

“The Confession of St. Patrick”
March 21, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti

Introduction:

Our starting point this evening is Hebrews 12:1-2. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

This is the Word of the Lord. [Thanks be to God.]

The “great cloud of witnesses” that the author of Hebrews identifies here are those who have lived lives of heroic faith in Christ before us. And in chapter eleven of Hebrews, the chapter that comes right before this one, the author of Hebrews includes not only the saints recorded in Scripture, but also those from non-Biblical history.

In other words, the author of Hebrews wants us to look to those heroes of the faith who have gone before us – those in the Bible and those not in the Bible – and to be inspired by them to better serve Christ in our own lives as a result.

And so, with St. Patrick’s Day occurring this past week, tonight I wanted to consider the life of Patrick, and the picture of faith that he presents for us. And it seemed to me that one of the best ways to do this would be to consider the life of Patrick in his own words. Later legends about Patrick developed over time, and so to avoid the fantasies later connected to his life, we can read what happened as he himself described it. Like Augustine (who lived around the same as Patrick), Patrick wrote a *Confession* as well. And so I’ll be reading this evening excerpts from *The Confession of Saint Patrick*, offering a few comments as we go, and then some further thoughts at the end.

The *Confession* was written by Patrick later on in his life, and it was written both as an explanation of his ministry, and a defense of his life and conversion.

That defense was needed as some bishops in Britain began questioning Patrick’s faith and ministry. What seems to have led to this questioning is that a trusted confidant exposed a confession of sin Patrick had made to him about the sins of his youth – back before his conversion. This revelation led some of the British bishops to question Patrick’s role as a bishop decades later. We don’t know what this past sin was, though the pattern of questioning Patrick’s ministry as an adult because of his sin decades earlier, as an adolescent, before his conversion, should strike us as odd. And so it’s helpful to remember that Pelagianism and its over-emphasis on our human role in salvation was a common problem among British bishops at this time, and likely played into this situation as well. (In other words, the Pelagians were into cancel culture before it was cool.)

Some scholars have also wondered if Patrick’s functional excommunication of the British Coroticus – which we discussed at prayer meeting this past week – may also have played a role in this new hostility towards Patrick.

In any case, several accusations seemed to be coming at Patrick from these British bishops, and this provided the occasion for him, now an older man, to look back on his life, his conversion, and his ministry, and present it for the consideration of others. The result is this short work.

Though it is a short work, our time this evening is even shorter, so I will more be reading excerpts from it, which I have strung together for us this evening.

With that said, we hear from Patrick ...

Readings from *The Confession of Saint Patrick*:

Chapter 1:

I am Patrick, yes a sinner, and the simplest of peasants,
so that I am despised by the majority of men.
My father Calpornius, who was a deacon,
was the son of Potitus, a priest.
We lived in the town of Bannaventa Berniae,
and outside there was a small holiday villa.
It was here that I was taken captive –
I had no option but to surrender myself,
for I was not yet sixteen years old.
At that time, I did not recognize the True God:
that was why I was taken as a captive to Ireland,
along with many thousands of others with me.
We fully deserved to suffer like this
for we had all “turned our back upon God”;
we “did not keep his commands.”
Not once had we listened to the bidding of our priests,
as they warned us constantly about our salvation.
And so “the Lord let down his anger upon us
and scattered us among the heathen tribes,” even “unto the farthest land.”
Where now my utter insignificance is plain to see among a strange race.”

With those words Patrick summarizes how as a young man, not yet sixteen, he was abducted by Irish pirates.

Yet, before his enslavement, Patrick did not take his faith seriously, and so he reflects on how while he was externally free, internally he was a slave to sin.

With that said, Patrick next turns to his time of enslavement. He writes:

Chapter 2:

And there also “the Lord opened my sense to my unbelief,”
so that, though late in the day, I might remember my many sins;
and accordingly “I might turn to the Lord my God with all my heart,”
who “has looked upon my lowliness”
and taken pity on my adolescence, on my ignorance,
and kept safe watch over me before ever I knew him,

yes, even before I had wit enough to tell good from evil.
It was he who strengthened me,
consoling me just as a father comforts his son.

Chapter 6:

Even if I am imperfect in so many ways,
nonetheless I want my brothers and my family to know my mettle,
so that they may clearly recognize the set of my soul.

