowledge of God's call to us. Yet our internal compass is so easily confused and turned away from true north. We hear the call of the North in our lives, God's call, but, unlike the geese, our ears are also full of the clarion calls of so many other things. The geese think nothing of the vast journey they so eagerly embark on. They will pour out all their strength to get there no matter what. We, however, look at the great distance between us and God's kingdom, between who we are, and who we know God wants us to be, and we cannot help but calculate the cost of the journey that lies ahead, and so often tarry and delay our start.

The theme of our readings today is really repentance, change, and God's promise to save.

In the Genesis reading, we see God demonstrating his promise to the doubtful and fearful Abram. This rather bizarre-sounding ritual is how a solemn contract was sealed. Both parties would pass between the halves of the slaughtered animals to show that their two halves of the bargain were sealed in a sacred commitment. But here, only God passes between the animals, which shows he will keep his side of the promise, even if Abram, and humanity will not.

In Philippians, Paul describes the conflict the Church faces there in terms of the idea of the “citizenship of heaven.” The Romans were clever. In key locations on the fringes of the empire like Philippi, they gave grants of land to retired soldiers, so creating communities that were entirely loyal to Rome and Roman ways in places where Roman influence might otherwise be at its weakest. Philippi was one such place. By raising the idea of dual citizenship, Paul is acknowledging that the Christians there were up against a very strong culture. It was hard to be a Christian in Philippi. It was full of those with a view of the world that, while mistaken, was very clear, powerful, and compelling. Paul recognizes that the faithful cannot do it all on their own. It is Christ who must come and transform them, and their situation. Their task can only be to stand firm and remain citizens of Christ’s Kingdom even in a place where that Kingdom is a very foreign one indeed.

In the Gospel, Jesus shows contempt for Herod, “the old fox,” and for the earthly kingdom in which Herod held great power. Christ laments the failures of the Holy City Jerusalem, and the religion it represented that had so often killed the ones God sent to guide his people. Most importantly, Christ is clear that human beings cannot save themselves and that he knows that he must make his way there to open up a new hope and a new way for humanity.

This Sunday, the bad news is that we cannot do this on our own. We are not geese. We are not programmed to fly always true north to God. We are not automatically conditioned, heart and soul to spend the last ounce of our strength to reach his Kingdom far away.

That said, the good news is that we do not need to. We must stand firm, and to look to Christ to transform us and the world, and when we fail to stand firm, and veer off in the wrong direction, or delay and fail to push forward, we must change direction and return to the true north of Christ; but we never have to do this alone.

St. Patrick was captured and taken as a slave to Ireland when he was 16. Many years later he escaped but, in time, amazingly, he felt called to return to preach Christ to his former slave masters. It is a famous story that will be celebrated around the world today but, at its heart, it is the story of an individual soul like yours and mine. A soul that found God and changed the world, but not without God’s help and love. In his own words in the “Confessio” Patrick describes how, as a slave in Ireland, God found him and saved him;

“And there the Lord opened my mind to an awareness of my unbelief, in order that, even so late, I might remember my transgressions and turn with all my heart to the Lord my God, who had regard for my insignificance and pitied my youth and ignorance. And he watched over me before I knew him, and before I learned sense or even distinguished between good and evil, and he protected me, and consoled me as a father would his son.”

If the direction of your life seems obscure or lost to you at the moment: if the desire and energy to move forward is low or gone in you; if the world seems much stronger than the faith in you today, then

read St. Patrick's Breastplate and remember that you are not a goose! You have a God who, like Patrick, opens your mind, pities your youth and ignorance, watches over you even when you do not know him, and protects and consoles you as father would his child.