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IMBOLC

by Sig Lonegren

See also: [Beltane](#) ~ [Lughnasad](#) ~ [Samhain](#)



The Sun marks the year at four clear points called the Quarter Days - the Winter Solstice (longest night), Spring Equinox (equal night and day), Summer Solstice (longest day), and Autumnal Equinox (once again, equal day and night). The Celts divided the year in to eight by inserting the four Cross Quarter Days at roughly November 1st (Samhain), February 1st (Imbolc), May 1st (Beltane) and August 1st (Lughnasad). These points are roughly half the number of days between the Solstices and the Equinoxes.

Samhain (Halloween/All Saints Day) is the end and beginning of the Celtic year. By November 1st, the harvest is in and the seeds of the winter crops are planted. These seeds will lay dormant until Imbolc, called Candlemas by the Church, at the beginning of February when (in the British Isles) they move by themselves for the first time. The seed now has demonstrated that it is a living entity on its own. By Beltane, May Day, the plants are up and fertility is of extreme importance. Then at August 1st there is Lughnasad, Lammas in the Christian calendar, when the harvest begins. All the crops should be in by Samhain (pronounced "Sow-an") when the cycle begins once again.

If the Quarter Days start a season on the cycle (Winter Solstice starts winter, Spring Equinox starts spring, etc.), the Cross Quarter Days mark the high point of each season. For example, here in Vermont, the old-timers say that you should have half your hay and half your wood by Candlemas (Imbolc). We also have our coldest nights (40 to 45 degrees below zero) just before the first of February.

As it is the February Cross Quarter Day that is coming up, I would like to address the rest of this article to Imbolc. This day is sacred to the Celtic fire-Goddess Brighde, "the Bright One" also known as Bridget, Brigid, Bride and Brigantia. She was a Sun Goddess who presides over the hearth and smithy, over the inspiration and skill of sacred art and craft, and over the world of crops, livestock, and nature. In particular she is important to sheep who begin to lamb at this time of year. The starting of their lactation is a sign that Imbolc is near. Milk has always been important to Bridget. You can see her above the south western door of the tower on Glastonbury Tor. She is milking a cow.

Another "holiday" around the time of Imbolc is Groundhog's Day. While perhaps it might not seem that way on the surface, there's something very ancient about this one - especially because it has to do with the Sun and whether it shines or not, and whether the groundhog sees its shadow. In the context of sacred space, this is very interesting. There are shadow paths that have been found in Britain where, due to the gently downward curvature of the land, a single standing stone casts a shadow that is half a mile long! Shadows and light play an important role in any sacred space, and the lowly American groundhog has become the recipient of a much older, I suspect European, tradition. Another connection between Groundhog Day and Imbolc has to do with weather prediction aspect of this day in early February. The major role this simple herbivore plays is to give us the answer to a most important question in northern climes: "Will winter end soon or will it drag on?"

Just as Christianity divides God into three - Father, Son, and Holy Ghost - Goddess cultures many times divided her in to three as well - Virgin, Mother, and Hag /Crone/Wise Woman. Imbolc celebrates Goddess in Her manifestation as the Virgin Bride. There is a lovely Irish prayer to Saint Bridget (the Christianized version of Brighde) that I would like to share with you:

INVOCATION TO SAINT BRIDE

*Dear Saint Bridget of the Kine
Bless these little fields of mine,
The pastures and the shady trees,
Bless the butter and the cheese,
Bless the cows with coats of silk
And the brimming pails of milk,
Bless the hedgerows, and I pray
Bless the seed beneath the clay,
Bless the hay and bless the grass,
Bless the seasons as they pass,
And heaven's blessings will prevail,
Brigid - Mary of the Gael.*

While she has been turned in to a saint and made analogous to the Virgin Mary, in this prayer, Bridget also remains the Goddess of Imbolc - of the kine (cattle) and of the seed that moves for the first time by itself "beneath the clay."

What seeds that have been planted in you, that have been laying asleep through the winter, have just moved on their own in your life? Can you sense an impending something in your life? Is there something that is yet to manifest above ground into physical reality, yet it lies there just sprouting under the dark covering blanket of Earth in side you? How can you nurture this seedling in the coming days and months?

Imbolc is the time to ask these questions. This is especially powerful when it is done in some kind of ceremony. You can do this alone or with friends. You might begin by creating a sacred/safe space by marking the Four Directions, making a circle on the floor, burning sage, or any other way of demarking the space you plan to work within. As Imbolc is sacred to Bridget, you will want to call Her into your space in some way. She will come to you if you call Her.

(I was looking for the little book that had the "Invocation to Saint Bride" in it. I couldn't find it, and as I have piles of books all around, I spent a lot of time rummaging through this pile and that. I couldn't find it, so I went back to writing this article. Then after a while I looked again. I still couldn't find it. Yet I knew it would go well in this article. In desperation I said out loud, "Bridget, help me find that book." My hand was on it within five seconds. Call Her, She'll come to you.)

In any event, after invoking Bridget and any other deities of choice that you might want to have with you, spend some time thinking about the seed (or seeds) that are quickening within you.

While the four Cross Quarter Days were know as Fire Festivals by the Celts, as there were four of them, I suspect that each one of them was also ruled by one of the four elements. Imbolc is ruled by Water. It is a time to look in to the future. February, just before spring is the time of year that many need to take a deep breath and look at the year ahead. You might want to spend some time planning how you will protect and

nurture the new part of you that is now quickening inside you. Each of the four elements can be used for scrying. Water speaks of the future. Fill a small bowl with water. Put it on a table, and in a darkened room look at the surface of the water. Perhaps a candle would be useful to provide some reflection. Think about the seed quickening inside you. Unfocus your eyes as you gaze into the bowl. (I usually try to look at the surface of the water from a 45 degree angle.) Don't look for, or at, anything. You won't "see" it with your physical eyes anyway. When something comes, remain relaxed. Maybe you'll think you saw something, maybe that triggers something aural through your ears. Pay attention. Don't jump up and shout, "Far out!" Stay calm and allow more specifics to come into your consciousness. Maybe you will "see" only one image, maybe you'll see and hear a whole movie. Maybe it will come as a feeling.

After your time of scrying the future in water, spend some time thinking about the seed, the image/movie you "saw", and the future. What associations can you make between them? How do they all fit together? Do you have a better sense of what the year will be like?

When you have worked all of that through, and any friends who might be there with you have shared what they have "seen," it is time to thank Bridget for being with you, and to release her. Finally, open the space you have worked in.

This is only one, very simple way that you can celebrate Imbolc. I have friends in Wales with whom I spent the whole day and night working on the themes of Bridget and Imbolc. They created a wonderful pattern of events. The women went to the holy well at Carreg Cennen, a natural tunnel deep beneath an ancient Welch Castle. We men gathered wood for the evening fire and spoke of Imbolc in many different ways. It culminated with a joyous gathering in the evening in a warm and cozy small building out in the woods where we sang songs and told more stories about this ancient Celtic Goddess. Bridget was there with us at that time of quickening.



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