

Sunday 31st January – ‘Imbolc and Candlemas’

Led by Sheila Evans

Opening Music ‘Nunc Dimittis’ by W.Byrd

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGbGd073gfo>

Welcome

Welcome to each and every one of you, whoever you are and however you are feeling. You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time. Welcome, wherever you are and however you join us: whether ‘live’ on-line, or watching a recording later; or if you are reading a printed copy of this service. Today, we celebrate the twin festivals of the ancient Pagan and Celtic Christian *Imbolc*, and of the Christian *Candlemas*, commemorating the presentation of the Infant Jesus at the Temple during Mary’s first visit there since his birth. It is a season of hope and new beginnings, particularly poignant at this time.

Chalice Lighting words by modern Unitarian Universalist Minister Rev Dr Linda Hart

We light this chalice as a symbol of the spark of life which abides within us and around us. May it be as a light in a dark night, a light in a window that welcomes the weary traveller home. May it be as a light in the hand of a trusted friend, that guides us along the path. May it be as the light in the face of one we love, bright with joy.

Opening Words ‘In February’ by Alice Meynell

(19th and early 20th Century English writer, poet, critic, and suffragist).

Rich meanings of the prophet-Spring adorn,
Unseen, this colourless sky of folded showers,
And folded winds; no blossom in the bowers;
A poet's face asleep in this grey morn.
Now in the midst of the old world forlorn
A mystic child is set in these still hours.
I keep this time, even before the flowers,
Sacred to all the young and the unborn.

1st Hymn: from the Purple Book No. 2 “A promise through the ages rings”

A promise through the ages rings,
That always, always, something sings.
Not just in May, in finch-filled bower,
But in December’s coldest hour,
A note of hope sustains us all.

A life is made of many things:
Bright stars, bleak years, and broken rings.
Can it be true that through all things,
There always, always, something sings?
The universal song of life.

Entombed within our deep despair,
Our pain seems more than we can bear;
But days shall pass and nature knows
That deep beneath the winter snows
A rose lies curled and hums its song.

For something, something always sings.
This is the message Easter brings:
From deep despair and perished things
A green shoot always, always springs,
And something always, always sings.

Prayer ‘A winter prayer — anticipating spring’ adapted from a prayer by Jeff Bowes
As we think of the turn of the season, drawing nearer each day, we know whatever the
coming months may bring, we may still share great hopes for the future.
In every year we have lived, Spring has faithfully followed the gloomiest of winters.
From that faithfulness we learn to have hope....

Hope for ourselves -
no matter how chill we may feel the winters to be, no matter how hard our lives may be

no matter how dispirited we may become
we can and we do, come to a springtime of light and love and life and growth.

Because we have hope for ourselves, we may have hope for others;

Hope for our family and friends — even though many of us have to keep physically distant from them, from neighbours and acquaintances, colleagues and fellow-workers. So, sometimes its hard to understand one another, and we may we feel ‘ice-bound’.

In other lands, where relations between states are icy, the people suffer from conflict and hardship. Our hope for them is that, like the warmth of the love we see and feel in the faithful return of the spring, there will be a thaw in these difficult relationships, to ease the hardship
caused to so many.

We know that the damp and mists are signs that the earth is warming once again.

As our land turns again toward the sun, the days lengthen and fresh growth begins, may we see that even through tears and sorrows we can turn, in our hearts and minds, toward that which is light and life in all we have. May we too, turn, and be warmed *AMEN*

A story – how the Snowdrop came to be

There is a story about the origin of snowdrops. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit and so they were outcast from Paradise, the Garden of Eden. They sat outside the Garden of Eden in the lonely wilderness where no flowers blossomed and no birds sang. The earth was barren and unembellished. The trees were without fruits or flowers and the grasses were brown and dry. It was cold, snow was falling. Adam and Eve remembered the beautiful greenery and the colourful flowers of the garden which had been so lovely to live in. Eve shivered in the bitter cold and sat sobbing. God in heaven looked down and saw her weeping.

He took pity and sent an angel to watch over them. The angel appeared to console Eve. The angel took a handful of snowflakes, ordered them to become flowers once they touched the earth, and blew on them. As the snowflakes came in contact with the earth, they sprang up into beautiful white flowers. Eve smiled in joy as she saw the flowers

bloom. The angel told Eve, “Take heart, dear Eve, be hopeful and don’t despair. Let this little snowdrop be a sign to you that the summer and the sunshine will come again.” A number of snowdrops sprang up in the snow. This is how the snowdrop came to be a symbol of hope, the promise of the end of winter and the arrival of spring.

