

Sermon on Romans 6:1b-11
Wednesday, March 17, 2010, Commemoration of St. Patrick
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace....

I am humbled by your warm welcome to me tonight, and amazed by all the attention and the ruckus people are making of the celebration of my saint day every 17th of March (especially here in St. Paul). But I know that you aren't here tonight gathered for prayer because you are Irish, and you're not here for the corned beef or the green beer! You are here tonight because of your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we all are gathered. And you remember me perhaps not because I am the patron saint of Ireland, or even because I brought Christianity to Ireland without war, ended human sacrifice and slavery there, and founded monasteries that kept knowledge of scripture, classic literature, and learning alive – thus, as author Thomas Cahill claims, “I saved Western civilization”. I hope you remember me because of my deep love for God, and for the faithfulness I brought to my work as a missionary to the people of Ireland and all over the world, to share the good news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ.

Now, there are some legends that have been told about me, that frankly have me bewildered, so I will try to set you straight. No, I did not banish snakes from Ireland (science tells us that we never had any!). No, I didn't invent the image of the shamrock as a symbol of the Trinity – that was a later fabrication. I didn't even write the hymn known as the “Breastplate”, which you sang tonight, though it is attributed to me. I wasn't even Irish! But here's what is true:

I was born in Britain, around 385 A.D. My father was a Roman official, who was a deacon in the church. I was captured by Irish pirates when I was about 14 or 15 years old, who took me to Ireland and sold me into slavery. There I spent six years away from my home and family, herding pigs and sheep. In my loneliness, I pondered the scriptures my father had taught me, and prayed to God 100 times a day. God told me in a dream to escape, which I did. But after I returned home, I had another dream, in which people in Ireland begged me to come and minister to them. So I studied for the priesthood in France, and returned to Ireland, then a wild, uncivilized land.

There I spent 30 years baptizing thousands in the name of the Holy Trinity, ordaining priests and founding over 300 churches and monasteries. Within 200 years the whole of Ireland had converted to Christianity. In the monasteries I founded, monks copied and preserved many of the classic texts, and then Irish monks brought this knowledge back to Europe by founding monasteries in England, Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy.

I suppose I should say a word about some of those legends about me. First, those snakes that I never banished (because Ireland didn't have any): when I began my work there, the Druids were a pagan cult that worshipped idols, and snakes were a symbol of their religion. I drove this cult and their pagan beliefs from Ireland, and replaced them with the faith of the Christian Church in the living God (just like the evil serpent was driven from the Garden of Eden).

But I never forgot my years spent as a slave, and when the British prince Coroticus raided Ireland, killed many of my Christian converts and sold others into slavery, I faced criticism when I demanded his excommunication. I was more direct than the Apostle Paul in condemning the institution of slavery rather than accommodating it, leading the way for abolitionists in later centuries.

But seeing that I baptized so many Irish converts into Christianity (some say it was as many as 120,000!), I would like to preach a word about baptism tonight. I know that some of you are confirmation students, studying the *Small Catechism* of Martin Luther, who lived over 1000 years after me. Your pastor has kindly shown me his catechism. I think all Christians can find Luther's teachings helpful, because they are based on the same holy scriptures that guided my work so many years before! For brother Martin reminds us that "baptism is not water only, but it is water used together with God's Word and by his command." He quotes the gospel of Matthew, which inspired me once to go to Ireland, when our Lord Jesus himself said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Holy Trinity, the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." So **why do we baptize people**, after all? It is because "in baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised." What did God promise to all believers? "Jesus Christ says that all who believe and are baptized will be saved, but those who do not believe will be condemned" – to me, this meant condemned to a life not knowing God, or of God's saving grace. That is why I returned to the land and the people who once held me as a slave, to bring them the truth that leads to life everlasting.

So, Luther asks, **how can water do such great things?** He said, "it is not water that does these things, but God's Word with the water and our trust in this Word. Water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is a life-giving water which by grace gives us a new birth through the Holy Spirit. So St. Paul writes, "God saved us...in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. This saying is sure!"

And now to the heart of the matter: **what does baptism mean for our daily living?** "It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to

live with God in righteousness and purity forever. And as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, the scripture read this evening: “We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into his death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

This baptism, this faith, inspired by such a promise, gave me the courage to go back to the place of my imprisonment to bring the good news of Jesus Christ that would bring true freedom and the faith that gives life to us all. Such faith transcends all the boundaries of tribes, nations, denominations and even religions! When it is preached in its purity, people respond – just as the pagan people of Ireland once did! So today not only the Roman Catholic Church claims me as a saint – even the Protestants in Ireland claim me as their own! The Baptists have called me a Baptist, and even the Lutherans commemorate me, as you do tonight! What once was a quiet, religious feast day in Ireland has become a day of parades and a celebration of Irish heritage by many who never set foot on the Emerald Isle! But I don’t mind – except when the celebration gets a bit out of hand! Better to do as you are doing – eat a little Irish soup and bread, and gather in our Lord’s name to sing some Irish hymns, read some scripture, and say some prayers for the sick, the poor and the suffering. And to remember your baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – the blessed Holy Trinity.

So please allow me to close with a little Irish blessing, which most of you have heard before, and some of you have sung:

“May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind always be at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
And rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again,
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.” Amen.