

For My Shield This Day I Call a Mighty Power
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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SCRIPTURE READINGS Liturgist

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 23

1 The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” ²Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’” ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” ⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?” ⁵He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the LORD.” ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and

Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these."

¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm 23 Common English Bible

The LORD is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

2

God lets me rest in grassy meadows;

God leads me to restful waters;

3

God keeps me alive.

God guides me in proper paths

for the sake of God's good name.

4

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no danger because you are with me.

Your rod and your staff—
they protect me.

5

You set a table for me
right in front of my enemies.
You bathe my head in oil;
my cup is so full it spills over!

6

Yes, goodness and faithful love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the LORD's house
as long as I live.

—

Mrs. O'Keefe can sense the danger Meg and Calvin and Charles Wallace are about to face. She draws from her ancestors and speaks:

All Heaven with its power,
And the sun with its brightness,
And the snow with its whiteness,
And the fire with all the strength it hath...
All these I place
by God's help and grace
between myself and the powers of darkness....¹

¹ *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, by Madeleine L'Engle, Chapter 1: In this Fateful Hour

So begins Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*. Our heroes take this rune, this prayer, this song with them as they face epic conflict. As they travel in and out of generations and face and *overcome* what could be the end of the world, these words become their *shield*.

And since reading this book in childhood, when *I* have faced danger or needed courage, *I have called* on this prayer: I call all heaven with its power... to stand against all wrong, to bridge the gap, to protect me, to be my shield. To protect those I love, to be a shield for my neighbors when danger comes. Sometimes prayer has to be *fierce*.

But it was *this year* that I realized the rune at the center of the plot *long predated* this novel.

Madeleine L'Engle was a novelist and poet - and an Episcopalian who drew this prayer right from St. Patrick.²

Patrick, whose words inspired our first hymn today. Patrick of Ireland, whose teachings moved Columba to Iona, whose words and ideas are heard down the centuries in Celtic lands.

And therein lies an invitation, from Celtic Christian tradition, to all of us.

“For my shield this day
A mighty power:
The Holy Trinity!
Affirming Threeness,

² To trace the connection from L'Engle to the poet James Clarence Mangan to Patrick's Breastplate, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Swiftly_Tilting_Planet#cite_note-2 and <https://www.bartleby.com/lit-hub/library/poem/st-patricks-hymn-before-tarah/> We attribute lines like these to St. Patrick without strong historic evidence of authorship. I'm making a choice today to assume Patrick's authorship.

Confessing Oneness
In the making of all
*Through love*³

In the west of Scotland, Celtic Christians were known for praying at every occasion - from getting up in the morning, stoking the fire, to the birth of a child to moments of danger. Every moment was steeped in prayer. There was a sense that prayers protect us and connect us to the power of God. Ancient runes invoke God's presence to stand in the gap. And there were moments and years and centuries of danger, there were moments and years and centuries of suffering. So, sometimes prayer had to be *fierce*.

Over the centuries, this tradition of prayer and poetry became prayers of resistance. "It was song [and prayer] that sustained them in their times of loss, suffering, and exile."⁴⁵

There is a beautiful collection of the prayers of the Scottish Hebrides, the *Carmina Gadelica* - Songs of the Gaels - gathered in the 19th century, when it seemed this oral tradition would be lost if not written down. Because they were written down, we can lift up prayers like this:

God to enfold me,
God to surround me,
God in my speaking,
God in my thinking,
God in my sleeping,
God in my waking,
God in my watching,

³ Patrick's Breastplate, as quoted in Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 18.

⁴ John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* p. 119

⁵ See also Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 117

God in my hoping.
God in my life,
God in my lips,
God in my hands
God in my heart.⁶

Esther de Waal writes of praying such ancient words today: “I find that while it is a desperate entreaty, a cry for help, it also carries a great feeling of confidence that the powers I invoke will come to my aid.”⁷

From the prayers of Patrick to the songs of the Gaels, we have a treasury of strong Celtic prayer. Runes of protection.