Reading *The Infant Jesus is presented the Temple* Luke 2: 22–40 NRSV

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord) and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with

fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him

Reflection

Take a moment for reflection, to spend a moment or two in quietness:

Consider the winter, soon drawing to a close..... the gradual lengthening of the days..... the bareness of trees awaiting spring's warmth ... the first snowdrops to emerge and flower

last autumn's fallen leaves to be taken up again by the soil as nutrients, part of Nature's endless cycle of life and death signs of life within our own gardens, as plants that seemed dead just a month ago are now beginning to show green ...

all hold the promise that though the current difficulties seem endless, they too will pass, and better times lie ahead

Pause in silence and reflect on your concerns at this time, for yourself, for others and for the world. You may like to light a candle as you do. And you are welcome to give thanks for your blessings, too, and offer up your thoughts to the God of your understanding.

After a short silence, you may like to listen to this music, found at the following link, or to any piece of music which you find calming.

Reflective music: 'Morceaux de Concours' by Fauré, Flute & Piano

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MBIPp3vyyA>

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## **ADDRESS – “Imbolc and Candlemas – a time of Hope”**

“A Promise through the Ages rings, that always, always, something sings.” How true ring those words from our opening hymn. Just a few days ago, a robin was singing, almost defiantly, on a bare branch in a tree in the local park, as I was stepping out for my daily exercise. It was still daylight at a quarter to 5 and really lifted my spirits! As January gives way to February, the increase in daylight hours becomes noticeable, at this midway point between the Shortest day, six weeks ago and the March Equinox, officially the start of Spring. I hope it lifts your spirits too, to see the days ‘getting out a little’, as my Mum used to say, with signs of the natural world gradually reawakening from its mid-winter hibernation. It seems to offer a promise of better times ahead, although, like the end of winter, still some way off yet... And how we all need that promise, now more than ever, at the end of a dark year unlike any in living memory!

This midseason, with its promise of reawakening and newness, was very important to the ancient Celts, who celebrated the festival of Imbolc (pronounced 'im'olk' or 'oi-melc') in early February. The word Imbolc comes from an old Irish word thought to mean 'in the belly', because the sheep, heavily pregnant, with lambs 'in the belly' gave birth around this time, as do many today. Imbolc also means 'ewe's milk'. Imbolc was one of the cornerstones of the Celtic calendar, tied in with the farming year. For them the success of the new farming season was of great importance to ensure food supplies. Rituals, on special days, or “Sabbaths” were performed at quarterly intervals throughout the year, in February, May, August and November, in the hope of harnessing divine energy to ensure a steady supply of food. Celtic festivals throughout the year centered around the lighting of fires, but especially so at Imbolc, because it was also the holy day of Brigid (also known as Bride, Brigit, Brid), the Goddess of fire, healing and fertility. The lighting of fires at Imbolc celebrated the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months. The ancient people, without the benefits of our modern heating and lighting, would be deeply aware of what was going on in the natural world. They recognised strength in cold and heat, death and life, so their rituals drew on the life enhancing power of fire, to provide heat, and especially light, to alleviate the darkness. These rituals have been traced as far back as Palaeolithic era, before organized farming, to mark the opening of the breeding seasons for wild animals which were hunted for food.

Christianity came to Ireland around 400AD. The goddess Brigid was transformed into a saint, St. Brigid of Kildare, and the first day of February became her feast day. The saint

and goddess both essentially perform the same functions: watching over babies, the home, and other female-centric things. As time progressed, the more “manly” attributes of the goddess — like gifting poets and blacksmiths with their talent, were taken away from the females. Imbolc has also been associated with weather predictions since pre-Christian Ireland. If it is raining and/or cold on Imbolc, then spring will come early, but warm/sunny weather on this day means at least six more weeks of hard winter chills.

Cormac, Archbishop of Cashel in the tenth century, referred to the ancient rituals, and noted that even in his time “four great fires were lighted up on the four great festivals of the Druids, viz.: in February, May, August, and November”.

In the Christian Church the holy day of Brigid became equated with the feast of the Purification of Mary the mother of Jesus, 40 days after his birth, which in our calendar is February 2nd. In certain cultures, including the Jewish tradition, women were considered ‘unclean’ after the birth of a child. For 40 days after the birth of a boy, (60 days for a girl), women weren't allowed to worship in the temple. They could only take part in religious services again after undergoing a ritual and making a sacrificial offering of an animal. Rich women offered a lamb; poor women like Mary, a pair of turtle doves or pigeons. As we heard in the reading from Luke’s Gospel, Mary went to the Temple in Jerusalem to make the traditional offering to purify herself, and present her baby to God. There, old Simeon recognized the baby as the Messiah of Israel, and a “light to lighten the Gentiles” but he foretold that unhappiness also lay ahead. Anna, the elderly widow, also remarked on this particular baby. So here we find again, the idea of the Light come to redeem the darkness.

The medieval church made much of this symbolism, of the idea of the divine light of heaven coming to cast out the darkness of human sin, promising renewal and rebirth of light in the dark time of the year. The churches celebrated with a festival of lights, when the priest would bless candles for the year ahead, not only for church use, but also for the common people. Just imagine, in the days before electric light, how brightly the dim medieval churches would be lit by a procession of members of the congregation, each carrying a lighted candle, to be blessed the priest. A special Mass for the candle blessing was said – Candlemas(s). The blessed candles were taken home and used to ward off storms, demons and other evils. This custom lasted in England until it was banned during the Reformation, as being superstitious and likened to idolatry. Even so, the symbolism

of the lighted candles remained strong in the Celtic fringes of the British Isles as late as the 19th century. In Wales, lit candles were put in the windows and special Candlemas carols were sung by singers going from house to house, rather like modern Christmas carolsingers.

