

Opening Music: ‘Winter’s End’ ‘Imbolc - Winter’s End’ by Katy Boyd

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

Welcoming words – 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 welcome, whatever your faith or none.

You are especially welcome if you are joining us for the first time, whether you are here in church 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: by Rev. Andrew Hill

This flame glows as light glows in the darkness.

This flame dances as growing things dance upon the green earth.

This flame flickers for a precious while in each of us.

This flame is warm as the companionship of family and friends is warm.

Opening Words: Introduction to the Wheel of the Year

The Wheel of the Year can help us to understand the rhythms of the seasons and our connection to the land. The main impulse of all the seasonal festivals is one of worship and interaction with the cycle of nature. The Wheel is celebrated in many different traditions, and most traditions celebrate eight seasonal festivals which mark various points of the year, and its progress through the cycle of birth, growth, death and rebirth.

Many people will be familiar with the four Quarter Days- the Solstices of Yule (mid-winter) and Litha (mid-summer); and the Equinoxes, Ostara (spring) and Mabon (autumn).

The other four festivals are the so-called Cross-Quarter Days which correspond to agricultural needs and tend to be more mystical. They are: Imbolc (Candlemas); Beltane; Lughnasad (Lammas); and Samain (Halloween). Today, we mark Imbolc and Candlemas - celebrating the goddess Brigit and the festival of the first spring.

1st Hymn: Purple Book 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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1st First 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 so called cease fire In Gaza be consolidated following the final release of Israeli hostages. May unrest in Iran and may other countries come to a peaceful conclusion. We hold in our thoughts and prayers all 'prisoners of conscience' wherever they may be.

We hold in our prayers all whose lives and livelihoods been affected or lost by fierce storms and other environmental disasters around the world. 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*

2) A winter prayer — anticipating spring 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 relationships can seem chilly and distant for our neighbours and acquaintances, colleagues and fellow-workers — sometimes our attempts to understand & move toward another can fail, making us feel 'ice-bound'.

In other lands, where relations between states are icy cold, 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*

1st Reading/story: 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.

Poem: ‘On a February Visit to Dartington’ by Dave Allen Inspired by a Unitarian Church Sunday walk at Dartington

The Monster oak bereft of green
Shelters a myriad of flowers:
Crocuses, daffodils, snowdrops may all be seen
Beneath the giant’s bowers.

Shafts of sun piercing forbidding clouds
Briefly light the colourful scene,
Before the darkness reappears and shrouds
The blossoms where the briefest warmth had been.

Hedges trimmed to the *nth* degree
Protecting the passers-by;
Hellebores and primroses, vying to be free
Of the shade, demanding their share of the sky.

Well trodden paths and grassy banks,
The occasional bird on the wing;
For this abundance of joy I give my thanks,
And will surely return, for further delights, in the spring!

2nd 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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2nd Reading:**The Infant Jesus is presented at the Temple Luke 2: 22–40 New Revised Standard Version**

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

Candles of Concern and hope:

Anyone here is welcome to light a candle in thanks or in concern for oneself, loved ones, persons known or unknown, or a cause dear to their hearts.

Meditation on the candles:

"Take a few moments and meditate on the light of your candles.

Think about this festival,
a time of healing and inspiration and purification.

Do you have something damaged that needs to be healed?

Are you feeling stagnant, for lack of inspiration?

Is there some part of your life that feels toxic or tainted?

Visualise the light as a warm, enveloping energy that wraps itself around you, healing your ailments, igniting the spark of creativity, and purifying that which is damaged."

A short silence followed by Reflective video:

‘Nunc Dimitiss’ taize : Mary & Jesus with Ann and Simeon 3 mins 17sec

find it here: <https://youtu.be/XkVoRt73-4U?si=2I04Ob31CozAZSQW>

~ ADDRESS – Imbolc and Candlemas – first signs of Spring ~

Welcome to a new month! Its February! January, which many people say seems to last about 300 days instead of 31, has gone, and with it, the darkest time of the year. Doesn't it lift your spirits to see the days 'getting out a little'? In the past couple of weeks, this increase in daylight hours has become really noticeable – both morning and evening. Yesterday I could read and do things around the house without switching on the light until well gone 5 pm. It seems as though Spring can't be *too* far off, despite the recent *awe-ful*, in the truest sense of the word, weather.

This week, in the northern hemisphere, is the midway point between the Shortest day, at the Winter Solstice on December 21st, and the northern Spring Equinox, official first day of Spring, on March 20th. These brighter days not only lift *our* spirits, they cause the natural world to gradually reawaken from its mid-winter hibernation. In the church garden a few snowdrops are shining out against the soil, and in my own garden leucojums, a species of long stemmed snowdrop, are blooming. Its a sight to lift one's spirits, as they did Eve's in the story read by Ann. I've brought a few in today, and put them up here (in the pulpit) for you all to enjoy. Wildlife is stirring too. We aren't out of the woods yet as regards weather, of course. 'February fill dyke' often lives up to its name, with much rain or even snow, filling the ditches, but there is a sense that it can't last *too* long. When the sun shines, its very bright in rain washed skies, penetrating the dark corners indoors, as well as out, showing up the dust and cobwebs. A spring clean is imminent!

Appropriately, the word 'February' comes from 'Februa' meaning cleansing or purification, reflecting the rituals carried out in ancient civilizations, before the Spring proper came in. February along with January, was introduced into the calendar as a month in its own right by the Roman Numa Pompilius around 700 BCE.

