

@ Join our mailing list

[Home](#) » [Resources](#) » [Resource Library](#)

Prayers for Protection in Places of Exile, Fear, and Uncertainty

In a time of fear, uncertainty, and isolation because of COVID-19, ancient prayers of protection can remind us of God's sovereignty and care. Here, Debra Paxton-Buursma, professor of education at Calvin University, explores St. Patrick's Prayer of Protection, set to music by a modern composer who himself faced danger and exile.

By: [Debra Paxton-Buursma](#)

Tags: [arvo part](#), [coronavirus](#), [covid-19](#), [st. patrick](#)

Reflection posted on April 7, 2020

Settle into a comfortable place and listen to VOCES8 sing "[The Deer's Cry](#)," a text taken from the seventh verse of the Lorica of St. Patrick, a prayer of protection from around AD 433. The song's text is in bold type below. The music was composed by Arvo Pärt in 2007. After listening, read the full text of the prayer along with a reflection on the text.

The Deer's Cry / The Lorica / A Prayer of Protection / St. Patrick's Breastplate, circa AD 433

The first verse invokes the [Trinity](#).

I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the Threeness, through confession of the Oneness, of the Creator of creation.

The second verse invokes Christ's baptism, death, resurrection, ascension, and future return on the last day.

I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth with his baptism, through the strength of his crucifixion with his burial, through the strength of his resurrection with his ascension, through the strength of his descent for the judgment of doom.

The third verse invokes the virtues of angels, patriarchs, saints, and martyrs.

I arise today through the strength of the love of cherubim, in the obedience of angels, in the service of archangels, in the hope of the resurrection to meet with reward, in the prayers of patriarchs, in the prediction of prophets, in the preaching of apostles, in the faith of confessors, in the innocence of holy virgins, in the deeds of righteous men.

The fourth verse invokes the virtues of the natural world.

I arise today through the strength of heaven, the light of the sun, the radiance of the moon, the splendor of fire, the speed of lightning, the swiftness of wind, the depth of the sea, the stability of the earth, the firmness of rock.

The fifth verse invokes various aspects of God.

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, God's host to save me from snares of devils, from temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill, afar and near.

The sixth verse lists the things against which protection is required: snares of devils, temptations of nature, those who wish ill.

I summon today all these powers between me and those evils, against every cruel merciless power that may oppose my body and soul, against incantations of false prophets, against black laws of pagandom, against false laws of heretics, against craft of idolatry, against spells of witches and smiths and wizards, against every knowledge that corrupts man's body and soul, Christ to shield me today against poisoning, against burning, against drowning, against wounding, so that there may come to me an abundance of reward.

The seventh verse calls for Christ to be in all things: Christ in me, all around me, in the eyes and ears and mouths of the people I meet.

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 everyone 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.

The last verse returns to the theme of the Trinity.

I arise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the Threeness, through confession of the Oneness, of the Creator of creation.

A Reflection

You have just listened to "The Deer's Cry," a choral piece composed in 2007 by Arvo Pärt. The composition is based on the seventh of eight verses of a prayer of protection attributed to St Patrick. This choral piece might not move you, but it might grow on you, or you might grow with it. Pärt's "The Deer's Cry" was introduced to me as one of the pieces the Calvin Alumni Choir would sing at church services. When we first read through the song in December of 2019, I had mixed feelings. I loved the text, fondly recalling the embrace of that benediction. But I was confused by the title—"The Deer's Cry"? I was intrigued by the date noted on the musical score, AD 377. I'd been taking a spiritual foundations course, studying the mystics and saints from the fourth century through the twelfth. How did this fit in? Then I pondered the simplicity of the piece and its embedded silences. How would this play in a contemporary world? Could busy people leaning into the fullness of life's tasks still themselves long enough to allow this prayer of protection to settle into their spaces and souls?