Some people actually regarded the Christmas season as including Candlemas, and so lasting 40 days! The one day of celebrations we were allowed last Christmas seems extremely meagre in comparison; maybe the putting up of decorations several weeks in advance was a form of compensation!

In some places, such as in Shropshire, snowdrops, the first flowers of spring, took the place of candles, being called "Candlemas bells," "Purification flowers" or – maybe in remembrance of Brigid, "Fair Maids of February." They are seen as signs of hope, sometimes against all odds, and the Mesothilia support organisation has adopted the snowdrop as its symbol. Maybe someone in their organization knew this poem, which expresses this so clearly:

*'Snowdrops' by Louise Gluck*

Do you know what I was, how I lived? You know  
what despair is; then  
winter should have meaning for you.

I did not expect to survive,  
earth suppressing me. I didn't expect  
to waken again, to feel  
in damp earth my body  
able to respond again, remembering  
after so long how to open again  
in the cold light  
of earliest spring--

afraid, yes, but among you again  
crying yes risk joy  
in the raw wind of the new world



On Dartmoor it was always important to take down any remaining Christmas greenery, for fear of inviting a death in the household during the coming year. If it wasn't done by the traditional date of 6<sup>th</sup> January, it had to be done by Candlemas! The 17<sup>th</sup> century poet Robert Herrick, who lived in Devon for several years, wrote this verse on the ceremonies of Candlemas Eve:

“Down with the rosemary, and so  
Down with the bays and mistletoe;  
Down with holly, ivy, all.  
Wherewith ye dressed the Christmas Hall;  
That so the superstitious find  
No one least branch there left behind;  
For look, how many leaves there be  
Neglected, there (maids trust to me)  
So many goblins you shall see.”

Surely here's a reference to spring cleaning? Of our own individual homes, and of our minds and ideas, certainly. The customs and rituals of this midseason may be interpreted in many ways, dependent upon one's individual belief system.

It is a time to reassess our lives, are they going in the direction we really wish? How can we improve our relationships with our nearest and dearest, and also within the wider human community? What dust must we clear away, what ideas re-evaluate, to make room for a fresher outlook for the new season ahead? At this time, when so many crises seem to converge upon the whole of the world, these questions apply to human society as a whole, on a global scale: the goblins of pandemic, divisions and inequalities of race, education, wealth, in society, and over-riding it all, climate change. It is up to us *all, to look after our own patch and beyond*, to ensure that post-pandemic, we make a kinder, cleaner, fairer better world for all. We yearn for this even as the most rational, and non-superstitious amongst us will surely feel gladness at the promise of warmer days and new growth to come, and to join again in the laughter and gladness and singing we all hope they will eventually bring.

I close with this short piece by Larry Peacock entitled 'February Prayer'

God of the winter sky, fill the night with stars,  
For I need to lift my eyes and raise my weary soul  
From shadows and short days,  
From dreary tasks and unending lists.  
Shine bright lights into the darkness  
And remind me that new life and dormant seeds  
Gather strength in the depths of the earth.  
Open me to the newness inside me  
Waiting to be born.... *AMEN*

**2nd hymn:** from Purple Book No 86 'Lady of the Seasons' Laughter'

Lady of the Season's Laughter,  
In the summer's warmth be near;  
When the winter follows after,  
Teach our spirits not to fear.  
Hold us in your steady mercy,  
Lady of the turning year.

Sister of the evening starlight,  
In the falling shadows stay  
Here among us 'til the far light  
Of tomorrow's dawning ray.  
Hold us in your steady mercy,  
Lady of the turning day.

Mother of the generations,  
In whose love all life is worth  
Everlasting celebrations,  
Bring our labours safe to birth.  
Hold us in your steady mercy,  
Lady of the turning earth.

Goddess of all times' progression,  
Stand with us when we engage  
Hands and hearts to end oppression,  
Writing history's fairer page.  
Hold us in your steady mercy,  
Lady of the turning age.

**Closing Words** 'Morning invocation' adapted from words by Tess Ward:

Spirit of light and love, reveal yourself to me today,  
Stop my feet in their daily tracks,  
that I do not miss today in some vague hope of tomorrow.  
Unfold my prayer to wisdom,  
That I might discern love's purpose in today's events.  
Open my eyes to see your presence in another human life.  
Deepen my insight to recognize such moments.  
May I go in peace this day ..... *AMEN*

**Closing Music:** 'Peaceful Moment' from 'Standing Stone' by McCartney  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V5-H6FA3YLI>

*Extinguish Chalice*