

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL): "Peat, Patrick and Power"
John 12:20-33
March 16-17, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan

It's St. Patrick's Day weekend and we live at the Irish Riviera, so of course we're going to sing "O Christ the Same" to the tune of Danny Boy as our Hymn of the Day, and of course I'm going to weave something about St. Patrick and Ireland into the homily ☺.

Over 30 years ago I visited County Donegal and stayed in a friend's cottage in Malin Head, the northernmost tip of the Republic of Ireland. The nearest neighbors were Mary Catherine and Philip, and they lived in a thatched roof cottage without electricity or running water. What they didn't have in modern-day conveniences they made up for with wonderfully warm hospitality, hot Irish tea in china cups, and Irish soda bread still warm from the peat-fired oven in their kitchen. After we enjoyed memorable tea time together, they sent us back to the cottage where we were staying with blocks of peat to burn in the fireplace there. Very distinctive fragrance.

So I associate peat and peat bogs with Ireland. For those who aren't familiar with peat, I looked up a formal definition: *a brown deposit resembling soil, formed by the partial decomposition of vegetable matter in the wet acidic conditions of bogs and fens, and often cut out and dried for use as fuel and in gardening.*¹ Here's my show-and-tell, a brick of peat, prettied up for sale, processed a bit since it was dug out of the ground.

Jesus says in today's Gospel, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (John 12:24) In the Saturday evening eucharistic prayer, we pray:

*We praise you for the fertile earth and for the life
its darkness holds and births:
plants of every variety, animals curled in sleep,*

humankind you shaped by your own hand.

In the winter I always think of the perennials sleeping under the earth, hibernating till spring, before green daffodil spears poke above the soil, before snowdrops ring their beautiful little bells. There's so much more happening in this world than meets the eye!

Not just tiny, but monumental things are happening out of sight, beneath the ground. We were reminded of that last month when there were news reports of "zombie" overwinter underground fires in Canada. In the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia there is a lot of peat and moss under the surface, fueling over 150 subterranean fires, even in regions where everything above ground is incinerated from last summer and fall's fires.² (Remember when we could smell the smoke from fires in Quebec? Folks all the way down to FL got a whiff.) Invisible but very real and very powerful.

When Jesus speaks about the grain of wheat needing to die before it bears much fruit, He's referring to His own life. He's announcing that it's time (*the hour*, not in clock time, but in God's perfect time) for the Good Shepherd to lay down His life (per Scripture scholar Raymond Brown). We "bury" seeds, and we associate burial with death. We use similar, kind of unusual language, when we talk about Holy Baptism. We say that we drown, we die, we're buried in the waters of Baptism, and in this way we share in Christ's death and resurrection. Even while we live, we die. And even when we die, we will live.

Last week we focused on John 3:16, Jesus' telling us, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life." I preached that everlasting life begins for us in Holy Baptism, not after physical death. **Eternal** life is **endless** life, that has **already** begun. A couple church friends

have since told me that was **news** to them, glad news. They always thought of everlasting life as in Heaven, not here. But God doesn't make us wait!

There's so much more happening in Holy Baptism than meets the eye. There's so much more happening in our daily life as Christians than is **visible**. There's so much more strength and inspiration and courage and forgiveness available to us than we usually recognize. There is not just an underground aquifer to quench the fire of temptations, there is a divine ocean of grace into which we are invited to dip daily.

St. Patrick knew it. He was a man of deep faith who loved the Lord more than he loved his own life, and who risked death to preach the Gospel to the people of Ireland, a country in which he had once been enslaved. The Druids were the reigning religious powerbrokers, and they deeply resented the inroads Patrick was making into their flock. They wanted to kill him and his missionary helpers. So the story goes that this is the prayer of protection Patrick prayed with the Druids in hot pursuit. The gifts he mentions are available to all of us who share faith in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

The Breastplate of St. Patrick

I arise today, through
 The strength of heaven,
 The light of the sun,
 The radiance of the moon,
 The splendour of fire,
 The speed of lightning,
 The swiftness of wind,
 The depth of the sea,
 The stability of the earth,
 The firmness of rock.

I arise today, through God's strength to pilot me, God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me, God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me, God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me, God's shield to protect me, God's host to save me
 From snares of devils,
 From temptation of vices,
 From everyone who shall wish me ill, afar and near.

I summon today
 All these powers between me and those evils,
 Against every cruel and merciless power that may oppose my body and soul...

Christ with me,
 Christ before me,
 Christ behind me,
 Christ in me,
 Christ beneath me,
 Christ above me,
 Christ on my right,
 Christ on my left,
 Christ when I lie down,
 Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise,
 Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
 Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
 Christ in every eye that sees me,
 Christ in every ear that hears me....

The prayer is also called the Deer's Cry, because legend has it that miraculously the Druids lost sight of Patrick and his friends, and saw only a herd of deer peacefully grazing....

The strength, might, wisdom, power of Heaven are available to us **today**, and not just **later**, in the wake of our Baptism and not just of our physical death. It is **now** that we need grace to serve and follow our Lord in faith, as our Lord calls in today's Gospel. Here's the paraphrase of Jesus' words from *The Message*:

"Listen carefully: unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your loved, you'll have it forever, real and eternal." (John 12:24-25)

There was another peat story in the news last fall, about bones that rose to the surface of a swamp in County Monaghan, about halfway between Derry and Belfast. There was skin on the bones, and pink flesh, and initially law enforcement thought it might be the remains of a 19-year-old executed by the Irish Republican Army in 1975. Carbon dating

proved the authorities wrong, determining that the remains that rose up out of the bog belong to a man who died 2,500 years ago. The peat had amazingly preserved the body in such good condition it was mistaken for a recent homicide victim.³

The One who compared His life to a grain of wheat that must fall into the ground and die left no mortal remains behind to decompose into the earth or to be preserved by peat and to percolate up to the surface again, because He was raised from the dead by the Father's love and the Spirit's power. There is no power on earth or in Heaven or anywhere in all the universes of Creation greater than the Power that raised Christ from the dead, resurrection Power in which we share through Holy Baptism. To access that Power is to live an endless, eternal, everlasting Life, even now. The portal to the Power is Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, and the Word of God. You can summon that Power today.

Amen

¹Oxford Languages, [oup.com](https://www.oup.com).

²Ian Austen, "As 'Zombie Fires' Smolder, Canada Braces for Another Season of Flames" ([nyt.com](https://www.nytimes.com), March 4, 2024).

³Ali Watkins, "In Ancient Bones, a Reminder that Northern Ireland's Ghosts Are Never Far" ([nyt.com](https://www.nytimes.com), February 29, 2024).

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