Chapter 12:

So there it is. I began life more rustic than any man you care to name:
an exile, unschooled – that much is plain –
a man, what’s more, “who does not even know how to make out for his future”;
yet I am sure in my mind of one thing:
that before I was brought low,
I was like some great stone lying deep in mud,
until “He who is power” came
and “in his mercy” lifted me up.

[...]

And so, because of that, I must shout out loud
“to the Lord in order to give back” some small thing
for all his gifts that are so great both here and in eternity.
The mere mind of man can never plumb such gifts as these.

Chapter 16:

But after I had come to Ireland,
it was then that I was made to shepherd the flocks day after day,
and, as I did so, I would pray all the time, right through the day.
More and more the love of God and fear of him grew strong within me,
and as my faith grew, so the Spirit became more and more active,
so that in a single day I would say as many as a hundred prayers,
and at night only slightly less.
Although I might be staying in a forest or out on a mountainside,
it would be the same;
even before dawn broke, I would be aroused to pray.
In snow, in frost, in rain,
I would hardly notice any discomfort,
and I was never slack but always full of energy.
It is clear to me now, that this was due to the fervor of the [Holy] Spirit within me.

With these words Patrick notes that with his newfound faith, though he was externally enslaved,
now he was internally free.

We read on. Patrick writes:

Chapter 17:

And there on a certain night, I had a dream
in which I heard a voice saying to me,
“You are right to fast, soon you will be returning to your own country.”
And, once again, after only a short while,

I had the response to this mysterious dream for I was told,
“Come and see, where your ship is waiting for you.”
Not that it was near at hand,
rather it was two hundred miles away,
in a place I had never seen before
and where I knew not a single soul.
And that’s what happened; a little time later, I turned on my heel and ran away,
leaving behind the man to whom I had been bound for six years.
Yet I came away from him in the power of God,
for it was he who was guiding my every step for the best.
And so I felt not the least anxiety until I reached the ship.

Chapter 18:

And on the very day when at last I came to the harbor, I saw a ship being put into the water.
So I spoke up for myself and told the sailors that I had money enough to set sail with them.
But this annoyed the skipper
and he replied angrily, cutting me down to size,
“Don’t get ideas into your head and imagine you are coming with us!”
When I heard him speak like this, I turned on my heel and began to go away from them.
I decided to go back to the little hut where I had been staying,
and on the way there, I began to pray.
But before I could even get my prayers into focus
I heard one of the sailors call after me.
In fact he bellowed at me,
“Hurry up, these men are shouting out for you.”
So straightway I went back to them,
and they all started talking to me at once.
“Come aboard, we will take you as you are;
make friends with us how you will.”
But then and there, I refused [their customs]
for I feared God and would not fall in with their pagan ways.
Yet, in spite of this, I still hoped that they might come to have faith in Jesus Christ.
And so that was how I got my way with them,
and directly afterward, we set sail.

Chapter 19:

Three days later, we reached land.
And then, for twenty-eight days we journeyed through a land that was completely barren.
Their food ran out.
and so “they grew weak with hunger.”
Finally, one day their leader started to complain to me,
“What have you to say for yourself, Christian?
You boast that your God is all-powerful.
So why can’t you pray for us,
you know how badly hunger threatens us;
it’s beginning to look as if we may not survive to see another living soul.”
But I told them with great confidence,
“ ‘Turn trustingly to the Lord who is my God’ and put your faith in him with all your heart,
because nothing is impossible to him.
On this same day, he will send us food sufficient for our journey,

because for him there is abundance everywhere.”
And with the help of God that is how things turned out.
Suddenly, we saw a herd of pigs right before our very eyes, seeming to block our path.
Wasting no time, they killed a very great number;
and then they camped there for two nights, feasting all the while,
so that they filled their bellies with fleshmeat.
Many of their number had fallen by the wayside
and had been “left behind half-alive” along the road.
After they had eaten, they gave great thanks to God,
and now I was well regarded in their eyes.
For from then on, they had abundant food every day.
[...]

Chapter 22:

Now [God] continued to provide us with food on our journey,
as well as fire and dry shelter as each new day arrived,
[...]
and on the night of our arrival in the village, it would be true to say that we
had not a bite of food [left] between us.