Exploring the lives of St. Patrick and Arvo Pärt introduced me to two people living at very different times under very different circumstances. Yet both people, through threats, risk, and loss, experienced the centrality of Christ's communing presence in their exile places. This devotional, born from their stories, was initially prepared for February and March, appropriate for a St. Patrick story. Lent also seemed appropriately linked to the intertwining exile stories of a prayer poet and a composer. At the time, I had no idea that COVID-19 would permeate Lent, directing us into an unexpected, unplanned, modern-day exile where we would incorporate practices of physical and social distance from families, friends, workplaces, schools, churches, and a host of people we barely know who daily support our shopping, travel, and cultural experiences. Neither did I realize how much threat and risk and loss would occupy our preparation for and practice of exile. This March we live into the unexpected and unimagined: an at-home exile. Within the wilderness of lost familiarity,

increased thorny news conferences, unbounded screen engagements, and silences embedded in our regular routines, we seek God for protection, we still ourselves, and we settle into the promise of Christ with us. Perhaps St. Patrick & Pärt do play into this contemporary exile.

St. Patrick, a Roman by ancestry, lived along the English coast in the fifth century AD, 350 years after Christ. This was a time when others in Egypt, Italy, and Istanbul were choosing to retreat from the world in their search for God. Despite his grandfather's role as a cleric and his father's status as a Christian nobleman, young Patrick distanced himself from Christianity, embracing all the world had to offer—that is, until he was kidnapped by pirates (the stuff of movies!) and brought to what we now call Ireland.

Exiled from home and family, without the luxury of technological advancements, St. Patrick was enslaved and immersed in a pagan culture of witchcraft, spells, and spirits. In response, he reached for the thing he took for granted as a kid: the love of Christ. In an exile with massive loss and incomprehensible threats, Patrick found God real and present, and he immersed himself in a spiritual journey. In time, Patrick escaped, returned to England, received formal training in the church, created a following of monks, embraced a deepening understanding of a trinitarian God, and headed back to Ireland as a missionary despite constant threats on his life. Patrick was credited for evangelizing Ireland and became known as St. Patrick, celebrated every March amid shamrocks, corned beef, and sauerkraut.

No one really knows if Patrick actually penned the prayer; however, legend has it that this prayer of protection, the *Lorica*, was recited when he and his band of monks traveled about preaching. On one particular trip to the king's court, Patrick became aware of druids lying in wait to ambush and kill Patrick and his monks, so they chanted the sacred *Lorica*: ***Christ to shield me today against poisoning, against burning, against drowning, against wounding. ... 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 everyone 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.***

The druids reported they never saw St. Patrick and his monks that day and instead only saw a gentle doe followed by several fawns—thus the title of the prayer: “The Deer’s Cry,” which would be later called “St. Patrick’s Breastplate.” The prayer was adapted into the 1889 hymn “I Bind Unto Myself Today.”

St. Patrick's exile brought him into communion with Christ, into a place for discerning bold actions, and into a creative testimony: a prayer for protection that witnesses to the presence and power of trinitarian God. The prayer inspired by St. Patrick's exile experiences intersects with our places of exile.

Enter Arvo Pärt, Estonian composer of classical and sacred music. Born in 1935, Pärt fell in love with music as a boy biking through the countryside, hearing the music blasting from the public speakers strategically and politically positioned by the communist government for public consumption. “Sometimes when the wind carried these sounds into our backyard,” Pärt said, “it felt like finding the meaning of life.”

Pärt became an accomplished musician, and his neoclassically influenced compositions, deemed worthy for public consumption, filled the music halls and hearts of Estonians. But Pärt's increasing popularity threatened the boundaries of his communist political world. Those initial tensions intersected with Pärt's personal identity crises as a musician and as a Christian. His 1968 composition “Credo in Jesum Christum” marked two turning points in his life. He publicly renounced structures supporting power over people and instead embraced his Christian belief in living out love for others, even enemies, explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Pärt's provocative testimony of utmost devotion to

Christ as a response to evil in “Credo in Jesum Christum” became wildly popular among Estonians, escalating the concerns of the Soviet regime. As a result, the government censored “Credo” and banned Pärt’s past compositions from music hall performances. Pärt’s music was essentially exiled from his homeland.

The imposed silence simultaneously brought a self-imposed composing silence in which Pärt renounced modernist musical techniques and forms of expression and began searching for a new musical language that would give voice to his changing Christian values. Pärt speaks of his sense of being lost in a wilderness: “I didn’t know at the time was I going to be able to compose at all in the future. Those years of study were no conscious break, but life-and-death, agonizing inner conflict. I had lost my inner compass and I didn’t know anymore, what an interval or a key meant” (arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/biography/).

