***I Am Imbolc, the Dream of Awakening***

*I am the dream of awakening.*

*I am the returning of the light.*

*I am the tough green shoot pushing up through the pavestones, I am the first kiss of sunlight on the unfurling petals of the snowdrop. I am the wind which whispers the gentle pull of home to the migratory bird.*

*I am the drop of ice melting on the mountainside with its great dream of the ocean.*

*I am the sap rising in the blossom tree just before it reveals its sticky buds to the sky; I am the riotous celebration humming away beneath the earth’s mantle of frozen sleep.*

*I am the rousing of the bee from its winter slumber, and the soft pad of the mother-wolf’s paw on the snow as she prepares to birth her pups.*

*I am hope, potential,* [*rebirth*](http://www.rebellesociety.com/2014/08/15/sacrificial-soul-sickness/) *and promise. I am the kindling breath which transforms the flicker of inspiration in your creative core into a blazing torch.*

*Give me the silent crescent moon rising over the sea and I will build you a bridge of silver light so you can walk up and lie in it.*

*Give me the frost-hardened wilderness and I will breathe radiant green life over it.*

*Give me the healer, the writer, the craftsperson and the storyteller, and I will replenish her essence and make her new again.*

*I am* [*Brigid*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigid)*,* [*Bast*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bastet)*,* [*Inanna*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inanna) *and* [*Hestia*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hestia)*. I am the fierce protectress of the* [*sacred fire*](http://www.rebellesociety.com/2014/09/15/a-love-letter-to-all-romantics-ii/)*.*

*Tonight I bestow my gifts of power and courage at the hearth of your soul: power to step out of the shadows of self-doubt and negativity which have held you in darkness for too long, power to shed all that which no longer serves you, and courage to clear your heart and mind for the dawn that awaits you.*

*I am the time to honor your unique gifts for their true worth and to protect and nurture your creative self as you would a child. I am the deep longing of the spirit which refuses to be consumed by a narrative of fear and chooses instead to place itself vivaciously on the side of love.*

*I am the stirring in your belly which knows exactly what you are capable of — and that it’s time the world found out.*

*I am the fire within which will not be contained any longer.*

*I am the quickening, I am the serpent uncoiling, I am* [*Imbolc*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imbolc)*.*

*I am the dream of awakening.*

*- Caroline Meller*

**Circle Two: Imbolc**

When I awakened this morning shortly before 5am, I could feel the freezing cold seeping in through the double-paned windows. Sure enough, the outside temps were well below zero, and I said a little prayer for the furnace who would be working extra hard today to keep us all snug and warm. Even now, mid-afternoon, at the height of this wintry day, it’s only -5°. The sun will be setting shortly, and I see the forecast predicts temps will plunder as low as -20° during the night.

In the dead of winter, we become survivalists. Not quite in the same ways as our ancestors, who faced grave danger if the last season’s harvest didn’t provide enough for winter rations, or if they ran out of oil, or (Goddess forbid) they somehow got trapped outside in the snow. Nowadays, most of us have modern comforts and safety measures. We can have anything we need delivered at the click of a button. Other people chop our wood. Water flows freely from the tap. Gas heats our homes and lights up our stoves. Many of the old challenges are no longer relevant.

Winter survival in modern times seems to be more of a mental and emotional nature. It’s a hardship to be without the light of the Sun for months on end, even as the days have been growing longer. Most of us don’t live in large, intergenerational families, and suffer feelings of loneliness and isolation. It takes great energy moving through our days, especially at a time when our physiology is wired for more rest, but the demands of our culture are unrelenting, as ever.

While Imbolc has traditionally signaled the time in the season when our forebearers would make their rituals and petitions to the Sun, encouraging and praying for the return of the light, I am reminded to make my own rituals and petitions - to the light within. This is a time to count my blessings, which are many. The seasons of the shadows are fading, and it is of great benefit to shine light on any remaining darknesses in my psyche. I learned many lessons in these recent cycles. I accepted the work presented to me. I tended to my grief and fears. Now, as I enjoy the final weeks of this Dreamtime state, my focus now drifts to the sparks of passion, inspiration, energy and vision which will guide me towards the birthing season ahead.