At this point Patrick jumps quickly ahead, but he makes his way from Gaul, back to his family in Britain. He writes:

Chapter 23:

So now, having been away for these few years, I was once more back in Britain
with my parents,
who welcomed me as their long-lost son.
They begged me to give them my word,
that after suffering so great an ordeal,
I should never leave them again.
But now, as large as life, “I had a vision in my dreams” of a man who seemed to come from
Ireland:
his name was Victoricius
and he carried countless letters,
one of which he handed over to me.
I read aloud where it began: “The Voice of the Irish.”
And as I began to read these words I seemed to hear the voice of the same men
who lived beside the forest of Foclut,
which lies near the Western sea where the sun sets.
They seemed to shout aloud to me “as if with one and the same voice”:
“Holy broth of a boy, we beg you,
come back and walk once more among us.”
I was utterly “pierced to my heart’s core,”
so that I could read no more.

We need at this point to fill in a bit of the story that Patrick does not. It seems that at some point after his return to his family, Patrick traveled to Gaul again, to Auxerre, where Germanus had a school for those preparing to become priests. Patrick labored at his studies there, and it was then that he recounts this dream, calling him back to Ireland.

In the dream, Patrick receives a letter from the Irish, asking him to return among them. The one who delivers the letter in his dream is identified as Victoricius – likely a reference to St. Victricius, a bishop who died around the time Patrick returned to his family, who was known in Britain for having ventured outside the Roman Empire to preach the word of Christ to the Belgian pagans. This missionary who traveled outside the safety of the Roman Empire to bring the gospel to unbelievers was the messenger in Patrick’s dream, calling him to do the same thing.

But, at this time another man had already been sent to Ireland. Pope Celestine had appointed a man named Palladius to be the first bishop to the Irish. But Palladius’s time in Ireland ended up being brief. And once Palladius died and Patrick was appointed as a missionary priest to the land of his desire, the path for Patrick to go out as a bishop to Ireland was set. [Skinner, 21-23]

John Skinner writes:

“As a missionary bishop, Patrick shows full awareness that he has handed his life over to the task. As a boy he is taken to Ireland against his will: As a man he offers himself freely to return. The exchange of life for lives is the kind of barter that imaged Christ’s own sacrifice on the cross, and an identification that clearly fired Patrick.

“As a young shepherd lad Patrick learned to pray. Prayer clearly infused his whole life. [...] Here is a man led by the spirit of God, in constant communication with his word that he has come to preach and teach in Ireland.” [Skinner, 24-25]

Many, like his family, urged Patrick not to go, and offered him gifts if he stayed. But Patrick refused. We pick up his *Confession* as he speaks of that conflict. He writes:

Chapter 37:

And many gifts were offered me in sorrow and tears,
and I upset their donors, much against the wishes of some of my elders;
but with God for my pilot, I refused to acquiesce or give in to them in any way.
I was able to stand firm against them all,
not through any strength of mine, but by God’s grace who conquers in me.
So at last I came here to the Irish gentiles to preach the gospel.
And now I had to endure insults from unbelievers,
to “hear criticism of my journeys,”
and suffer many persecutions “even to the point of chains.”
Now I was able to hand over the freedom of my birth for the benefit of others.
And should I prove worthy, I am ready and willing to give up my own life,
without hesitation for his name.

Chapter 38:

There would I be glad to pour out my soul even to the point of death,
if the Lord would so grant it me,
because I am so much in God’s debt.
For he gave me such great grace,
that many people through me were reborn to God,
[...]
They are those whom the Lord has chosen “from the ends of the earth,”
just as before he had promised by his prophets:
“The gentiles will come to you from the ends of the earth,”
and they will say,
“The false idols which our fathers made are quite useless”;

And again: "I have put you as a light among the gentiles,
so that you may be the means of salvation as far as the ends of the earth."

Chapter 39:

And there I want to "await his promise,"
for he never deceives,
as he promises in the gospel:
"They shall come from the east and from the west
and they will sit down at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob";
just as we believe that the faithful will come from the whole world.

Chapter 40:

So therefore it is our duty to fish well and with loving care,
just as the Lord urges and teaches us:
"Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men."
[...]
Because of this, it was vital that we let down our nets
so that "a vast crowd and multitude" might be taken for God.
Also that everywhere there might be priests who might baptize
and teach a needy and willing people.
Just as the Lord says in the gospel
when he urges and teaches, saying,
"Go now, teach all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you,
and see, I am with you all days,
even to the end of the world."
[...]
And also in Hosea he says, "A people that is not mine, I will call mine,
and a people who has not received mercy, I will call one that has known mercy,
And in the place where before it was said, you are not my people,
there they will now be called children of the living God."

Chapter 41:

Now how else has it lately come about in Ireland that those who never even knew God,
but up till now had always worshipped nothing but idols and impure things,
are now suddenly made the people of the Lord,
so that they are now called children of God?
[...]

