Sermon on St. Patrick’s Day and Lent 2
(Ps 126 cf. Luke 13:31-35)

Anglicans are encouraged to celebrate saint days; that’s our Catholic side; but not many Anglicans do because most Anglicans seem rather strict about only gathering for worship on Sundays.

Every Sunday is a feast of the resurrection which takes precedence over a saint day; that’s our Protestant side. So, unless you’re one of those increasingly rare Anglicans who observe the saint days that fall during the week, you probably don’t know much about the saints.

So sometimes a priest has to bend the rules a bit, just so we all keep in touch with both sides of our identity.

My excuse is the fact that Irene has planned a beautiful St. Patrick’s Day event for this Sunday; I’m only sorry that my split-vocation does not allow me to stay for it.

Because St. Patrick is one of the most popular and accessible saints in countries that use the English language it’s appropriate that we use this occasion to look a little bit more closely at his life as it might rub up against our Lenten journey.

Besides, if you’re heading over to an Irish pub for lunch you should know what you’re toasting when you lift your Guinness and say, “to the luck of the Irish!”

The texts today might not seem to have anything to do with St. Patrick, they are, after all, the texts assigned for Lent 2; but as is always the case, the scriptures, as human documents, inspired by the Spirit, evoke just the sort of thematic connections that we’ve come to expect.

One of the themes of Lent is prayer as a path into our destiny; we saw that last week with Jesus in the wilderness. Prayer is a path into our destiny because it connects us to our deepest identity and so, last week I encouraged you this Lent to use as an arrow prayer, “You are my daughter, my beloved, in you I am well-pleased” as a way to face each day’s challenges.

Today’s texts give us another arrow prayer for the journey, a prayer that connects us with St. Patrick.

Sometime in the early fifth century, Patrick a native of Cornwall or Devon in Southwest England was kidnapped by Irish pirates who sold him into slavery in their homeland.

Six years later he fled his Irish masters and returned to Britain. Home at last. Our psalm puts it this way: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion then were we like those who dream, then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

Can you imagine the joy in Patrick’s village when they saw him trudging up the path? Can you image the laughter, the “feels-like-a-dream” joy of restoration!

Christians in the early centuries prayed the psalms continually; it’s far more likely than not that these very words would have been on Patrick’s tongue as he approached his Cornwall home.

The Psalms are great for this sort of thing, they help us praise and lament, and everything in between; they help us process life.

I was chatting with the esteemed Rector’s Warden of St. Matthew, Virginia; we were chatting about her and my work experience and how anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation is becoming more and pervasive at younger and younger ages

She then reminded me of a great line that goes back to St. Augustine, “Worship is the pedagogy of desire.” That is, if we carve out even just a few minutes each day to pray, to praise, to lament, even if not in our own words, maybe especially if in words not our own!, we slowly train ourselves into more realistic expectations, more helpful ways of looking at the world and the inevitable disappointments and joys that will litter our path.

The message of the first part of this psalm is a call for us to get one thing straight in our hearts and minds, a foundational thought so powerful that it can’t help but lead to celebration: the Lord restores, the Lord restores our fortunes; the Lord sets things right; makes things work well; sets us back in a groove when we’ve fallen on hard times, when things have dried up; when creativity is waning, imagination low, physical suffering on the rise; that’s when the Lord begins to restore.

Fortune is a word that reminds us of luck, one of those words that we imagine came to us from the Irish. But in reality it’s a word that has very little to do with the way luck is understood in our time: pure chance.

Rather it’s a word given to us by the Hebrew poets who rejected any idea of fate in favour of a theology that held together the mysterious working of a restoring God and our best efforts.

Patrick’s fortunes were restored because it was God’s will to bring Patrick back to his village and so, probably after much weeping, after much planning, and maybe several failed attempts, God blessed his efforts to escape.

The blessings that have come to us in our lives are not purely of our own making but of a complex web of factors, some in our control, most not and we’re called to a type of holy remembering, a remembering of how God has brought good from bad, healing from hurt, new direction when we’ve stuck or captive to a pattern of living that’s unhelpful or unhealthy.

This holy remembering is different than nostalgic pining because it helps us pray now: “Restore our fortunes O Lord!” “Sure people said great things about us/me in the past, sure I was successful, but what about right now; my life’s a mess. Restore our fortunes O Lord.

This psalm serves as a stockbrokers disclaimer: “past performance is no guarantee of future returns.” Life isn’t a technique but an evolving dance of relational learning, growth, suffering, weeping and laughing.

There will never be a time when we don’t need some measure of God’s restoration, as a community, as people, as a nation, as a world. So here’s a great prayer, when things have taken a turn, you’re feeling down, “Lord, restore our fortunes!”

After coming home, Patrick, in deep gratefulness, dedicates his life to the church and becomes a priest but he also begins to think about the barbarous conditions of the northern tribes in Ireland.

The fact was, though they held many in captivity, they were the true captives, enslaved to their bloodletting and wander lust ways.

Then Jesus gives him a vision and it’s all he needs; he’s made a bishop and given a mission: go back to the land of your captivity and seek the restoration of the Lord.

Similar to the clear-eyed vision of Jesus in our gospel reading today, clear-eyed about the present political situation, clear-eyed about what would most likely happen to him, Jesus, expressing the love of the Father heads toward Jerusalem

God restores our fortunes not just for us, but for those who need their own fortunes restored.

We begin to receive restoration in answer to our prayers and our cooperation with how the Spirit is calling us, leading us, but we only really get it if we risk it for the sake of others; if we re-enter that sticky family situation, that difficult Church conundrum, that neighbourhood spat that you’re avoiding.

God restores our fortunes through others and others’ fortunes are restored through our obedience it!

And if we try to play it safe we lose what we have! So Patrick wasn’t being stupid, just exercising a version of the faith we’re all called to exercise in small ways every day!

And so, the Spirit working through Patrick was able to help the Irish change their path in such a way that their adventuring ways were turned to the betterment of others, they literally saved civilization during the Dark ages; their monks helping keep the candle of learning flickering when all else was being snuffed out.

The Irish sense of humour and their connection to the earth helped them survive disaster after disaster, so that when the Great Potato famine happened in 1840’s millions emigrated to this part of the world shaping it in countless ways.

“The went out weeping, carrying the seed, but came back with joy, shouldering the sheaves.” Our various captivities don’t have the final word! With Christ, in Christ, through Christ, through prayer we have agency and hope in pursuit of restoration!

because we know our God restores we can laugh and because we laugh we dare to weep in hope for ourselves and for those around us. Lord Restore Our Fortunes, Amen.