I wonder, as the Sun marches onward towards its own zenith, what will mine look like this year? It’s hard to wonder about Summer’s blooms when we are still huddled beneath the frozen snow.

I am grateful for my warm home. For the wood burning at the hearthside. For the chicken I will roast for tonight’s dinner. For this work given to me - to write, to sing, to pray. Grateful that my family is healthy and safe. Grateful for the longer and longer days. Grateful that the light shining within grows alongside the Sun; no darkness or bitter cold can weaken my spirit. Not this winter.

I am quite blessed, indeed. And it's a good time to remember. So be it. Blessed be.

**An Introduction…**

Imbolc heralds the first cross-quarter sabbat in the Wheel of the Year. The cross-quarter sabbats represent the midpoint of each season. Thus, Imbolc (which is typically celebrated on February 1st and 2nd) is the halfway mark between Winter (Yule) and Spring (Ostara).

As the cross-quarter sabbats typically denote significant agricultural festivals, Imbolc was traditionally celebrated as the beginning of Spring and the time when the first lambs were born. The word Imbolc literally means “in the belly.” This refers to the pregnant ewes who are about to birth their lambs, but may also refer to the Goddess, as in “in the belly of the Mother,” for in the womb of Mother Earth, even though it may not be apparent to us yet, there are stirrings. The seeds are just beneath the surface, ready to sprout. This is a time of quickening and new growth.

Imbolc does not bring dramatic change from the apparent death of Winter - the trees do not burst into blossom overnight, leaves do not immediately sprout from the branches, plants and flowers do not instantly carpet the earth. This is a very mysterious time; growth is gradual, and seeds lie hidden in the earth, slowly pushing the first shoots up through the soil. Yet all still appears lifeless.

Imbolc is also known as Imbolg, Lady Day, Candlemas and St. Brigid’s Day. The other name for this festival is “Oimelc,” meaning “ewe’s milk,” in reference to the lactating ewes. For our ancestors, the lambing season was another sign that Winter was coming to an end. The gamboling lambs seemed to herald the warmer days to come. In Cornwall, they honored this event by making a ritual drink from cider, mashed apples, honey and the milk of pregnant ewes.[[1]](#footnote-0)

​​Imbolc is the festival that celebrates the transformation of the Goddess from the dark Crone of Winter to the radiant Maiden of Spring. The ground is awakening and the seed is placed in the belly of the earth. The promises of the return of the light and the renewal of life, which were made at the Winter Solstice, are now becoming manifest. It’s the dawn of the year. It is time to creep out of Winter hibernation; it’s the time of germination. This is also a traditional time for new beginnings, a time of initiations and taking a new name.

Also regarded as a Celtic fire festival, many of the traditions of this sabbat revolve around symbolic gestures and offerings to the Sun, encouraging Its light and warmth to return to the Earth. Bonfires, hearthfires, candle-making and burning, baking bread, fire-scrying and more are all wonderful ways to celebrate Imbolc.

We take this moment in time to honor the growing light outside, and the growing light within. Energy rises from stillness. The dreamer slowly awakens. Welcome to Imbolc.

**A Herstory of Imbolc**

Imbolc is a [Gaelic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaels) traditional festival, marking the beginning of S[pring](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_%28season%29), and for Christians (especially in Ireland) it is the [feast day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calendar_of_saints) of [Saint Bri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigit_of_Kildare)gid. It is held on February 1st-2nd, which is about halfway between the W[inter Solstice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_solstice) and the S[pring Equinox](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_equinox_%28Northern_Hemisphere%29). Historically, its traditions were widely observed throughout [Ireland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ireland), [Scotland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scotland) and the [Isle of Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isle_of_Man). It is one of [the four](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quarter_days) Gaelic seasonal festivals, along with [Beltane](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bealtaine), Lammas/[Lughnasadh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lughnasadh) and [Samhain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samhain).

