***LIKE STARS***

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Texts: Genesis 15:1-6 and Philippians 2:12-15

For six years he served as a shepherd, tending sheep. For six years he endured the whims of bitter weather that chilled him to the bone and battered him with raging winds. Wandering sheep and a gnawing hunger were his only companions on the lonely hillsides of the 5th century island where he served. For six years Patricius, the son of a Roman official, served an involuntary tour of duty as the shepherd slave of a stern Irish warrior. For months he saw and spoke to no one except the sheep, but after a time, he began to speak to God. In his loneliness, he began to pray. He had not believed in God when he was first chained to those hills, but the harsh circumstances led him to pray in order to survive. Patricius writes:

*Tending flocks was my daily work, and I would pray constantly during the daylight hours. The love of God and the fear of [God] surrounded me more and more – and faith grew and the Spirit was roused, so that in one day I would say as many as a hundred prayers and after dark nearly as many again…. I would wake and pray before daybreak – through snow, frost, rain…because then the Spirit within me was ardent*.

That ardent spirit within Patricius transformed him from lonely shepherd to faithful Christian. Trusting God to guide him, Patricius made a daring escape from the island, entered the priesthood in Gaul, and then, in a strange twist, returned to the island to spread the good news of Jesus Christ among his oppressors. He spoke boldly for Christ and against slavery. Through his efforts, the island that had been his prison was transformed from a nation of pagans to a country of Christians. God used that Roman boy, a shepherd slave, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ on that island we know as Ireland. His name was Patricius, but we know him as Saint Patrick.

Today the Irish and the not-so-Irish will celebrate St. Patrick’s Day. Green clothing, green beverages, and green shamrocks abound. In law school my Contracts class was taught by a ruddy Irishman by the name of Joseph Kelly. He had a tradition that on St. Patrick’s Day he would call only on students with Irish names. So it came as a shock when near the end of class Professor Kelly called on Vinny Badagliaca. “But Professor Kelly,” protested Vinny, “I’m not Irish.” Professor Kelly looked out over the top of his glasses at Vinny and replied, “Oh. I thought the name was O’Badagliaca. Answer the question please.” That day there was no mention of the reason for remembering St. Patrick; I daresay few of my fellow students could have told you what he accomplished back there in the 5th century, but his own words suggest what his life was all about:

*I arise today*

*Through God’s strength to pilot me:*

*God’s might to uphold me,*

*God’s wisdom to guide me,*

*God’s eyes 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 way to lie before me,*

*God’s shield to protect me,*

*God’s host to save me*

*From snares of devils,*

*From temptations of vices,*

*From everyone who shall wish me ill,*

*Afar and anear,*

*Alone and in multitude.*

St. Patrick’s day began with God and ended with God; he trusted God to be his constant companion, preserving, protecting, sustaining, and inspiring his life on 5th century Irish hills among the sheep and doing the same for us on the hills of this 21st century town and Valley. There is one God upon whom we all are wholly dependent, one God who is ever-present, ever-faithful, ever-loving; a God who, in the words of our Affirmation of Faith today, “protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head” (a phrase now near and dear to my heart). That is the God who Patricius came to know in those Irish pastures, the God he wants us to know through his words and his story.

Do you know that God? Does your day begin and end with God as St. Patrick’s days did? Does God’s *strength* pilot you and God’s *might* uphold you and God’s *wisdom* guide you through your days – or are you more independent, aware of God only on Sunday mornings in these pews and in need of God only when you are in over your head or sinking fast or suddenly desperate enough to call for help from the divine lifesaver? Is God at the center of your life, a part of your day to day, hour by hour, moment by moment living, or have you relegated God to the periphery, to the waiting room of your life to be called on only in an emergency? For St. Patrick God was in every breath, every beat of his heart, every extension of his wonderfully made fingers and opposable thumbs. God’s Spirit pulsed through him, inspiring his days and his nights. But that was a long time ago – 1600 years – and we’ve learned a lot since then about the world and our universe and our bodies and our minds and our time. And I wonder: do you have any room left for God near the center of your busy, enlightened 21st century life?

