

Poems, Songs, and Sacred Imagination

Joel 2:28, Psalm 47:1-2, Matthew 13:31-32

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Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men and women shall see visions.

Joel 2:28

Clap your hands, all you peoples; shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Holy One, is awesome, and reigns over all the earth.

Psalm 47:1-2

Jesus put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in a field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

Matthew 13:31-32

We continue our journey of discovering how Celtic Wisdom can guide us today in our lives, in our church and in our lenses for looking at the world.

Let's begin today with music. Think of the ways music has been part of your life. Do you or did you play an instrument? Think of the times and places you have played. Do you enjoy singing? Think of the times and places you have sung with others – in church, with a choir, with friends, with family. And times you sing alone – in the shower, in the car, at home. Think of favorite concerts you have attended. Remember how music made you feel – your emotions, your heartrate. Think of song lyrics that moved you deeply. Those lyrics, those poems set to music, can give voice to experiences that are deep, sacred, full of joy or full sorrow.

And along with music, think about poets and poems that have moved your soul. One of the greatest gifts you have given me as your pastor is the feast of poetry you have shared with me. I have not served a congregation before whose love and knowledge of poetry is as deep as yours. Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, Rumi and so many others have now become part of my spiritual well from which I regularly draw renewal for my soul. Thank you.

Part of what Newell emphasizes in chapter 4 is that Celtic Spirituality is rooted in song and poetry. It is poetry that has most powerfully expressed the wisdom of the human soul. Poems were passed down in the oral tradition, chanted by women and men throughout ordinary days as the sun rose, as food was prepared, as animals were tended to, as families worked in the fields, as night came. These were poems, prayers, and blessings that were said and sung often in Gaelic.

Offering poems and songs in the midst of joys and sorrows of daily life was also part of the reality for the Hebrew people. The book of Psalms, the collection of the songs and poems of the Hebrew people, is foundational in the Jewish and Christian traditions. We often read or sing a setting of a psalm in worship because we can feel a connection to these ancient words. Today Mike Stone read a version of Psalm 96 about praising God with music. I read a verse from Psalm 47 - "Shout to God with loud songs of joy." I am not sure that is how Martha Wall would instruct the choir!

Celtic wisdom invites us to reclaim the centrality of poetry and music in daily life as we seek a deeper connection to the Holy One, to one another and to the earth. What might that look like for you? Does it mean to read poetry more often? Does it mean to write your own poetry? Does it mean to imagine singing for the joy of it when we feel joyful? Does it mean letting the tears flow and singing (or humming) a song that expresses emotions of sadness or grief? Or maybe it means listening to more music?

Too often spirituality has become heady. In the Reformed tradition, there has been an emphasis on systematic theology, on expressing our beliefs about God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Bible, grace, resurrection, evil and more through logical and academic language. There is a place for that. However, for many, it does not fully express our deepest longings, our fears, our joys of being alive and being aware of the constant presence of Divine Mystery and Love. The church too often negated the value and place of poetry and music as foundational to our spiritual lives.

Newell traces the history to a time when poetry about everyday life and the beauty of creation was seamlessly woven into the Celtic world. Thankfully there is a collection of this treasure. Here is part of "The Invocation of the Graces" a poem and prayer to God after Christianity was introduced to the Celts. Translated from the Gaelic with modern wording.

You are the joy of all joyous things,
You are the light of the beam of the sun,
You are the door of the chief of hospitality,
You are the surpassing star of guidance,
You are the step of the deer of the hill,
You are the step of the steed of the plain,
You are the grace of the swan of swimming,
You are the loveliness of all lovely desires.

— "The Invocation of the Graces" (#3) from the *Carmina Gadelica* (1)

This is from the *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations Collected in Highlands and Islands of Scotland*. One of the great classics of Celtic literature, this tome (the one-volume edition is almost 700 pages long!) is a compendium of what was originally a six-volume collection of oral folklore, prayers, chants, incantations, hymns, blessings, and poems that an amateur folklorist

named Alexander Carmichael collected in Gaelic-speaking Scotland over a fifty-year period starting around 1860. It is a record of the heart of Celtic Christianity. Not as a theory found in libraries or classrooms, but as a lived spirituality of people who practiced an ancestral way of life, attuned to the rhythms of nature and the wisdom of their ancestors.