Imbolc is mentioned in [early Irish literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Irish_literature), and there is evidence suggesting it was also an important date in ancient times. Scholars such as historian [Ronald Hutton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Hutton) argue that the festival must have pre-Christian origins, honoring the Goddess Brighid. Some scholars argue that the date of Imbolc was significant in Ireland since the [Neolithic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neolithic) period. A few megalithic monuments and [passage tombs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passage_tomb) in Ireland are aligned with the sunrise around the times of Imbolc and Samhain.

The [*Táin Bó Cúailnge*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%A1in_B%C3%B3_C%C3%BAailnge) indicates that Imbolc falls three months after the November 1st festival of Samhain.Imbolc is mentioned in another Old Irish poem about the *Táin* in the [*Metrical Dindshenchas*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metrical_Dindshenchas): "*iar n-imbulc, ba garb a ngeilt*,” which [Edward Gwynn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Gwynn) translates "after [Candlemas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candlemas), rough was their herding.” Candlemas is the Christian holy day which falls on February 2nd and is known in Irish as *Lá Fhéile* [*Muire*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muire) *na gCoinneal*, or “feast day of Mary of the Candles.”

It is believed that Imbolc was originally a [pagan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Celtic_polytheism) festival associated with the goddess [Brighid](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigid), and that it was later [Christianized](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianization) as the feast day of Saint Brigid, who is likely a [Christianization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism) of the older goddess. The festivities on the feast of Saint Brigid did not begin to be recorded in detail until the early modern era. In recent centuries this day was marked by the making of [Brigid's crosses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigid%27s_cross), and a [doll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doll)-like figure of Brigid would be paraded from house-to-house by girls, sometimes accompanied by “[strawboys](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wren_Day).” Brigid was said to visit one's home on the eve of the festival. To receive her blessings, people would make a bed for Brigid and leave her food and drink, and items of clothing would be left outside for her to bless. Brigid was also evoked to protect homes and livestock. Special feasts were had, [holy wells](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_well) were visited, and it was a time for [divination](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divination).

Hutton writes that Imbolc must have been "important enough to more ancient cultures for its date to be dedicated subsequently to [Brigi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigit_of_Kildare)d, the Mother Saint of Ireland.” [Cogitosus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cogitosus), writing in the late 7th century, first mentions a feast day of Saint Brigid being observed in [Kildare](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kildare) on February 1st. Brigid is said to have lived in the 6th century and founded the important monastery of Kildare. She became the focus of a major cult. However, historical facts about her are rare, and early [hagiographies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagiography) about her "are mainly anecdotes and miracle stories, some of which are deeply rooted in Irish pagan folklore.” [[2]](#footnote-1)

Like the Saint, the goddess Brighid is associated with wisdom, poetry, healing, protection, blacksmithing and domesticated animals. It is suggested that the festival, which celebrates the onset of spring, is linked with Brigid in her role as a fertility goddess. According to Hutton, it could be that the goddess Brighid was already linked to Imbolc and this was continued by making it the Saint's feast day. Or it could be that Imbolc's association with milk drew the Saint to it, because of a legend that she had been the wet-nurse of Christ.

Imbolc was similar to Samhain and Beltane in that fire played an integral part of the celebrations, although not on the same scale. While at Samhain bonfires were lit to ward off evil spirits and at Beltane they served to offer protection and growth, at Imbolc they were symbolic of the Sun’s return. Rather than a huge central bonfire at the center of the festivities, Imbolc was more about the home and each home’s hearthfire. Every home in the community would have their own fire burning right through the night, and during medieval times when homes consisted of actual wood and stone buildings rather than the wattle and daub huts of the Celts, all of the fires in the house were lit for the night. If for some reason that was not possible, it was sufficient to have candles lit in every room instead.

