

Breastplate of St. Patrick

Romans 8

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

³¹⁻³⁹ With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing Godself to the worst by sending God's own Son, is there anything else God wouldn't gladly and freely do for us? ... The One who died for us—who was raised to life for us!—is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.

... None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus embraces us.

We're in the second week of our four-week series on prayer, called "Prayer for People who have trouble praying." Not accusing. Just assuming. Each week, we're gathering around a particular prayer to see what it teaches us about how to pray. Last week, we read the Lord's Prayer.

Today, we jump to the 11th century on the island known as Ireland. There, in an ancient book of songs, you find the first written version a prayer that came to be known as the "breastplate of St. Patrick."

I bind unto myself today
the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.
I bind this day to me forever,
by power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
his baptism in the Jordan river;
his death on the 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.

I bind unto myself today
the virtues of the star-lit heaven,
the glorious sun's life-giving ray,
the whiteness of the moon at even,
the flashing of the lightning free,
the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
the stable earth, the deep salt sea
around the old eternal rocks.

I bind unto myself today
the power of God to hold and lead,
God's eye to watch, God's might to stay,

God's ear to hearken to my need,
the wisdom of my God to teach,
God's hand to guide, God's shield to ward,
the word of God to give me speech,
God's heavenly host to be my guard.
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.

I bind unto myself the name,
the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, the One in Three,
of whom all nature has creation,
eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
salvation is of Christ the Lord. Amen.

There's so much to talk about in this prayer. It's long. It's "meaty." But as we're thinking about learning how to pray, I want to point your attention to two really wonderful things this prayer does for us:

- 1) It integrates **Christian spirituality and the natural world**. It shows us that nature can be both solace and inspiration in our prayer life.
- 2) This is clearly a **prayer for protection**. A prayer for when we are afraid. I want to talk in a nuanced way about it means to pray for protection.

But's let's begin with nature, with this prayer's marvelous weaving of Christian theology and Mother Earth. This prayer offers us not one but two marvelous stories about our human belonging. One story is the Christian story. The prayer begins with that:

I bind unto myself today
the strong name of the Trinity,
by invocation of the same,
the Three in One, and One in Three.

Our Christian story is a story in which God self-discloses to us in 3 ways: God, Christ, and Spirit. This prayer declares "I belong to the unfolding of this divine story." When you and I are baptized, our story is joined into the story of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and the promise of God's kin-dom coming on earth as it is in heaven. This story of Christ's undefeatable life is my story, too. Our prayers can weave us into that story.

But that is not the only story to which we belong! The prayer says "I belong to a second great story": the story of God's unfolding Creation!

I bind unto myself today
the virtues of the star-lit heaven,
the glorious sun's life-giving ray,
the whiteness of the moon at even,
the flashing of the lightning free,
the whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
the stable earth, the deep salt sea
around the old eternal rocks.

This is a prayer that everyone of us has ever prayed when we have seen, heard, beheld God's Creation and discovered inside of us that wanted to weep, shout, or dance. "I bind these elements unto myself." I hold this beautiful world to my heart. This prayer effectively says, "I belong to this world and it belongs to me."

What comfort there is in that belonging! It's why so many of us are drawn to poets whose subject is the natural world: Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Robert Frost.

Our economic order keeps trying to say that the world is a commodity to own and exploit; or we taught the world is a threat we're supposed to protect ourselves from and insulate ourselves from.

Prayer like this establishes an older and a *better* truth: you belong to nature, you belong in nature. Creation is God's good gift. To pray like this puts you in the natural order where things make sense. Many Christians have discovered Celtic spirituality because it doesn't "other" the Creation. It sees God in the Creation. The late theologian John O'Donohue puts it this way.

When you wake in the morning and come out of your house, it makes a huge difference whether you believe you are walking into a dead geographical location or whether you are emerging into a landscape that is just as alive as you.... That was one of the recognitions of the Celtic imagination: that landscape isn't just matter, it is actually alive.

