First Congregational Church Weekly Newsletter

East Longmeadow, MA

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PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

BLARNEY BLOWOUTS AND THE GOD WHO MAKES ALL THINGS NEW

Yesterday's newspaper headline boasted, "Blarney Blowout was tamer than usual." That is, if you consider 14 arrests, 16 summonses, and 30 medical transports a quieter than usual pre-St. Patrick's Day celebration at UMass/Amherst. The City of Holyoke's St. Patrick's Day parade and celebration will be Saturday, March 22. More than 400,000 visitors and 6,000 road racers, watched over by 150 police officers and drones are expected to attend. I wonder what St. Patrick would think of our contemporary celebrations of his life.

Patrick is another example of God taking the most unlikely people in the most improbable places to carry out God's mission. Patrick was not born in Ireland. He was born in the waning days of Roman Briton when Emperor Honorius withdrew the last Roman legions from Britain as the western empire began to disintegrate. It was a time when the established order was slowly imploding. In the span of a single lifespan a predictable world was swept away and replaced by an era of chaos, unpredictability, and disorder. Patrick's father was the equivalent of a town councilor and his family had enjoyed a comfortable life prior to the Roman withdrawal. Then, amid all the subsequent chaos and confusion, Patrick was captured by Irish slave raiders and sold into harsh servitude in Ireland.

Eventually, guided by what he interpreted as a divine dream, Patrick escaped and made his way to France where he studied to become a priest. Visited in still another divine dream, Patrick felt called to return to his former enslavers as a missionary who along with other early saints like Brigid and Kevin converted the Irish to Christianity.

Amid all our celebrations of shamrocks and green beer, we typically overlook the political and social disintegration amid which Patrick lived as well as what we can learn about how to live in our uncertain times from his life and ministry.

Besides his autobiographical treatise, the only surviving document that was written by Patrick himself is a letter to a British slave raider named Coroticus who had murdered and carried into slavery some of Patrick's recent Irish converts. Patrick denounces these Christian enslavers as betraying their Christian faith through violence and cruelty. His letter, in its fifth-century context, is a defense of human rights, stating that all are of equal worth in God's eyes. He also identifies himself as standing in solidarity with vulnerable victims of violence and exclusion, saying: ""I sold out my noble state for the sake of others – and I am not ashamed of that, nor do I repent of it." Even when his speaking out puts him at risk, Patrick does not shy away from denouncing injustice and violence. His opponents, he writes, "watch me with malice. What am I to do, Lord? I am greatly despised."

Patrick lived in a time of rapid changes that shattered what had been a stable world. "The grass withers; the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever," wrote the prophet Isaiah (40:8). Reflecting on this verse, Hanna Reichel who authored our winter study, "For Such A Time As This: An Emergency Devotional," reminds her readers that neither power nor wealth lasts forever. Kingdoms crumble and empires collapse.

Most societies do not go out with a big bang. They fizzle out slowly as Rome's did. Historian Kyle Harper's "The Fall of Rome" blames the long, slow decline of Rome on imperial expansion into distant lands that exposed its peoples to new germs that triggered the Antonine, Cyprian, and Justinian Plagues. These diseases weakened both Rome's social fabric and its economic vitality. The same centuries witnessed climate shocks during which persistent droughts resulted in crop failures, which led to famine and more social and economic uncertainty. These factors, plus a suspicion of and refusal to integrate Germanic peoples whose relationship with Rome had fostered mutual prosperity, resulted in a Roman empire that slowly degenerated into infighting and scapegoating. As Reichel puts it, "everyone scrambles for pieces of a pie that suddenly seems up for grabs, even as it is now also perceptibly shrinking." This was the world into which Patrick was born and in which he sought to build a new people of God based on gospel virtues and values.

On some days we too can feel as if the stable, predictable world in which we have lived mostly comfortable lives suddenly looks a lot less certain. "We've been here before," Reichel writes. Ours is not the first society to have experienced the shaking of its foundations or to have struggled to discern the shape of an emerging world that could be more humane and habitable. She notes that Luther and the Protestant Reformation, of which we are the heirs, occurred in a time of profound cultural crisis marked by economic hardship, social unrest, technological change, political conflict, and new trade patterns that weakened old power structures without immediately creating new social and economic arrangements.