Our Muslim brothers and sisters pause throughout the day to roll out their prayer rugs, kneel, and offer prayers to Allah, the Arabic word for God. Some Christian monks do the same, gathering for worship and prayer before the sun has risen and reconvening to worship and pray at set hours throughout the day. While those practices, like some of our own, can become rote legalisms, they are intended to bring to the pray-er’s awareness God’s continuing presence at all times in all places. It was in the midst of such prayers that those faithful folks in Christchurch, New Zealand were killed this week, gunned down while praying to the God of Abraham. Christian, Jew, and Muslim alike pray to the God of Abraham for according to tradition, we all are children of Abraham, and Abraham’s God is our God. There are agents of evil who want to divide the children of God from one another; those, especially white supremacists and white nationalists of late, who want to divide the world along racial lines that have nothing to do with our calling by God to love one another; those who are willing to breach any sacred space to use violence to try to break the relationship between God and those who believe in God, whether in a South Carolina Church, a Pittsburgh synagogue, or a Christchurch mosque. As children of Abraham we stand together with our brothers and sisters to oppose such violence and to affirm God’s promise to Abraham and to us: *Do not be afraid! I am your shield!*

In the passage from Genesis that we read this morning God offers that promise to Abram, the very assurance for which Patrick was searching on that Irish hillside, “Do not be afraid. I am your shield or benefactor (the Hebrew can be translated either way); your reward shall be very great.” God was looking out for Abram, offering protection and blessing! If St. Patrick’s faith was marked by the bold confidence expressed in his words, Abram’s faith is more a mixture of trust and doubt. He trusted God enough to pull up his tent pegs and go wherever God would lead him. But he doubted enough to challenge God about what kind of reward God might offer that would have any value to him when he and his wife remained childless in their old age. For Abram, no reward was a blessing if he had no descendants with whom to share it, and to that point his only descendant was Eliezer of Damascus.

What was wrong with Eliezer? We don’t really know. Maybe he was a scoundrel or was faithless or had bad breath or rooted for the wrong team or just had a bad name (after all, how many Eliezers do you know?). For all we know he may have been a great guy, but as an heir Abram found him sorely wanting, a poor substitute for a child of his own. And he laid the blame squarely at the feet of God, saying: “YOU have given me no offspring!” Abram dared to challenge God directly, to doubt God’s rosy promises when the one promise Abram wanted most and the hope Abram held most dear remained unfulfilled – a son.

In response God took Abram by the hand and led him out into the night. “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you can,” God said. “So shall your descendants be.” Abram asked for a single heir; God offered descendants as numerous as the stars – billions and billions of descendants, a promise beyond Abram’s wildest dreams. And the odd thing is, Abram believed God. Without any further proof, Abram trusted the promise, trusted that what God said would come true. “And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness,” says the writer, which is his way of saying that right relationship between God and Abram was restored. Or to put into modern parlance, “They were good.”

Are you good with God? It is that right relationship God wants with all of us, a relationship based upon faith in God and trust in God’s promises and presence in our lives. In Jesus Christ God came to restore that right relationship with us, urging us to trust again in God’s promises and live as God calls us to live, love as God calls us to love, and forgive as God calls us to forgive. Jesus showed us what that life looked like – a life of faithful obedience and compassionate love and enduring hope, a life that reflects the glory of God as descendants of Abraham and children of God. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul describes Christ’s example in a passage known as the Christ hymn and urges us to *have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus*. He then follows up with the passage we read today, urging us to seek that right relationship with God and one another and so to be children of God who “shine like stars in the world.” That is who we are called to be – shining stars who reflect God’s glory in a sometimes fractious world.

We cannot do it alone. So God sent Jesus to us, so that by the grace of God we might shine like stars by following his example, loving God with all that we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That is the good news Paul proclaims and the good news St. Patrick discovered on that Irish isle 1600 years ago. It is still good news today! It is good news in a world that is more enlightened about some things, totally clueless about others, and needs to be restored to right relationship with God and with one another. Like St. Patrick’s days it begins and ends with God who calls us to shine like stars and offers this blessing through a variation on the words of St. Patrick:

*Christ be with you, Christ within you,*

*Christ behind you, Christ before you,*

*Christ beside you, Christ to win you,*

*Christ to comfort and restore you,*

*Christ beneath you, Christ above you,*

*Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,*

*Christ in hearts of all that love* you,

*Christ in mouth of friend and stranger. Amen*