Carmichael was an exciseman — in other words, a tax collector — for the British government, working in Scotland. 150 years ago, it was apparent that the old Gaelic culture in Scotland was vanishing. The old Celtic tongue was already in decline and when a language dies, an entire culture dies. Carmichael realized this, so he began to document the oral tradition of the Gaelic people — a process of amateur folklore that would lead, eventually, to the *Carmina*. It is not a pristine collection of long-lost folklore. Rather it is one person's vision of how traditional Celtic spirituality continued to shape the minds and hearts of Scottish folk, well into the 19th and even early 20th centuries. (2)

With over 550 prayers, poems, songs, runes, invocations, words of healing, and other texts, the *Carmina* offers a glimpse into a spirituality shaped by the land and sea of the Scottish Highlands and islands, deeply Christian, yet also inclusive of old pagan, pre-Christian ways. There are prayers, poems and many folk song texts for almost any routine task that a farmer or a fisherman or homemaker might use: prayers to bless the milking of the cow, the lighting of a fire, the coming of the new moon, going to bed with one's beloved, the undertaking of a journey, at the deathbed of a loved one.

What emerges is a sense of a people who lived with one foot securely grounded on the good earth, and the other reaching with trust and joy into a mystical place where God is. The people of the *Carmina Gadelica* symbolize for us today the power of poetry and song to keep alive a vision of the sacredness of the earth and every human being. As you read the chapter 4 and other poems from this collection, what do they awaken in you? How might we see Christ differently through the lens of the *Carmina*?

The other invitation from Newell this week is how, in the Celtic world, the imagination is a way of knowing. It is a way of remembering what we have forgotten, a bridge to the future, forever opening us to the ways of seeing and living that we have not yet experienced. It is to have the capacity to dream our way into new beginnings.

Sacred imagination that includes dreams, stories and metaphors is a strong thread throughout the writings of the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament. The prophet Joel warned the people as he spoke God's word and called them to radical transformation toward justice and faithfulness. And then he spoke of hope. Like other prophets, he casts a positive vision for the people of God. The rains will return. The vats will overflow with new wine. The threshing floor will be filled with grain. "Your old men shall dream dreams," said Joel, "your young men and women will see visions." In addition to prophetic critique, the prophets offered pastoral comfort. He kept the dreams of God's people and God's kin-dom alive in times of disaster and discouragement. Remember to dream. Like one of our modern day prophets, Martin Luther

King Jr, said, “I have a dream.” Dreaming requires sacred imagination to move in the direction of justice, shalom and The Beloved Community.

Sacred imagination is central to storytelling. That is sacred and foundational in the human experience. Jesus, using parables and metaphors, invited people to use their imaginations to know deep truths, to draw close to God and live in close relationships with God, one another and the earth. Too often in church history the value of story and narrative was pushed aside and even silenced. The stories and teachings about the goodness and blessing of all people, and the sacred in all creation and all people were silenced.

Alexander John Scott, a young minister of the Church of Scotland in the 1800’s, refused to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith because he did not believe the theology of “we are born wholly defiled in body and soul and wholly inclined to all evil.” He taught that the heart of Christian wisdom was that the divine and human are one. He imagined royal garments woven with a golden thread, interweaving of the divine and the human. He was banished from the Church of Scotland for such images.

That did not stop him. Eventually he drew his teachings from other faith traditions as well as the Bible. Like Eriugena, he believed there are two books – the Bible and the sacred text of the earth and the universe. Scott’s panentheistic vision of God in all things is a way to imagine the sacred interconnectedness of all things. Scott’s teachings inspired many students, including George MacDonald, who went on to write some of the best literary works and fairy tales that reflected Celtic Christian spiritual themes. We need great storytellers to open us to the Spirit and be transformed.

Poems, songs, and sacred imagination are central to a Celtic spirituality. We need musicians and poets now more than ever to open us up to Divine Love and hope. It is a special joy today to sing a newly written chant by our own John Steiner using words from one of the prayers in the *Carmina Gadelica*. We need storytellers and stories to open ourselves to the possibility of new interrelationships. May your soul be awake to the sacred dreams stirring in you and to the new song of earth in you. Amen.

Sermon includes materials from John Philip Newell (2021) *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, Harper One. Highlights from chapters 4 and 5

1) Alexander Carmichael, 1992. *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations*. Edinburgh: Floris Books. Page 36.

2) Carl McColman, 2022. *Why I Love the Carmina Gadelica (Despite Its Flaws)*.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlmccolman/2017/04/carmina-gadelica-2/>