None of what we are experiencing is new – from wars in distant lands to scapegoating and political infighting at home; from the risks of Artificial Intelligence to the threat of new plagues and the resurgence of old diseases. Amid the chaos of the Reformation, someone asked Martin Luther what he would do if the world ended, he answered, "Then, today, I would plant an apple tree." Luther's response was one of hope and commitment to the future regardless of how uncertain the present appeared.

Our Christian hope cannot be tethered solely to social, economic, or political conditions that have sustained us for many generations and that we had come to assume were eternal. None of what we are experiencing, concludes Reichel's book, is unprecedented. Many peoples have been here before, including St. Patrick and his generation. "What is unprecedented," she concludes, "is that today it is we who have to do the hard work of seeing idols smashed, grieving and picking up the pieces, holding them up to the sun, and seeing new refractions of light in their edges."

St. Patrick is a saint for our time. In a time when so much that was familiar and comfortable began to totter and fizzle out, Patrick placed his hope in a God of time and history who always labors to bring forth something new amid the ongoing messiness of endings. As the Book of Revelation assures us, our God is One who promises "Behold, I am making all things new…." (21:5) We honor Patrick by being for our time and place what he was for his.

Happy St. Patrick's Day,
Thomas

SUNDAY WORSHIP in the sanctuary or livestream link: http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/

SPIRITUAL TYPES WORKSHOP - March 15 in Butler Fellowship Hall

Psychologists tell us that we all have different "information processing" styles. Some of us take in information by hearing it. Others of us process information through reading it. Still others; by using visual methods like diagrams, pictures, or graphs. Educators are taught that different students have different "learning" styles. Some are visual learners who learn new material best using charts and graphic organizers. Others learn best through reading new material or writing information down for themselves. Still others are "aural/auditory" and learn best by hearing and speaking.

Did you know there are also different spiritual types or styles? Some writers have nine of them; others identify 12. One of the easiest models uses four styles of spiritual or religious orientation. Having a sense of these types is helpful because it helps us better understand ourselves and what kinds of experiences or spiritual disciplines help us grow and which ones are more of a stretch for us. Also, every strength if used to an excess can become a weakness or block to our growth. Wholeness is growing to appreciate and draw on all pathways to God, not just the one most familiar or most comfortable.

Want to learn more? Pastor Thomas will be facilitating a workshop on "Knowing Your Spiritual Type" on Sunday, March 15, from 12:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. We will begin with a light soup and salad lunch following coffee hour (which gives us an opportunity to have dessert before our meal!). The workshop will then begin at 1:00 p.m. and conclude at 2:30 p.m.

A sign-up list is posted in the breezeway. Question? Speak to Pastor Thomas

A search committee for a new Music Director is needed. Please contact the church office if you are interested in participating in our search for our new Music Director.

OUR LOVE OFFERING TO THE WORLD

For over 75 years, the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering (OGHS) has been helping Christians bring hope and healing to hurting people both in the US and around the world.

OGHS's mission is to support domestic and international development, fight poverty and its consequences, bring aid and relief to communities torn by war or ravaged by national disaster, provide advocacy and resettlement assistance for refugees and displaced persons, and combat injustice in its many forms. OGHS provides funding and hands-on assistance in collaboration with local and international partners.

Your offering helps rebuild from disaster, feed the hungry, provide clean water to the thirsty, empower the oppressed and restore hope.

There is always a need, but can there be a better time than now to support this program through the United Church of Christ. Envelopes are placed in the pews if you choose to make a donation over the next few weeks. Thank you.

PRAYER

This prayer is a section of what is known as "Faeth Fiada" or the "Lorica of St. Patrick." It is sometimes believed that portions of it go back to the time of St. Patrick in the 5th century.

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…
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 every man 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…
Amen