Chapter 43:

And so even if I wanted to leave these [people]
so as to head home to Britain,
and I would have been only too ready,
not just to see my own country once more and my parents,
not only them,
but also the cross over to Gaul and visit my brothers there,
so that I might once again see the faces of those holy men belonging to my Lord.
God knows only too well how much I longed for that,
yet I am "bound by the Spirit,"

who “testifies to me” that if I do so,
he will mark me out as guilty for the rest of my days.
But what I fear most is to lose the labor I have begun,
and not I alone,
but Christ the Lord,
who bade me come here
and be with them for the rest of my life,
if the Lord so desires.
And he will shield me from every evil,
so that I do no sin in his sight.

Chapter 44:

I am certain this is what I ought to do,
yet I do not believe in my own powers,
[...]
because he is strong, who daily strives to turn me away from the faith
[...]
[And] my enemy the flesh continually drags me down to death,
I mean indulgence in illicit pleasures.
And “I well know in part” why I have not led a perfect life,
just like other believers but still I confess my Lord,
and I do not blush for shame in his sight.
Neither do I lie,
for I have known him from my youth,
and the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me,
“and up till now,” by God’s goodwill, “I have kept the faith.”

Chapter 45:

Let him who wants mock me and jeer,
I shall not be silent. For I may not conceal those signs and wonders
which the Lord has shown me
[...]

Chapter 46:

For all this, I am bound to give God thanks without ceasing.
So often he has overlooked my stupidity, my carelessness,
not just once, not in only one situation;
time after time, he has held back his full fury from me,
who had been made his chosen helper.
I was unwilling to agree readily with what was being shown me,
nor did I behave as “the Spirit prompted.”
Yet in spite of this, the Lord “took pity on me” a “thousand thousand times”
because he saw within my soul that I was ready.
But I was uncertain what to do about my decision.
For there were many who stood in the way of my mission.
There was always someone talking behind my back
and whispering “Why does he want to put himself in such danger
among his enemies who do not know God?”

Not that they bore me any malice;

yes, I am the first to admit it,
they did not know how to deal with
my homespun ways and lack of learning.
For myself I was also slow to recognize to its full extent the grace that was with me then,
whereas now I can see quite plainly what I ought to have done.

Chapter 51:

[...]
I was threatened with danger on every side.
I came to the remotest places.
beyond which no man has ever gone
and where no one had ever reached before,
who was able to baptize
or ordain priests
and confirm those people in their faith.
By God's own gift,
I have done all that was needed,
worked tirelessly and with a will for your salvation.

Chapter 55:

Yet I am aware, even "in this present world,"
how I am lifted up beyond all measure.
I myself was not worthy nor
do I deserve that [God] should ever treat me in such a way.
For I know full well
that poverty and adversity would suit me better
than riches and delights.
Yet "Christ the Lord was poor for our sake";
and I myself am but a wretched failure,
having nothing to my name, even had I wanted worldly goods.
"Nor is this just my own opinion of myself";
for as every day arrives, I expect
either sudden death or deception
or being taken back as a slave or some such other misfortune.
"But I fear none of these," since I look to the promises of heaven
and have flung myself into the hands of the all-powerful God,
who rules as Lord everywhere.
As the prophet says: "Throw your thought on God alone
and he will fill your every need,"

Chapter 59:

And if I have ever imitated any good
for the sake of my God whom I so dearly love,
I beg that he would grant me
that I may pour out my blood
in the company of these exiles and captives for his own name.
Yes, and even if my body were to remain unburied,
or my corpse be torn pitifully limb from limb by dogs or wild beasts,
or that birds of the air eat it up.
For I know with utter certainty,

if this should be my lot,
that I shall have gained my soul as well as my body,
because without shadow of doubt on that last day we shall all rise again in the sun's own
brilliant blaze;
that is, in the glory of Christ Jesus our Redeemer,
as "children of the living God and fellow heirs with Christ,"
still "destined to be shaped in his own image";
since "from him and through him and in him" we are going to reign.

Chapter 62:

But I beg and beseech all those who believe
and fear God,
whoever comes across this writing
and takes the trouble to read it through,
namely the writing of Patrick, a sinner who, though he was never taught,
wrote it down in Ireland,
that no man ever say, if in my ignorance
I have accomplished any small thing, however trivial,
or if I have shown the way
according to God's good purpose,
that this was my own ignorance at work:
but rather, know and believe it to be the undeniable truth
that it was the gift of God
This is my Confession
before I come to die.

