

“The Eyes of St. Patrick”

Liturgical Date: Commemoration of St. Patrick, Missionary to Ireland (March 17)

Primary Text: Topical, but draws from the lessons for the day, especially St. Luke 5:1-11

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The sermon for today, the Commemoration of St. Patrick, Missionary to Ireland, is primarily topical, but will draw on the lessons, including the Gospel from St. Luke Chapter 5. The title of the sermon is, “The Eyes of St. Patrick.”

For one of the pre-service musical selections, I played a version of “When Irish Eyes are Smiling”. It is very familiar song to many people. In fact, it has been recorded by over 200 different musical artists. It is something of a “Irish Anthem”, you could say.

When Irish eyes are smiling,
Sure it's like a morn in Spring,
In the lilt of Irish laughter
You can hear the angels sing.
When Irish hearts are happy,
All the world seems bright and gay,
And when Irish eyes are smiling,
Sure, they steal your heart away.

Ah, yes. The Irish are known for their tempers and love of strong drink. But they are also known for their love of family and community. And for their love of celebrating, often with music and song. Many Irish are people of strong Christian faith as well. The reason for that is, of course, God the Holy Spirit brought them faith. And the person that God used to do that was none other than the Saint whose name rings out today, St. Patrick. Today in the sermon I am going to present some

of the life of St. Patrick and how God used him in a powerful way through looking at his life's impact through "The Eyes of St. Patrick."

In late 4th Century Britain, the eyes of a newborn **opened** to the outside world for the first time. Born into a Roman British family who were Christians, the parents of this newborn decided to name him "Patrick". No doubt they had joy as he grew, but these were dangerous times. The neighboring island of Ireland was home to the fierce Celts-successful but brutal in warfare and steeped in paganism. As the Psalm and Old Testament spoke of idols and false gods centuries earlier, the people of Ireland were guilty of this great sin as well. The Celts had a habit of raiding Britain and taking captives back to Ireland as slaves.

At about age 16, Patrick was captured and made a slave in Ireland. As you might imagine, his time as a slave was not pleasant. He wrote of mistreatment and beatings. The eyes of St. Patrick then **looked to the heavens in prayer**. When he was made a slave, he didn't consider himself very religious, but as a slave he found himself turning more and more to God. He spoke to God regularly and it is said he began to pray about 100 times a day. The Lord God heard those prayers.

Patrick was assigned to care for sheep and in cave **in his mind's eye, he saw a vision**. God gave him a dream to escape and make the long trek to the sea and that he would be able to board a ship back to Britain. Patrick followed this vision and went, just as God had shown him. A ship was provided for him, and Patrick escaped slavery in Ireland and returned home to Britain. And God was not finished with him yet. Patrick's mind's eye saw yet another vision, that he was to return to Ireland as a missionary to preach the Gospel to that pagan land.

It did not happen right away, but as it always does, it would happen in God's timing. Patrick's **eyes remained focused with determination** on the mission that God had given him. For 15 years he studied, he became a priest, he was able to rise in the church to the level of bishop. Finally, the church agreed to send him as

a missionary to Ireland in 432 AD. It would be a dangerous and difficult mission. However, years living in Ireland had taught him the language and culture. As we read in the Gospel Lesson, God calls disciples to be fishers of men. The net was let down and an amazing catch was made even though Simon Peter had not caught anything through the night. When Jesus spoke, though, he would obey, and a huge catch of fish was attained. Jesus had provided the fish. And He would provide everything that St. Patrick needed to work mightily for God in Ireland.

As I said, this was a dangerous mission. Patrick could have easily ended up dead at the hands of Celtic warlords. But the **eyes of St. Patrick were looking straight ahead to his mission without fear.** He saw the opportunity for a faithful harvest, and he knew that the Lord God was with Him. His eyes had faith rather than fear. Patrick was miraculously preserved from death on many occasions. God used him to show His power over the false Druid gods. One striking story is when St. Patrick arrived at the court of King Leoghaire at Tara. The Druid priests plunged the king's hall into darkness. But Patrick was not afraid. He used this to preach a sermon about Christ being the light. The pagan priests may have been able to create darkness, but they could not create light. And light always overcomes darkness. Many of the assembled nobles converted to Christianity that very day, and Patrick gained the king's respect and protection.

