

Christmas is a season for storytelling, and today I'm going to share the legend of St Brigid of Kildare, a 5<sup>th</sup> century abbess, who along with St. Patrick and St. Columba, is revered as one of the patron saints of Ireland. Legends are stories that preserve deep truths, and because they are primarily handed down in oral, rather than written tradition, they also come to be told in different ways by different storytellers, each of them reweaving and embroidering the story in his or her own way, so what I'm going to tell you is only one of **many** versions of Brigid's story.

Brigid grew up as the daughter of a pagan Irish chieftain. Her mother was a Christian, but when Brigid was very young, her mother was sent away by her father who then remarried. Brigid remembered all the Bible stories her mother had told her, though, and Brigid had decided that she wanted to live a life of love and generosity that she had learned from the example of Jesus. So even as a child, whenever she came across someone in need, Brigid would give away whatever she had – because the Gospel said that to serve others was the same as serving Christ himself, and that was what she most dearly wanted to do. The only problem was that she really didn't have much of her **own** to give away. All she had technically belonged to her father, and her generosity to every passing beggar infuriated him. He saw no hope of ever finding her a husband if she behaved like this....but that didn't trouble Brigid - she wanted to join a religious community and live out her life and faith in that way instead. As far as her pagan father was concerned, this was an even **worse** fate than being without a husband, and he despaired of her plans.

One day Brigid's father left their home to attend to some business in a nearby village. It was a difficult time in Ireland. Famine had struck the land and everyone was struggling to find enough to eat, and Brigid's family was no exception. They had only a bit of bread and a few scant provisions, so before he left he firmly said to her, "Please promise me that while I'm gone you won't give anything away, because if you give it away we will have nothing to eat for ourselves." Not long after her father had gone, she saw a young couple coming up the road toward the house. They looked tired – another starving family just like so many she had seen lately. As they came nearer she saw that the woman was very pregnant and close to exhaustion. The man looked desperately at Brigid. "Do you have any food you could spare for my wife who is about to give birth?"

Brigid remembered her father's words. But she knew she couldn't let this woman go hungry, not with a child on the way. So she invited them in and gave them what little was on the shelf. "You need it more than we do", she said. The young couple rested for a while, but as the afternoon wore on, they left to continue their journey. As luck would have it though, just as they set off down the road, Brigid's father came riding back home. He saw the couple, and then he saw Brigid standing at the doorway watching them go, he knew what she had done. "Have you disobeyed me? Have you given our last food to those beggars?" "But father," she said, "they needed it more than we do." "This is the last straw," he said. "We will surely starve because of your foolishness. You might as well go and live in your precious monastery. In fact, go now. I never want to see you again!" It was all Brigid needed to hear: she started walking down the road, taking nothing with her but the clothes on her back.

In short order, Brigid founded a monastery, gathering nuns and monks who admired her generosity of spirit and her dedication to looking after all who needed help in the villages around them. Many years passed, and then one night, just before Christmas, Brigid was awakened from a deep sleep by someone urgently calling out, “Brigid, come and help us!” Thinking it must be someone outside the monastery looking for help, she got up, wrapped her cloak around her and stepped out of her cell. But instead of finding herself in the cloister of the monastery, she found herself on a strange hillside. How could this be? Down at the bottom of the hill she saw a small stable, with a dim light coming from it. Again she heard the shout, “Brigid, come and help us!” and it seemed to be coming from the stable. Brigid hurried down the hill and went inside – and there she found a worried looking man, and his wife who was in labour was lying on the bare earthen floor amid the straw. Brigid looked closer and realized it was the same couple she’d given her last piece of bread to all those years ago. Brigid knew that something very strange was happening - many years had passed for her, but for them it was as if they had only just left her, but there was no time to ask questions. Brigid had acted as midwife for many women in her own village, and she knew just what to do. So she reassured the woman that all would be well and very soon, with her help the woman gave birth to a fine strong baby boy. After his parents held him and admired him together, Brigid took him so that they could rest. Soon they were fast asleep, leaving her with the baby. She took off her plain, homespun cloak and wrapped it round him to keep him warm. She laid him down in the animals’ feeding trough, and sang him a lullaby – and as she sang to him it seemed to her that somehow all creation was singing with her – the birds and the beasts, all the angels in heaven and the people of earth. And Brigid knew who this child was, and who the young couple were too – this was the Christ Child and she had delivered him safely into the world. The child fell asleep, and Brigid stretched out on the ground and slept as well.

But when she awoke in the morning she found herself, not in the stable but back in her own bed, in her own cell in her own monastery. “It must have all been a dream,” she said, “though it seemed so real. Still, it was a good dream, and I am glad to have had it, for aren’t we all called to bring Christ into the world in the things we do for others?” And then she got up and went to put on her cloak, which was hung in its usual place on the back of the door – her plain, homespun cloak. But something strange had happened in the night. Woven into the plain brown cloak there now were threads of gold. And the pattern they made formed pictures all over the cloak, pictures of birds and beasts, and all the angels of heaven and all the people of earth, singing for joy at the birth of their Saviour.

And that’s my story, and you can believe that it happened if you want to...

but even if you don’t, **its carries an important truth**, because like Brigid, whenever we come to the help of another, we help the holy child of hope and joy and peace to be born again. Brigid is known and blessed the world over as the midwife of Mary, but she would have wanted each of **us** to claim that title too, to bring Christ into the world in the things we do for others – not just at Christmas but all the time.

There is a beautiful painting by John Duncan hanging in the National Gallery of Scotland which depicts angels transporting the sleeping Brigid to Bethlehem on her midwife’s errand. Today as we contemplate the mystery that the Creator of the Stars came to live as one of us, may the legend of Brigid open our hearts for the God of time and space to carry **us** away to acts of mercy, generosity, and love. For this we pray and together say Amen.