This half-way, midseason was very important to the ancient peoples. In early February, the ancient Celts celebrated the festival, of Imbolc (pronounced 'im'olk' or Oimelc). The word comes from an old Irish word thought to mean 'in the belly', as livestock, especially sheep, heavily pregnant, with lambs 'in the belly' gave birth around this time, as many sheep do in these modern times. Some people say Imbolc means 'ewe's milk' (oi-melc).

Imbolc was one of the cornerstones of the Celtic calendar. For them the success of the new farming season was of great importance. Winter stores of food ran low at this time of year, so rituals, on special days, called "Sabbaths" were performed in the hope of

harnessing divine energy to ensure a steady supply of food until the harvest six months later.

The Imbolc celebrations centered around the lighting of fires, as did other festivals throughout the year. Fire was more important for this festival than others, as 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 celebrated the increasing power of the Sun over the coming months. The ancient people, without 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. Their rituals and celebrations, drew on the life enhancing power of fire, its ability to provide heat and light, and its purifying property too..

Margaret Alice Murray writes of the rituals in "*The God of the Witches, III*" and traces them even further back to a time before organised agriculture. She writes:

"The Sabbaths were held quarterly, on the second of February (Candlemas day), the Eve of May, the first of August (Lammas), and the Eve of November (All Hallow E'en). This shows a division of the year at May and November with two cross-quarter days. Such a division belongs to a very early calendar before the introduction of agriculture. It has no connection with sowing or reaping, it ignores the solstices and equinoxes, but it marks the opening of the two breeding seasons for animals, both wild and domesticated. It therefore belongs to the hunting and pastoral periods, and is in itself an indication of the extreme primitiveness of the cult and points to a very early origin, reaching back possibly to the Palaeolithic era." (Which spanned 2 ½ million to 10,000 years ago).

She notes that:

"Cormac, archbishop of Cashel (Thats in County Tipperary) in the tenth century, refers to these meetings when he says that "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 keeping with the policy of the early Church to subsume pagan festivals into Christian feast-days, the Day of Bride or Bridget, became equated with St Bridget, b approx. 450 AD. She is said to have performed various miracles and since 2023, her feast day has been observed as a national holiday in Republic of Ireland. She deserves having a service dedicated to her – maybe next year Legend says she was midwife to Mary, mother of Jesus, so the re is an association with the Christian feast of Candlemas on February 2nd, in commemoration of the Purification of Mary 40 days after Jesus' 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, (60 days for a girl), women weren't allowed to worship in the temple. At the end of this time, women were brought to the Temple or Synagogue to be purified, before they were allowed to take part in religious services again

As described in the passage from Luke, which Linda read earlier, Mary went to the Temple at Jerusalem to make the traditional offering to purify herself, and present her baby to God. As she entered the temple, an old man named 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 we encounter the archetype of the young Sun S U N, or Light come to redeem the darkness, but now in Christian clothing.

I have read that the services used for this day in the medieval church made a lot of this symbolism, playing up the idea 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. This could be seen as a continuation of the Christmas theme. Some people actually regarded the Christmas season as including Candlemas, and so lasting 40 days! So if you have left up your Christas decorations, you still have today and tomorrow to put them away, to avoid 'bad luck'! Even the **12** days of Christmas are too much for some of us!

Many customs and traditions became associated with them. Old country rhymes linked them 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"

So looking at the weather forecast for the next few days, winter should be well on the way out!

In Britain, Candlemas was celebrated as a festival of lights, when the priest blessed candles for the year ahead. Imagine, if you will, in the days before electric light, how brightly the medieval churches would be lit by a procession of members of the congregation, each carrying a lighted candle, to the priest. 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 had a strong influence 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 singers going from house to house, similar to modern like Christmas carollers.

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 regarded as signs of hope, and the Mesothilia support organisation has adopted the snowdrop as its symbol.

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. Robert Herrick, who lived in Devon for several years, wrote a 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."

Maybe a reference here to spring cleaning? not only of our houses, but also 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 fresher outlook for the new season ahead?

So we can see that customs and rituals of this midseason may be interpreted in many ways, dependent upon one's individual belief system. Even the totally rational, and non-superstitious amongst us will surely feel hopeful at the promise of better weather, with new growth and opportunities ahead, to join in the laughter and feel the spirit of renewed life within us all. *A M E N*

Final Hymn: Purple Book No 102 'May the Road rise to meet you'

May the road rise with you,
may the wind be always at your back,
may the sun shine warm upon your face,
may the rain fall soft upon your fields,
and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

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may the wind be always at your back,
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Words Traditional

Music Tune 'A Blessing' Traditional, Arr. by David Dawson

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Closing Words: 'Blessed be the earth...' from Unitarian Earth Spirit network

Blessed be the earth, and all beings upon it.
We give thanks for the winter, melting behind us,
for its rest, lessons, abundance and quiet.
To all those with whom we share this world, may there be blessings for the new season.
We pray that all beings will have what they need,
be nourished, be held in love, be guided by wisdom.
We prepare for the time ahead by unlocking our hearts and our minds.

May our spirits be open and welcoming.

Extinguish Chalice

Closing Music/Video: 'Song of Imbolc' Goddess Brigid chant by Flora Ware with Heidi McCurdy

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/u9khSzVqWHU?si=zxjWxyxb7rBdM6P>