That's Genesis. God made everything—everything made for a purpose—everything in just the right place—and everything "good." So... the first thing this prayer does to show us that prayer brings us comfort by locating us in the great unfolding stories of God and the natural world. Prayer walks are wonderful practices. Every one of you can walk under a canopy of trees and feel like you're being sheltered by the hand of God. Every one of you can walk alongside a flowing body of water and feel in its inevitable downward flow and know this must be like the force of justice in human life. Every one of you can stand on a mountain and know we are a little less than the angels. Every one of us can give thanks to God for the promises of our baptism when you are caught unprotected in a summer rain.

Which leads us into the second function of this prayer: a prayer of protection.

I'm about to step into some murkier waters. I want to talk about praying for God's protection. There's a long tradition of praying to God to protect us. We find it in the Psalms:

- *The Lord is my rock and my fortress (Ps. 18)*
- *The Lord is my Shepherd (Ps. 23)*
- *God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. (Ps. 46)*
- *I will raise my eyes to the hills;
From where will my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,*
- *Then there's the whole "armor of God" imagery in Eph. 6*

Part of our prayer life can be to pray to God for protection when we feel threatened. There's a Celtic tradition of prayers like this one from St. Patrick called *loricas*, which means, in Latin, "breastplate," or "armor."

When we pray to God for reflection we are afraid. It's a basic human emotion. It's the fundamental human feeling of vulnerability, fragility. We know we can't protect ourselves. So we turn to something—someone—else. We pray to God that no harm comes to us. We want God to set up a kind of force field around us. You heard that in the prayer.

I bind unto myself today
the power of God to hold and lead,
God's eye to watch, God's might to stay,
God's ear to hearken to my need,
the wisdom of my God to teach,
God's hand to guide, God's shield to ward,
the word of God to give me speech,
God's heavenly host to be my guard.

All of us have—or will—pray like this. During a tornado warning, when we're huddled in an inner room. When there's violence around us. When we're in financial trouble. When we're lost. Overwhelmed. Our life feels fragile. We just want God to hear us, see us, protect us.

Something in us also knows that protection is not something we can pray for. We do it because we're desperate. And desperation is a good time to pray. But we know something's off about it. If you believe God protects your life, you must also believe that God chooses not to protect others. Not everyone in this world is protected.

Prayers for protection from harm are actually undercut by the Biblical text itself. So many of the characters in Scripture are not protected by God. They endure incredible hardship. Even in these most of these well-known psalms of protection, if you read them closely, the psalmist is often praying after the enemy has besieged them, after the earth is already shaking and the mountains are slipping into the sea, after they enter the valley of the shadow of death. In a real way, they are not prayers that God save me from any hardship. They're prayers that ask God to be with me in my hardship.

Protection from suffering is not part of the Christian life. We have no further to look than Jesus. Jesus was not, in any sense, “protected” by God. Remember the night before his arrest, after his last supper with his friends? They go to the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus sits up all night praying for God’s protection. “God, take this cup from me....” But in one of the great cosmos-shattering moments in scripture, Jesus, whom we know is God, realized that he will not be protected from suffering. God will suffer. Jesus prays, “not my will but thy will be done.” Jesus is not protected from arrest. Not from taunting and jeers. Not from humiliation. Not from a crown of thorns. Not from beating. Not from the nails. Not from a cross. Jesus is not “protected.” But the power of the story—the power of our faith—is that Jesus is not abandoned.

That’s what we pray for, truly. In the middle of this prayer, it prayer changes—we pray not for Christ’s protection, but for Christ’s presence:

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.

Christ, be with me. Christ, so saturate reality that I know that no matter what, I am with you, I am yours, I am whole. Christ, your perfect love drives out fear. Though I may suffer, I am never broken, never defeated, never lost.

This is a “prayer of protection.” Not to be saved from harm. But to confess, without a shadow of doubt, that I belonging within God’s Cosmos, within God’s grace, I belong to a reality in which no power to destroy is stronger than Christ’s power to save.