Application:

The life of Patrick was an extraordinary one.

And yet one thing he wants to draw our attention to over and over again is that he was just an ordinary man.

But at root, one of the things that seemed to have shaped his life was a view of freedom and slavery.

As an adolescent, Patrick recognized that he was externally free, but he was internally a slave to sin.

Captured by Irish pirates, forced to rely on God and put his faith in him, he realized that while externally a slave, he was now internally free to serve Christ.

Finally, once he gained his freedom and returned home, he came to realize that though externally free again, he owed everything to Christ, and truly he was now Christ's slave. It did not matter whether he wanted to stay in Britain with his family. It did not matter if he was hesitant to return to the land of his slavery. It did not matter if he feared the dangers of Ireland. Patrick knew that he was a slave to Christ. And if Christ sent him somewhere, he was to go.

And because he was a faithful slave to Christ his Lord, he accomplished far more with his life than he ever would have had he clung to his freedom back home.

We really like freedom in our culture. Everyone in our culture does. Across the political spectrum people will tell you they love freedom. The differences between us in our society rarely comes in some saying they like freedom and others saying there are problems with freedom. Instead, the differences – the differences that lead to so many of our political animosities – lie more often in how we define freedom. But no one really claims to be against freedom. They all say they love freedom. The way you can really test this is that you can walk into a room of people who span the political spectrum, and one of the best ways to unite them is to stand in front of them and say that you think there should be less freedom for people in our society. And the room will unite against you.

We love freedom. But more often than not, we love it for its own sake. We love it for ourselves. We love it as an end in itself.

But that is not a Biblical picture of freedom. In the Bible, freedom – good freedom, true freedom – is always freedom *for* some greater purpose. It is always freedom in order to serve Christ.

You can see the difference in some interesting places.

Tim Keller has pointed out how you see this in the old movie *The Ten Commandments*. In that movie Charlton Heston plays Moses. And in it, he goes to Pharaoh and he says to him: Thus says the Lord: “Let my people go.”

That’s the line. And that is often the line in our popular imagination.

But that’s not actually the whole line – at least not from the Bible. That’s the American version of the line. That’s the version our culture likes. Everyone can get behind that.

But the actual line in the Book of Exodus is: “Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, ‘Let my people go, that they may serve me.’” [Exodus 9:1]

The Exodus is not the story of Israel being freed for the sake of freedom. It’s Israel being freed from Pharaoh so that they can instead be the servants of Yahweh, the God of Israel.

The Bible doesn’t exhort us to freedom for its own sake, but to freedom so that we might better serve Christ.

So we might ask ourselves: How much have we internalized the Bible’s picture of freedom ... and how much have we internalized our culture’s view of freedom?

The Bible tells us that our culture’s view of freedom is neither desirable, nor really possible.

When we think of those who live their lives truly free from any obligation to others, what we see is not a beautiful picture of a life well-lived, but instead an ugly, and often sad picture of self-centeredness and purposelessness. It’s not actually desirable.

But even more than that, we see that such a life is also a lie. For we all must serve something. If it is not something greater than us that we serve, then it will probably be something less than us: our own desires, or fears, or appetites.

Bob Dylan touched on that same truth in his song “Gotta Serve Somebody.” He wrote:

“You may be an ambassador to England or France.
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance.
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world.
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

“But you’re gonna have to serve somebody,
Yes, you’re gonna have to serve somebody.
Well, it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord,
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

In the end, whether it is the devil, or the Lord, whether it is the Kingdom of God or our own fickle appetites, we all will serve someone.

Patrick knew that. And so Patrick chose whom he would serve. He chose that as a slave in Ireland, in the freedom of his heart and mind he would devote his thoughts and his soul to serve the Lord. And then, when he was free again in Britain, he chose not to use his freedom to serve himself, but to use it to make himself a slave of Christ.

Relative to most people in history, we enjoy a lot of freedom in the particular time and place we find ourselves in. One of the greatest questions we face is how we will use that freedom, and one of the greatest temptations we face is the temptation to use it to serve our own desires, or the petty desires of those around us.

But Patrick points us to a different way. He points us to a life well lived. He points us to a life lived in service to Christ our King and our Redeemer.

And so, as the author of Hebrews has urged us: “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Patrick. *The Confession of Saint Patrick*. Translated by John Skinner. Foreword by John O’Donohue. New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998.