Visiting wells was another important custom for Imbolc, particularly holy wells. Visitors would walk around the well in the same direction as the Sun traversed the sky at that point on the land, praying for health and wealth for the year. Offerings were left at the well once this was done; usually coins or ‘clooties’ (pieces of cloth). Special foods were also part of the festivities, usually consisting of bannock – a flatbread cut into wedges – as well as dairy products and meat.[[3]](#footnote-2)

The Celts were always concerned about the weather, so Imbolc was an important time to read omens and attempt to predict the weather for the Summer. An unusual but widely popular omen was if the weather was especially bad on the day of Imbolc, which meant a great summer was on the way. This is because one of the more malicious creatures in Irish folklore, the Cailleach, would spend the day of Imbolc collecting firewood for herself if Winter was to last a while longer. To do this, she would obviously need a bright and dry day to collect her wood, so if Imbolc was wet and windy, that meant the Cailleach had gone to sleep and winter would soon be over.

Of course, we see this custom played out in our modern culture with Groundhog Day, also celebrated on February 2nd. The emergence of the groundhog from its burrow at this time of year is believed to predict the weather for the next six weeks - the remainder of the Winter season. During the Middle Ages, there arose the belief that animals such as the badger and the bear interrupted their hibernation to appear on this day. If the day was sunny and the animal saw its shadow, six more weeks of Winter weather remained. If, however, the day was cloudy, it was a sign that the weather in the coming weeks would be mild, heralding an early Spring.

**The Festivals of February**

Throughout human cultural evolution, there have been many festivals which honor this particular passage in the Wheel of the Year. It’s important to remember that the seasons arrive in reverse order between the Northern and Southern Hemisphere. So, while the North celebrates Imbolc in February, those living South of the equator celebrate it at the beginning of August. For our purposes, we are following the Wheel of the Year from the Northern perspective. As such, let’s take a moment to learn about other significant celebrations falling in the month of February.

**The Festival of Panagia Kardiotissa / The Bear Goddess of Neolithic Europe**

One of the oldest forms of the goddess is that of the bear, and one of the earliest recorded holy days of February honors Her in that form - likely due to the emergence of such animals from their hibernation.

According to cultural anthropologist Marija Gimbutas, “The concept of the goddess in bear shape was deeply ingrained in mythical thought through the millennia and survives in contemporary Crete as ‘Virgin Mary of the Bear.’ In the cave of Akrotiri near ancient Kydonia, a festival in honor of Panagia (Mary) Kardiotissa (she of the bear) is celebrated on the second day of February.”[[4]](#footnote-3)

**The Eleusinian Mysteries of Greece**

Thousands of years later in ancient Greece, the lesser Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated at the end of January and beginning of February. This festival commemorated the return of Persephone from the Underworld to her mother, Demeter. Demeter was a Mother Goddess who brought life to the world, and made the crops grow and the bees give honey. When her daughter Persephone was taken to the Land of the Dead with the god Hades, Demeter mourned, life slipped from the land, and the first Winter came. A compromise arranged by the gods allowed Persephone to reign as Queen of the Underworld for half of the year, and return to her mother for the other half, bringing the emergence of Spring along with her.

The Greeks held a great celebration to mark the occasion. First, there was a torchlight procession, in which the participants combed the land and even waded into the sea, recreating the search for Demeter’s lost daughter. When word came that Persephone had been found, the assemblage cheered and held a great feast to celebrate.

**Lupercalia**

The Romans regarded Lupercalia as a time of cleansing and purification - *Februarius mensis,* “the month of ritual purification.” Several festivals were celebrated, but their biggest event was the Lupercalia on February 15th. The holiday was named for the *Lupercal*, the grotto where the infants Romulus and Remus came ashore after floating down the Tiber River in a basket. There they were suckled and raised by a wolf, and later grew up to found the city and nation of Rome.

In part, the festival of Lupercalia honored Faunus (also called Lupercus), a goat-footed god of Nature, flocks, crops and gardens, music, animals and more. Goats were sacrificed to him, and then his priests (known as the *Luperci*) took to the streets wearing goatskin loincloths. Each carried goatskin thongs and their role was to hit everyone they saw; presumably this token scourging was a symbolic ritual purification.