The **eyes of St. Patrick were filled with love** as he preached the Gospel to Ireland. Remember that these were the very people that had captured and enslaved him. These Celtic people were fierce and brutal warriors. An untold number of atrocities had been committed by them. They were known to make jewelry and tableware out of the bones of their victim. Yet, Patrick loved them. And God loved them too. He wanted them to repent and convert to Christianity. As 1 Peter 4:8 said, "*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.*" Thus, all over Ireland Patrick preached the Gospel. Idols were

torn down, both literally and figuratively. That St. Patrick drove all the snakes out of Ireland is a myth. However, it is a metaphor in that Patrick-by the power of God-drove the evils of paganism from the land. Within 200 years of St. Patrick's mission to Ireland, almost every single Irish person was a Christian. Incredible. Churches were planted all over the country. Ireland remained one of the most Christian societies in the world for centuries. Ireland became a missionary sending country itself and played a key role in the growth and preservation of the faith. The eyes of St. Patrick were filled with love for Ireland because they were filled with the love of the Gospel.

And after a life full of adventures, challenges, twists and turns, and incredible missionary efforts, the eyes of St. Patrick would close in death. **The eyes of St. Patrick would close his earthly life as faithful**, a faithful servant of Jesus Christ who had done what God called him to do. The exact year of his death is debated, but we know he lived to an old age-possibly over 100-and that he died on March 17, thus the timing of the holiday. There is much more to the story of St. Patrick, as you have just heard an overview this morning. But I believe even from this brief overview, you can see how faithful St. Patrick was to the one true religion of the Christian faith.

Finally, there is one more aspect of the eyes of St. Patrick to bring forward. Some people believe that those Christians that have passed onto to heaven can look down and see what we are doing. There is really not much Biblical support for that, so likely they cannot. But let's **imagine that St. Patrick's eyes today could see his legacy and how the world is today**. What would he see?

Well, for one he would see that the holiday honoring him is not primarily celebrated, at least in America, as focusing on his religious contributions. In fact, many people celebrating St. Patrick's Day today could not tell you anything about St. Patrick other than maybe, "he must have been Irish." I like to say that

celebrations of St. Patrick's Day revolve around "the three L's": luck, leprechauns, and libations. These are the things people focus on and they have nothing to do with Christianity being brought to Ireland. Maybe if you have Irish heritage, perhaps it is celebrated as a day for Irish pride and celebrating all things Irish. Now, I don't believe St. Patrick was against celebrating and having fun. On the other hand, I think it would sadden him that the day honoring him does not focus on how God used him to spread the Gospel.

And even his native Ireland, which was a bastion of Christianity for centuries has become more secularized in recent decades. These things may cause the eyes of St. Patrick to drop in sadness. At the same time, I believe his eyes would not be completely filled with sadness, but also hope and joy. The work that he did does still live on. Many do continue to hold to the faith that he brought to the Emerald Isle 16 centuries ago. And that faith has continued to spread around the world. It was even brought to our own United States.

And I believe St. Patrick's message would be the same. He would want us to tear down idols, not just statues of false gods but those things in our hearts that we place above God. He would preach a message of repentance and faith, Law and Gospel. He would want us to continue to preach the Gospel with missionary zeal. Patrick would want us to drop the nets and bring forth a bountiful catch of fish. To be fishers of men, Jesus as Jesus spoke of in St. Luke 5. In short, he would want Christians to really follow Jesus. To love as He loved and go where He leads us to go. He would want non-Christians and those that have wandered from the faith to hear the Gospel and believe it. He would want a calling out for a repentance of sin and a receiving of the gift of the Gospel in faith. So, as you go forth from this Sanctuary today, however you will or if you will be celebrating anything else with St. Patrick's Day, remember that. The mission of St. is ongoing. The mission of spreading the glorious and saving Gospel of Jesus Christ

is ongoing. God used St. Patrick as a big part of that and He wants to use each one of us as part of bringing His soul-saving mission to the world. Through the eyes of St. Patrick, we can see that. And that is the best way that Irish eyes, and the eyes of all nationalities will be smiling, as redeemed sinners serving the real and living God.

The peace of God, that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.