**2 Lent, March 16, 2014; Gen 12:1-4; Ps 121; Rom 4: 1-5;13-17; John 3:1-17; Rev Mary Trainor**

He was out all alone, cold, hungry, tending sheep. He had been kidnapped and taken to this strange land across the water, when he was only 16. Terribly mistreated, he suffered day after day. Until this time, he had, by his own account, cared nothing for God, but now he turned to God for help - and God responded. He was "***born from above"*** *(as it says in our Gospel this morning),* and drew strength from God to endure.Escape finally came after six years in captivity, and he returned home to England. Although he never wanted to go back to that land again, his dreams were haunted by the voices of other kidnapping victims who had not escaped. God was in those voices. After he was educated and ordained, at the age of 45 he accepted a call by the church to be the bishop in this barbaric land. Oh, others had tried and failed or been killed in the process; but he knew God was drawing him back there. It was like God had given him instructions, like he had given to Abram in today's reading from Genesis: "***Go from your country and....I will show you....I will bless you."*** He must have recited words from our Psalm for today to help him 121: "***I lift up my eyes....my help comes from the Lord."*** I am speaking about St. Patrick, whose feast day we celebrate tomorrow. He was born in the year 390.

Many people associate St Patrick's day with corned beef and cabbage, green beer and leprechauns. St. Patrick is more accurately associated with courageous kind sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people in Ireland. Walking long distances was a daily reality of St. Patrick's life. He risked his life every time he went out the door, because of widespread violence among fiefdoms. He said "**I learned the hard way to put my sole trust in God and God alone.**" So walking and talking with people along the way, in spite of the risk, was what he was called to do. He said, "**God, the saints, and the angels are walking alongside us -- and so it is quite natural to turn to them for support and companionship**." On his walks, he used nature to teach. He bent down and picked up a shamrock to teach about the Trinity: the shamrock has one leaf with three lobes, our God is One, with three persons. God was real and accessible to Patrick, and he helped others see this. In your pews is a bookmark for you to take home. It provides you something that Patrick wrote, that captures this message -- and is inspiring to us every day:

**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 to 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,**

Patrick also lived and breathed the familiar words we heard Jesus say in today's Gospel: "***For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.***" Jesus came to give us life! this transforming message resulted in > 100,000 being baptized by him. The whole of pagan Ireland became Christian, and civilized, because of Patrick's witness to God's radical love for us.

Belief in God "***who so loved the world"*** causes us to be "***born from above.***" This is a metamorphosis -- a changing from one state to another. God can change us from being self-centered and despairing, to being God-centered and hopeful. In the jungles of Honduras, there is an insect called a "scarab beetle." This beetle starts life in a rotting tree stump as a soft, mushy, grey-white grub: simple, plain unattractive. They live like this for a long time, until the rainy season comes. Then things change: through a gradual process, the adult changes from the grub into a dazzlingly beautiful scarab with a hardened shell of flaming red or bright gold or shining silver. They are now glorious, beautiful, prized jewels that sell for $500 each. In the hands of God, we undergo a metamorphosis too. Without Christ, we are simple, self-focused inside. Then, when we accept the grace of God falling upon us like the rain, process of transformation occurs. We emerge glowing with the radiance of the divine, bearing the mind of Christ, the image of God.

In our Gospel today, we heard about a Jewish leader, a Pharisee Nicodemus. Nicodemus, in spite of his grand external appearance with fine robes, was empty and deficient inside like that slug. He sensed he was missing something. He had heard about this Jesus, and wanted to see if Jesus had THE answer. It was a huge risk, however, for an influential leader like Nicodemus to even talk with Jesus; but he couldn't stay away. So, to reduce his risk, he visited Jesus in secret at night. We get to eves-drop on this conversation. In it we see God's grace like rain falling upon Nicodemus from Jesus' words of wisdom. Jesus sees into the inside of Nicodemus, He tells him "***You must be born from above.***" Nicodemus does not get it -- so Jesus tries to help him see that right in front of him is the answer, the door to God's kingdom, to eternal life.

Nicodemus was probably like some of us, like people around us today, like people who St Patrick encountered in Ireland way back then. People who thought they were living their lives fully, and yet were a long way from experiencing the abundant life that God had planned for them. In order to "***be born from above"*** we need to allow the grace of God, the love of Jesus, to penetrate our thick heads and callused hearts. Baptism is the sacrament in which we are welcomed as Christ's own forever -- but few of us actually live into this change; we are transformed when we choose to live into our Baptism, when we allow that grace like rain to sink in, to seep in, to make us new.

Lent is a season for us all to revisit our openness to God's grace and truth. On pages 305-306 BCP, you see prayers for those who are to be Baptized: "**open their hearts to your grace and truth, fill them with your holy and life giving Spirit**." Use these prayers this Lent for yourself, to seek a new openness to God's transforming power.

Accept Jesus, trust in Him, don't keep Him at arms length, invite Him into all aspects of your life. Go for it! Amen.