The thongs also supposedly encouraged fertility. While women were meant to be struck gently across the palms, some were so determined to conceive a child that they stripped naked to encourage the Luperci to go further. For this reason, Pope Gelasius I banned this cheerfully scandalous festival in 492, and Lupercalia was changed to the feast of St Valentine in 496.

**Norse Festivals of February**

The Norse had several celebrations at this time of year, including the Feast of Vali, the Honor of Vara, Barri and Disting-tid.

The Feast of Vali was a solar festival marking the strengthening power of the Sun, the beginning of the end of Winter, and the survival of the community. It also celebrated loyalty and kinship, and is named after Vali, a son of Woden whose role in mythology was to avenge the death of the beloved god Baldur.

The Honor of Vara was a lunar festival in which the community witnessed and celebrated the vows of lovers. Similarly, Barri was a fertility festival, whose celebration began on February 1st or 2nd and lasted until the full moon in Leo. It commemorated the courtship of the giantess Gerda, symbolizing Mother Earth, by Freyr, god of fertility and the power of the waxing Sun.

The Norse also celebrated *Disting-tid*, or “the charming of the plow.” As Spring approached, plows would be dragged out of Winter storage and blessed so that the harvests would be abundant. It was also a celebration of the first breaking of the ground by metal, which was a huge technological leap from wooden plows. To that end, the festival’s mythology included the dwarves, who were both legendary miners of metal from the ground and masters of smithcraft.

Here are brief descriptions of other cultural celebrations in this season around the world:

**The Feast of Isis (Egypt):** celebrated January 31-February 3, celebrating the Egyptian Mother Goddess, patroness of magic and healing, symbolizing light and life.

**The Feast of Oya (Yoruba):** celebrated February 2, in honor of Oya, the Orisha of death and rebirth (the transition from Winter to Spring representing death and rebirth).

**The Feast of Nut (Egypt):** celebrated on February 2. According to the [Book of the Dead](https://www.learnreligions.com/paganism-wicca-basics-4684805), Nut was seen as a mother-figure to the [sun god Ra](https://www.learnreligions.com/ra-sun-god-of-ancient-egypt-2561791), who at sunrise was known as Khepera and took the form of a scarab beetle. She is typically portrayed as a nude woman covered in stars, and is positioned above her husband Geb, the earth god. When she comes down to meet him each night, darkness falls.

**Set-Subun (Japan):** celebrated February 4 (aka the Bean Throwing and Lantern Festival), when the spirits of Winter were believed to reside in dry beans, which you would toss away from yourself to symbolically send Winter away. Lanterns were lit to encourage the return of the Sun.

**Li Chum (China):** celebrated February 10 as the Chinese Spring Festival.

**Chinese New Year (China):** celebrated on varying dates each year, but spanning fifteen days total, in which each day has a different theme. Many traditions are followed, and it is widely believed that the New Year sets the tone for the year ahead.

**The Feast of Lanterns (China):** celebrated on February 28, this holiday is an opportunity to encourage the light and warmth of the Sun to return. Temples, homes and trees were strung with lanterns for dazzling light and beauty when dusk came. Lanterns hung from high poles were carried in processions, with the dance of a 100-foot long paper dragon serving as the climax.

**Sapporo Snow Festival (Japan):** celebrated on varying dates each year, bringing thousands of snow sculptors and more than two million sightseers to the island of Hokkaido in Japan each February. Teams of sculptors create hundreds of giant statues from snow: gods, mythological creatures, cartoon heroes, dinosaurs and even great castles.

