

**Opening Music:** 'Imbolc - Winter's End' by Katy Boyd

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/-Tu7fUmWsQE?si=coDZNOvfcoQsuJaE>

## Welcome

to each and every one of you, whoever you are and however you are feeling, and whatever you bring in your heart – joy, sadness, uncertainty or curiosity! .

You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time. Welcome whether you are in church, or joining us via the wonders of technology on Zoom, or watching the recording online later.

Today, we celebrate the twin festivals of the ancient Pagan and Celtic Christian Imbolc, and 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 lighter days and snowdrops, of hope and new beginnings.

## Chalice Lighting:

We light this chalice as a symbol of the spark of life which abides within us and around us.

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.

*Rev Dr Linda Hart*

## Opening Words by John Bunyan

At Candlemas let candles shine,  
The dark and gloom to banish;  
With cheer adorn the house of GOD,  
That all our fear may vanish.

For here we find, to treasure well,  
A gift that grows by giving:  
The sharing of GOD's candlelight,  
The light of love for living.

## 1<sup>st</sup> Hymn: PBk No.158 'The Flame of truth is kindled'

The flame of truth is kindled,  
our chalice burning bright;  
amongst us moves the Spirit  
in whom we take delight.  
We worship here in freedom  
With conscience unconstrained,  
A pilgrim people thankful  
Of what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled.  
we celebrate the mind,  
its search for dee[est meaning  
that time bound creeds can't bind.  
We celebrate its oneness  
with body and with soul,  
with universal process,  
with God who makes us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,  
 we open wide our hearts,  
 that it may burn within us,  
 fuel us to do our parts.  
 Community needs building,  
 A Commonwealth of Earth,  
 we ask for strength to build it –  
 a new world come to birth.

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## **Prayers:**

### **Prayer for others and ourselves:**

Let us pause and hold in our thoughts & prayers those of our own church community and their loved ones, and all in our city, and throughout the wider world, all experiencing illness, difficult, sad or worrying times, whatever the causes.

We hold in our thoughts & prayers all whose lives have been lost or changed forever through violence due to political and social unrest, natural disasters, accident or plain misfortune. We think today especially of the continuing conflicts in many places. May those claiming to be the leaders of all those countries be blessed with compassion and wisdom to prevent further destruction. May those fleeing conflict, mostly the vulnerable:

the young, the sick, women and the elderly, find sanctuary and peace. May the places to which they flee somehow find the strength and resources to provide what they need. May the fragile cease fire in Gaza and release of Israeli and Palestinian hostages continue, also enabling desperately needed aid to reach all in need.

We hold in our prayers all whose lives and livelihoods been affected or lost by the fires in California, and the plane/helicopter crash in Washington.

Let us pray that the tensions within our own society, can be resolved through dialogue, and discussion, so that everyone, whatever their differences, may co-exist peaceably.

Let us pause just for a few moments in the quietness of our own thoughts, to consider both the blessings and the trials of our own lives, and dedicate ourselves to sharing our blessings and to doing what we can to ease the trials of others *AMEN*

### **A prayer of Rev Cliff Reed's**

Spirit of light and love, in the darkness of centuries we have sought the light, we have revered those in whom it has shown to illuminate the path.

But we have feared the light also, and we have snuffed out those in whom the flame burned too brightly. They lit up corners we would rather have kept in shadow.

Recall us to our seeking, and may we see again the divine truth – flaming brightly in the lantern-souls of humankind. Help us to receive the light and make it ours.

May we be united - beyond all barriers of time and space – with all those whose spirits have been kindled by your spirit. May we leave behind the hatred and arrogance of the darkness: share the glimpses of the brilliance that each has seen – and make us light bearers to those who fear the night. *AMEN*

**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.

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading:** The Infant Jesus is presented at 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

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading:** 'In February' by - Alice Meynell

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.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn:** PBk No 148 'Spirit of Life' One verse sung twice

Spirit of Life, come unto me.  
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.  
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;  
move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.  
Roots hold me close, wings set me free;  
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

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**3<sup>rd</sup> Reading:** 'February Prayer' by Larry Peacock

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

### **Candles of concern**

Now I now invite anyone with a special concern, who might wish, to come to the front, and light a candle – either in silence, or to speak the name of your special concern,

~ **Pause for Reflection** ~

**Reflective Music: Taize Chant 'Nunc Dimitis'**

Find it here <https://youtu.be/XkVoRt73-4U>

### **ADDRESS – 'IMBOLC AND CANDLEMAS'**

Candlemas, Imbolc, call it what you will - is a season of Hope. Well - don't you feel more hopeful and your spirits lifted to see the days 'drawing out'? In the past fortnight, the increase in daylight has become really noticeable – both morning and evening despite some dreadful weather. It seems as though Spring can't be *too* far off. This weekend, is midway between the Shortest day, 6 weeks

ago, and just over 6 weeks until the Spring Equinox. These ever lengthening days are re-awakening the natural world from its winter hibernation, with snowdrops, hazel catkins and crocuses brightening our gardens and parks. The brighter light also penetrates the dark corners in our homes, showing up the dust and cobwebs - a spring clean is needed !

Maybe that is why when the Romans introduced this month it into their calendar around 700 BC Era, they named it 'February' from the Latin word 'Februa' meaning cleansing or purification. This reflected the ancient purification rituals carried out in anticipation of true Spring.

This half-way, midseason was important in many ancient cultures. Ancient Celts celebrated the festival, of Imbolc (pronounced 'im'olk' or Oimelc) in early February, The word comes from an old Irish word meaning 'in the belly', or 'ewe's milk' (oi-melc), for heavily pregnant sheep started dropping their lambs, in February, as they do in modern times.