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It was *this week* that I realized Psalm 23, that beautiful chapter so many of us know by heart, can also be a rune of protection in times of trouble. Psalm 23 can be a fierce prayer.

There are moments when the challenges we encounter are almost cosmic in scope. We face cataclysmic disruptions in the world - and we face our own personal strife.

These are moments when scripture, and the prayers of our ancestors, can become tangible cloaks and shields.

The Lord is my shepherd.

As Paul says, moments when we put on the whole armor of God.

⁶ Quoted in John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* p. 98-99

⁷ Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 22

When we don't know where to go,
We invoke God's guidance.

As the Psalm says:

God lets me rest in grassy meadows;
God leads me to restful waters;

God keeps me alive.
God guides me in proper paths
for the sake of God's good name. (Psalm 23 CEB)

And as Patrick said:

"This day I call to me: God's strength to direct me, God's power to sustain me, God's wisdom to guide me, God's vision to light me, God's ear to my hearing, God's word to my speaking...."⁸

When we face adversaries - and that could be human opponents, or illness, or a world that seems to have gone off the rails - God is next to us.

As the Psalm says:

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no danger because you are with me.
Your rod and your staff—
they protect me. (Psalm 23 CEB)

And as Patrick prayed:

"God's hand to uphold me, God's pathway before me, God's shield to protect me, God's legions to save me..."⁹

⁸ Patrick's Breastplate, quoted in Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 20

⁹ Patrick's Breastplate, quoted in Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 20

When we cannot find hope, there is God's love, no English translation can contain the kind of love the Psalmist spoke of, *chesed* in Hebrew:

Yes, goodness and faithful love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the LORD's house
as long as I live.

And as Patrick proclaimed:

"Christ beside me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me...."¹⁰

The strength that is beyond strength, the courage that is beyond courage, the power that is beyond power, the guidance that is beyond guidance. God's *chesed*. God's unfailing and steadfast and fierce love.

*"All these I place
by God's help and grace
between myself and the powers of darkness..."*¹¹

—

The Celtic Christian tradition of hundreds of years ago was an oral tradition. The prayers, songs, poems, runes were memorized and passed down like precious, sometimes secret gifts. We basically don't do that these days. Rote memorization is out of vogue. But most of us know Psalm 23 by heart.

So if you know these words by heart, I wonder if you might try to remember them a different way today. Not just as a memory or a

¹⁰ Patrick's Breastplate, quoted in Esther de Waal, *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, p. 20

¹¹ *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, by Madeleine L'Engle, Chapter 1: In this Fateful Hour

statement of faith. But as a power, as a shield. Might it be, sometimes, *that remembering Psalm 23 might become part of your courage?* A shield, a cloak of protection?

I chose to print a less familiar version of the psalm today, with the hope that its symbols and promises would feel fresh. But now I want to read this Psalm aloud to you again, using the version most familiar to English speakers, but reading it to you in the form of a fierce rune of protection and a declaration of courage.

1 The LORD is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3 He restoreth my soul:

he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4 Even though

Even though,

Even though

I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Amen.

Postscript on enemies in Psalm 23: There's a major question that I'm jumping over in my reflections today. The Psalmist frames their struggle against enemies. How do we deal with that language? I commend to your attention Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflection on Enemies in Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible. (discussed <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/praying-imprecatory-psalms-bonhoeffer>, and quoted at length in <https://renovare.org/articles/the-enemies>). I also commend to your attention W. David O. Taylor's *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*, Chapter 9 - on Enemies: "It is important that we be clear about the purpose of enemy language in the psalms. Its purpose is to remind us that the violent, sinful ways of human beings - including our own violent, sinful ways - need to be named so that God can step in and do something about it...not a license to do violence to others...[it] is a matter of honestly naming our experience." Taylor goes on to offer Christians the framing of Matthew 5:43-45 and Luke 23:34 to hold in parallel with these passages from the Psalms.