**Holi (Hindu):** celebrated in late February and early March, this Festival of Color celebrates Spring. Celebrants are drenched with buckets of brightly colored water in imitation of the deities Krishna and Radha who splashed each other in the river one fine day. Caste barriers are set aside.[[5]](#footnote-4)

**Brighid the Goddess, Brigid (Bridget) the Saint**

February 1st is the feast day of Brighid, who began Her life as a pagan goddess and ended up a Christian Saint. Her name originates from the Gaelic words *Breo-Saighit*, which means “fiery or flaming arrow.” The Church of Rome could not hope to extinguish Her flame, so they attempted to control and contain it by creating a Saint in Her image, changing the name to Bridget. Some church scholars say there never really was a Saint Brigid/Bridget, but because the Catholic Church couldn’t very easily call the Great Goddess of Ireland a demon, they canonized Her instead. In Her temple at Kildare, nineteen priestesses tended an eternal fire - an inextinguishable flame. It is said that on the twentieth day, the flame was left to burn by itself, though some say Brighid attended it Herself.

Brighid is known as one of the Celtic ["triune" goddesses](https://www.learnreligions.com/cernunnos-wild-god-of-the-forest-2561959) - meaning that She is one and three simultaneously. The early Celts celebrated a purification festival by honoring Brighid. In some parts of the Scottish Highlands, Brighid was viewed in Her aspect as crone as [*Cailleach Bheur*](https://www.learnreligions.com/cailleach-the-ruler-of-winter-2561705), a woman with mystical powers who was older than the land itself. She was the daughter of Dagda (the chief Celtic deity) and one of the Tuatha De Danann - some of the first inhabitants of Ireland. She is associated with many things, most significantly poetry and fertility, but such activities as healing, smithing, arts, and crafts, tending to livestock and serpents also make the cut. In Britain, there are many sacred wells and many of them are dedicated to Brighid. The water in these wells contain healing minerals and people tie ribbons to nearby bushes and trees so that they flutter in the wind like prayer flags. As the cloth is torn to rags by the wind, sun and rain, illness falls away too.

Brighid is known as the White Swan, and in Glastonbury the outline of a swan in flight can be seen in the contours of the hills which make up the Isle of Avalon. Brighid has strong connections with Glastonbury - there was a shrine dedicated to Her at Bride’s Mound and also a Bride’s Well. There is a chapel of St. Bridget there and, in its original location, it is said that Brighid’s embroidery tools were preserved there. Brighid’s bag of healing herbs and Her bell are said to be hidden in the ground near Chalice Well in Glastonbury. They say at Imbolc, you can hear Her bell softly ringing in the earth.[[6]](#footnote-5)

Saint Bridget, on the other hand, was not a mythical goddess but a real woman, born in Dundalk, County Louth, around the 5th century AD. During her lifetime she became a nun, founded numerous monasteries and performed her fair share of miracles, becoming one of the foremost advocates of Christianity in Ireland. After her death, she was made one of Ireland’s patron saints. So it was a natural progression for Imbolc (the pagan festival worshiping the goddess Brighid) to become the Christian festival in honor of Saint Bridget.

On her feast day, beginning at sunset on February 1st and ending at sunset on February 2nd, her statue was washed in the sea (for purification) and then carried in a cart through the fields surrounded by candles. Sacred fires were lit, since she symbolized the fire of birth and healing, the fire of the forge and the fire of poetic inspiration. Brigid is the protector and preserver of all memory and knowledge. Her role is that of teacher and magical instructor, and she empowers her students with wisdom and knowledge to keep the land safe and productive for the good of all.

For the Celts, Brighid represented the all-important light half of the year, so Her presence was much revered during the festival. On Imbolc Eve, it was claimed that She would visit the most virtuous homes and bless everyone who slept in them, so people would leave pieces of clothing, food, or other tokens outside the entrance for Her to bless, or to entice Her into the home. It was Brighid’s role as a fertility goddess that was most important here, but for the medieval people of Ireland, Her healing powers and general protective sense were also important. The majority of Imbolc traditions regarding Brighid come from this time. While the tradition of leaving small tributes to Brighid on the doorstep continued for several centuries, several others sprang up too:

Ashes from the fire that were left to burn all night long would be smoothed out and left to see if a mark from St. Brigid appeared, to confirm that she had visited the house. Sometimes a makeshift bed would even be made up next to the fire, in case the Saint wanted to rest a while. In some areas across Ireland and Scotland, women played a very important part in the festivities. They would make a doll figure from rushes known as a ‘Brideog’, dress it in white and with flowers, and carry it in a procession while singing hymns and poems in honor of Bridget. At every home they passed, they would receive more pieces of cloth or small bits of food for the Brideog. Once the procession was finished, they would place the Brideog in a seat of honor and have a feast with all of the food, before placing it in a bed for the night while they began celebrations.