**Imbolc**, in February, was one of the cornerstones of the Celtic calendar, the others being in May, August, and November. At Imbolc, the stores of food were running low, so rituals, involving the lighting of fires, were performed in the hope of harnessing divine energy to ensure a steady supply of food until the harvest six months later.

The Imbolc celebration, was also the holy day of Brigid (also known as Bride, Brigit, Brid), the Goddess of fire, healing and fertility. People lit fires to celebrate the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months. These ancient people, without our modern heating and lighting, were deeply aware of what was going on in the natural world. They recognised strength in cold *and* heat, death *and* life. Their rituals and celebrations, drew on the life enhancing power of fire, its ability to provide heat, light, and purification.

When the Christians arrived, they subsumed pagan festivals into Christian feast-days. Cormac, Christian archbishop of Cashel in the tenth century, refers to the ancient rituals, noting that "four great fires were lighted up on the four great festivals of the Druids, viz.: in February, May, August, and November".

So Brigid became 'St Brigid'. With her feast day, at the beginning of February.

Forty days after Christmas, the Feast of the Nativity, was linked to the feast of the Purification of Mary the mother of Jesus, 40 days after his birth. Ritual purification is a Jewish tradition: women were considered 'unclean' after the birth of a child. For 40 days after the birth of a boy, (half as much again for a girl), women were forbidden to worship in the Temple. At the end of this time, women went to the Temple or Synagogue to be purified, and could then take part in religious services again

As we heard in our first reading, from Luke's Gospel, Mary went to the Temple at Jerusalem to make the traditional offering to purify herself, and present Jesus, her first born son, to God. As she entered the temple, old Simeon recognized the baby as the Messiah of Israel, and a "light to lighten the Gentiles" but he also foretold that unhappiness lay ahead. Anna, the elderly widow, remarked on this particular baby too. So we encounter the archetype of the young Sun or Light come to redeem the darkness, but now in Christian clothing.

**Candlemas:** So, we have the ancient fire festival, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple and his mother's purification ceremony, but how does the Christian 'Candlemas' fit in? An old reading for this festival contains the line from Zephaniah 1: 12, "I will search Jerusalem with candles" The medieval Christian church made much of this and of the symbolism of the divine light of heaven coming to cast out the darkness of human sin, and of renewal and rebirth of light in the dark time of the year. So, on this day, priests would say a special mass - Candle Mass, for the blessing of their stock of beeswax candles for use throughout the year. Members of the congregation took blessed candles home, to ward off storms, demons and other evils. In

England this custom was banned during the Reformation, for being superstitious and likened to idolatory. Even so, the symbolism of the lighted candles remained strong in the Celtic fringes of the British Isles. In Wales, as late as the 19th century, lighted candles were put in the windows and Special Candlemas carols sung by groups going from house to house, rather like modern day Christmas carol singers.

Some people actually included Candlemas in the Christmas season, so it lasted 40 days! Various customs and traditions became associated with this. Dartmoor folks thought it was important to take down any remaining Christmas greenery, for fear of inviting bad luck into the house. The poet priest Robert Herrick, lived in Devon for some years, and wrote this verse on the **ceremonies of Candlemas Eve** (Hesperides, 1852, p.92) :

“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.”

a reference here to spring cleaning? of our houses, *and* our minds – a time to reassess our lives - are they going in the direction we really wish? How could we improve our relationships with not only our nearest and dearest, but also within the wider community? What dust must we clear away, what ideas re-evaluate, to make room for a fresher outlook for the new season ahead?

Old country rhymes superstitiously linked Candlemas to weather patterns, eg

“If Candlemas Day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another fight.  
If Candlemas Day brings cloud and rain,  
Winter won't come again”

Often snowdrops, the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 have long been regarded as signs of hope, and have inspired many a poet, ancient and modern. The Mesothilia support organisation has adopted the snowdrop as a symbol of hope.

So, customs and rituals of this midseason may be interpreted, dependent upon one's individual belief system... May even the totally rational, & non-superstitious amongst us experience hopeful feelings at the promise of better weather, new growth and opportunities ahead, and feel the spirit of life within us all. *AMEN*

### **Final Hymn: PBk No 30 ‘Each seeking Faith’**

Each seeking faith is seeking light,  
and light dawns on our seeking,  
when clashing tongues combine  
to pray that light will shine,  
and guide and gather all on earth  
in peaceful greeting.

Each seeking faith is seeking truth,

Plymouth Unitarian Church  
for truth is lived by seeking,  
and though our faiths conflict,  
no dogma can restrict  
the power of truth set free on earth  
in honest meeting.

Imbolc/Candlemass)

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2025

Each loving faith is seeking peace,  
And peace is made by seeking  
To spin the strands of trust  
In patterns free and just,  
Till every family on earth  
Is in safe keeping.

Each living faith is seeking life,  
And life flows through our seeking  
To treasure, feel and show  
The heart of what we know.  
In every faith the Light, the Life,  
is shining, speaking.

*Words Brian Wren, b. 1936 ©1989, 2003 Stainer and Bell Ltd, 23 Gruneison Road, London N3 1DZ  
Music 'Middleton' David Dawson, 1939 -2021 Used by permission.*

**Closing Words: 'Morning invocation'** adapted from one 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*

### **Extinguish Chalice**

**Closing Music:** 'Song of Imbolc' Goddess Brigid chant by Flora Ware with Heidi McCurdy  
Find it here: <https://youtu.be/u9khSzVqWHU?si=zxjWxyyxb7rBdM6P>