

# Thin Places of Waiting

## *Psalm 27*

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 17, 2019

It isn't all that often that St. Patrick's Day falls on a Sunday – every 6 years or so at most. (For perspective, this is only the second time that it has happened since our kids were born...the youngest of which just barely missed being a St. Patty's day baby nearly 11 years ago.) So the occasion got me thinking a bit about the legends and traditions surrounding St. Patrick, and especially about the distinctive Celtic Christianity with which he 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 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., at sixteen, he was captured by Irish pirates and sold into slavery. For six years he was compelled to 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. Upon completion of his studies, he requested a mission assignment to return to the land in which he had been a slave, bringing the Christian faith to the Celtic people (albeit in a distinctively different form from the Roman Christianity in which he was formed himself).<sup>1</sup>

Now much of what we have come to identify with St. Patrick is the stuff of legend. But we know from his autobiographical *Confession* that the years he spent in captivity were critical to his spiritual development. Though 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: "*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.*"<sup>2</sup>

We could go on about Patrick's life and motivations, but it is here that I want to stop for today. Because Patrick's story, while unique in its details, is also common in its trajectory, even among non-saints such as ourselves. Think how often you have read a biography, or heard someone talk about her life, and learned about a significant time of struggle, pain, or tragedy that proved to be a transformative catalyst that shaped a person's life and faith? Sounds familiar, right? Whether it is the life of our favorite heroes or our own life seen from the rear-view mirror with an ample amount of distance, it usually isn't the moments of comfort and ease and 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. But no one wants to go through such times of suffering. And very few are able to maintain enough perspective to 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.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint\\_Patrick#Life](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Patrick#Life)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in George G. Hunter III. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West...Again.* (Abingdon Press, 2000) p. 14.

It seems that the author of today's Psalm 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 – assault by evildoers, approaching and surrounding armies pressing for war, witnesses testifying falsely and “breathing out violence,” even being forsaken by parents. Moreover, there is a barely concealed implication that the Psalmist feels less than 100% sure of God's protection, and feels the needs to plead with God: Hear me and answer me! Don't hide your face! Don't turn [me] away! Don't cast me off! Don't forsake me! Don't give me up to my enemies<sup>3</sup>

Within these verses, I see the kind of messy, real-life faith which feels familiar to me. Neither 100% belief nor 100% doubt, but a blending of the two. As one commentator 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, 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.<sup>4</sup>

I can only imagine that such was the case for Patrick as he endured those long stretches out on the windswept 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 composing very similar words as this psalm, allegedly penned by another lonely livestock herder. The threats and the metaphors might be different, but I suspect the spirit and the pleas would be much the same.

I think that is why the psalms still resonate with us so frequently, despite the fact that the circumstances, rituals, and metaphors they employ are so foreign 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.<sup>5</sup> And when 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 which comes from the ancient Celts, “thin places” are those “locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we're able to catch glimpses of the divine.”<sup>6</sup> In the Celtic 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* to which 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 the idea can be helpful to describe particular times or seasons of life as well. And 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

<sup>3</sup> vv. 7, 9, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsay P. Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2. pp. 58, 60.

<sup>5</sup> Phrasing taken from Armstrong, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Weiner. “Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer.” *The New York Times*. March 9, 2012. Online:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

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 proportions – and 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 let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!”<sup>7</sup> 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 ...

## **PASTORAL PRAYERS OF SUPPLICATION**

Merciful and ever present God, we are a hurting people.

All of us have wounds and pains, trials and struggles.  
Some of them are fleeting and momentary, others are deep and define our lives. All of them are real.

And so we lift them all to you...

Some of us struggle with disease and illness in our bodies:

- ...with conditions that are resisting treatment
- ...with pain as a constant companion
- ...with having heard that fearful word, “cancer”
- ...with enduring the long road of treatments and rehab
- ...with bodies worn with age or abuse

Some of us who are tormented in mind and spirit:

- ...with paralyzing fears & disquieting obsessions
- ...with grief from losses both recent and long ago
- ...with depression and mental illness
- ...with inescapable anger and bitterness
- ...with demons no one else can understand or even fathom.

Some of us are in relationships that are sources of tension and sorrow:

- ...some facing the prospect or reality of divorce
- ...some whose children are breaking their hearts
- ...some for whom “home” is not at all sweet
- ...some whose families are sources of only pain or shame
- ...some who now know well what it means to have enemies

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<sup>7</sup> v. 14.

And some of us are caught in the midst of the world's sin and brokenness:

- ...some trapped in cycles of hatred, terror, and violence.
- ...some enslaved to addictive substances & behaviors
- ...some who are victims of society's fear and prejudices
- ...some who are unable to get past the walls that divide us
- ...some who have lost confidence in our systems of governance, education, and law enforcement
- ...some who have lost faith in humanity or hope for a better future

O God, we know that suffering is a part of life. But we also know that you revealed your care for those who are suffering through the healing presence of Jesus Christ. And we know through him that even you are not immune to suffering.

And so we take comfort in the knowledge that we are not alone, that you hear our S.O.S., and that you are there with us in our suffering. And we pray that like Jesus, we might find a way to make our suffering redemptive – a doorway into the deep and healing places of your heart – a thin place where we can experience the anointing presence of your spirit. And we pray that our witness to your healing and redemptive love might ripple out from us and so anoint our world with your love and grace, which every day reminds us of its need.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus, and together join our voices in the prayer that he taught us to pray, saying...

*Our Father... ("debts and debtors")*

## **SENDING BLESSING**

May God's spirit anoint us with  
 peace and patience,  
 strength and grace,  
 And may our hearts take courage  
 in our thin places of waiting.  
 May it be so...