

*The Strong Name of the Trinity:
How Might Our Church Live Up to Our Name?*

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

June 12, 2022

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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*I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.*

Today is Trinity Sunday, the day we celebrate our parish's birthday, and the day when the wider church meditates on the mystery of the God who is revealed in three persons, the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The God who created us, who became one of us, and who moves among us even today.

One person for whom the Trinity mattered immensely was St. Patrick. Patrick was born in Britain to a Roman official around 385 C.E., and at the age of 16 was captured by pirates and sold into slavery in Ireland. After 6 years, he escaped, but after returning home, he had a dream in which the Irish people pleaded with him to return. After studying for the priesthood in France, he was charged by the Pope to return to the land of his enslavement as a missionary bishop. Spending the rest of his life, 30 years, in Ireland, Patrick built a movement. He ordained priests and founded churches and monasteries. Ireland fully converted to Christianity within 200 years and as Ireland adopted Christianity, the practices of slavery and human sacrifice were abolished, and most intertribal warfare also ended. Ireland in turn sent missionaries like Columba, who spread the faith through Scotland. Irish Christians also helped preserve Western culture during the middle ages. As the Roman Empire crumbled, Ireland's vibrant monastic communities became a faithful cultural remnant, preserving important classical texts and disseminating

knowledge back to continental Europe through the establishment of monasteries in various countries.

But before Ireland became a Christian land, when Patrick first arrived back on its shores as a missionary bishop to support Christians already there and to win new converts, he faced great hostility. About a year after his return, the church celebrated the 400th anniversary of Christ's death and resurrection. Patrick had a vision in which the Holy Spirit instructed him to observe the 400th Easter by lighting a great Easter fire on the night before Easter Day. To complicate matters, this was also the time of Beltane, a major festivity in the local Celtic religion. No fire was to be lit this particular night before the high king in Tara and his Druid priests lit the Beltane fire. The priests warned the king that prophecy foretold that any light lit before the Beltane fire had to be put out that same evening or else it would burn forever. When the king's troops came to put the fire out, no water could quench it nor could they overpower Patrick or his companions. They went away, and on Easter morning, Patrick and his companions marched toward Tara and the high king. Two related legends tell of what happened that day as the king's soldiers tried to intercept them. In one, Patrick and his companions transform into deer, or at least appeared to be deer to the king's troops, and so they were able to move past them unharmed. In the other story, a herd of deer distract the troops, and Patrick is able to escape and continue on. In some accounts of both stories, Patrick was shielded by chanting a poem that is now attributed to him as St. Patrick's Breastplate, also called the Lorica, which means Deer-Cry. A lorica is a song of protection. St. Patrick's begins with those stirring words of the hymn we just sang:

*I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.*

And as it continues it tells the Christian story:

I bind this today to me forever

*By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in Jordan river,
His death on Cross for my salvation;
His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heavenly way,
His coming at the day of doom
I bind unto myself today.*

Protected by his invocation of the Trinity, Patrick arrived before the king and began to preach the gospel. Some accounts hold that he told his listeners about the Trinity, taking a shamrock from the grass beneath their feet to explain how something could be both one and three at the same time. The queen and her daughters came forward to be baptized, and the king granted Patrick permission to continue preaching around the country. Patrick's movement was wildly successful, seemingly giving truth to the Druid prophecy that the flame he lit that East Eve would never die.

Patrick responded to God's call by returning to a land in which he had been enslaved. It must have been difficult for him. But he did it for love. Love of God, and love of God's people, including the Christians and the pagans of Ireland whom he saw in his vision, pleading with him to return. He was motivated by faith in the Triune God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. One God in Three Persons. At the heart of the mystery of the Trinity is relationship. Christians believe in a God whose very nature is relational. As retired Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said, "God's own self is already a pattern of loving relationship: the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit." Williams posited that the implication of this is that humans, created in the image of God, are also by nature relational beings. We are created to be in relationship, and particularly to be in relationship with our creator, the source of all things.

When we give of ourselves to others, whether family and loved ones or our wider community, we are mirroring the relational nature of God who shares the divine life between and within the community of the Trinity and who poured out this

divine life into the universe in Creation. God, who is Parent, Child, and Holy Spirit, lives in a constant state of love, for God is love, and God formed us in this divine relational image so that we could reflect that love back to our creator and so that we could share this love with one another.

St. Patrick spoke of this divine love that gives of itself and unites us to God and one another in my favorite section of his Lorica:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

When we give of ourselves to one another, we are serving the image of Christ in the other, allowing the Holy Spirit to move through us and to connect us with one another as fellow children of the same Creator.

Love of God and God's people inspired Patrick to preach the gospel to the land of his enslavement. And love of God and God's people moves people even today to respond to the needs of the world. And we too here at Trinity Church have the opportunity to answer the call every day. How will Christ be with us, within us, behind us, before us, and beside us? How will Christ win us, comfort us, and restore us? We will find Christ in friend and stranger alike, and when we serve friend and stranger, we serve Christ. We have many ways to serve here at Trinity. Our motto is God's unconditional love is practiced here. And that's the heart of the Trinity. We could spend our lives studying the theological complexities of this wonderful Christian mystery, and I commend those who do, but for me, the Trinity is actually pretty simple. The Trinity means that God the Creator of all is not only found in the heavenly realms, but God is also here on earth, in Jesus Christ who

lived 2,000 years ago, and in you and me today. God is in this place, right here, right now. Here we strive to share God's unconditional love. Here we strive to live up to our name, Trinity Church.

Amen.