In almost a decade of musical exile, Pärt embraced uncertainty and stepped into a spiritual journey of exploring historical simplicity and silence within life and music. This musical exile gave birth in the late 1970s to a surprising and radical minimalist, Marie Kondo-like musical style which he called *tintinnabuli* (little bells). With this new voice, Pärt began composing pieces that were well-received by both Christians and secular artists, particularly in film.

The popularity of Pärt’s new compositions again created danger for him and his family, causing him to flee Estonia until 2010. During this exile from homeland Pärt was commissioned in 2007 for the composition “The Deer’s Cry.” Exile from an accomplished, life-giving musical style, exile from the sounds of his music being performed, exile in a political society prohibiting public Christian testimony, and exile into the wilderness of silence gave birth to a new musical style and new compositions.

The stories of exile woven into this choral piece cause me to think of our own exile stories. Perhaps the choral silences and musical simplicity of “The Deer’s Cry” and St. Patrick’s prayer can reside and resound within the exilic wilderness of our new ways of being and doing, within our wildly growing worry-weeds, and within our new kneeling places. Perhaps this place is the very place we can more fully embrace the promise of Christ with us, ever present.

God resides in our exile places. In fact, God waits for us before we even arrive in our wilderness places. In the silence of familiar, comfortable rhythms for flourishing, we encounter a peculiar exile that invites loss and pain, anxiety and uncertainty. St. Patrick and Arvo Pärt testify that flourishing can abound in our exile places, and in the meantime, there is a prayer for protection and a reminder: *Christ with us*.

Sample Reflective Practices

Play the song, allowing the music to wash over you and still your thoughts and fears.

Use image and word to explore your exile place. What might God be calling you to in the silence of your familiar space? What bold change might Christ be asking you to imagine in this space?

Consider those in exile where wilderness hardships extend beyond your experience: those without internet or food or income. Pray the Prayer of Protection for them.

In the silence of your regular routine you might be tempted to press into new ways of being and doing. Intentionally set aside time each day to brush aside the press of news, weeds of worry, and virtual social engagement. Relax your body, open your hands, and breathe deeply, allowing yourself to be held within the promise of Christ with you.

Note: The stories of St. Patrick and Arvo Pärt in this devotional were crafted from information on several different websites. An attempt to accurately retell very small slices of a person’s story risks missing key aspects of their lives and God’s work in and through them. I encourage you to read more about these two Christ-followers.

Comments

0 Comments

Sort by **Oldest**

Add a comment...

Facebook Comments Plugin



Debra Paxton-Buursma

Find more

COVID-19 and Worship: Resources for Churches Adapting to Social Isolation

As containment of COVID-19 forces your worshipping community to implement shelter-in-place worship and practice social isolation, we offer these resources to help you plan and cope in ways that encourage and support your community. These resources were initially created from events and in response to different situations and can be adapted for worship that encourages prayer and Christian community during this time of social distancing necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

[Read more »](#)

Prayers of God's People during COVID-19

Prayers of God's People during COVID-19 written by Rev. Larry Doornbos

[Read more »](#)

Neal Plantinga on His "God Go Before You" Blessing

Cornelius "Neal" Plantinga Jr, president emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary, often gives a specific benediction that blesses worshipers.

[Read more »](#)

Calvin Institute of Christian Worship

for the study and renewal of worship

1855 Knollcrest Circle SE Grand Rapids, MI 49546-4402 USA

(616) 526-6088 worship@calvin.edu

On the campus of [Calvin University](#) and [Calvin Theological Seminary](#).

See our related website, PreachingandWorship.org

Unless otherwise specified, content on this website is licensed as Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0.

Social Media Directory



@ Join our mailing list



Calvin Institute of Chri...
8,063 likes

A screenshot of a Facebook page interface. At the top, there is a banner image of a landscape with a field and trees. Below the banner are two buttons: 'Like Page' and 'Learn More'. Below these buttons is a white box with a thin border containing the text 'Be the first of your friends to like this'.