The most well-known tradition, however, and one that is still practiced today, is making a Saint Bridget’s cross and hanging it in the home. These crosses were a unique symbol of the transition from Paganism to Christianity. Before, bunches of rushes were tied together and hung at the entrance to homes to welcome Brighid. One of the stories of Bridget’s lifetime, however, recounts how she wove a cross from rushes and placed it above a dying man’s bed. He roused from his delirium to ask what she was doing, and on hearing what it meant, he asked to be baptized before his death. Since then, the cross has been a symbol for Bridget, and was also a familiar symbol for the Celts, making it the perfect transition symbol for Imbolc. The cross is distinctive, with a square in the middle and each point of the cross placed at a corner of the square. Somewhere between then and now, placing a cross in your kitchen came to mean that your house would be protected from fire.[[7]](#footnote-6)

**Traditions of Imbolc**

While there are many traditions (both ancestral and contemporary) to celebrate Imbolc, the main symbols include: fire; candles; Brighid’s cross making; breads/baking; and divination. Here are some ideas which you might include in your own honoring of this holy sabbat:

**Fire**

The hearthfire, sacred to Brighid, was Her altar in every home. Each family’s hearth was the gathering place and the heart of the home. Here, food was prepared, and in the evening was a major source of light and warmth. During long, cold winter nights, it was where fishing nets were mended, wool was carded and spun, or an orphaned lamb was nursed to good health. Here also the storyteller, the *seanachaidh*, would tell rousing tales of gods and heroes, of great storms and long-ago battles, of fairy folk and the little people.

At Imbolc, the fire was more important than ever. It was not allowed to go out, and was carefully fed with special kinds of wood on Brighid’s day (usually a rowan twig would be placed in the center of the flames for protection).

It was a traditional time to burn the Yule greens (the evergreens used for Yuletide celebrations and decorations), as it was believed that if they were not burned by Imbolc, hobgoblins would haunt the house. It was also a symbolic way to let go of the old year and make way for the new.

Along similar lines, corn dollies made at Lammastide (to represent the Harvest Crone) would also be burned (or returned to the fields), representing the Winter Crone reborn as the Spring Maiden.

If you do not have access to a fireplace or woodstove, a bonfire could also suffice. If that is also not an option, the use of candles (mentioned below) would be another great alternative.

**The Candles of Candlemas**

Imbolc is also honored as the Christian Festival of Lights, and called Candlemas. Candlemas is a traditional festival that commemorates the ritual purification of Mary forty days after the birth of her son, Jesus. On this day, Christians remember the presentation of Jesus at the temple, a Jewish custom in which parents would bring their infant sons to the temple in Jerusalem to be presented to God by his thankful parents. Infant daughters were similarly brought to the temple eighty days after their birth. Candlemas was also the day when all the candles that would be used by the church in the coming year were brought in and a blessing was said over them.

There are many traditions around the use of candles at Imbolc as well.

There was the procession of candles/torches, in which ancient Celtic communities would light up and parade throughout the village, with children asking for “alms for Biddy (Brighid).” These processions would also be led counterclockwise around gardens and fields to banish and purify the earth, and then clockwise to charge the soil with energy for planting readiness and abundant harvests to come.

Similar to Santa Lucia’s Day (around Winter Solstice), many ancient Celts made crowns or rings of candles, worn either by a little girl to represent the new year, or a woman acting as Brighid or the Mother Goddess, who is quickened at Imbolc. A wreath made of greens, and red ribbons to fashion a showy bow and streamers hanging off the back end would be festooned with long taper candles. The crown would be worn for ritual, and then offered to the fire (the candles would be saved and used for other rituals in the coming seasons).

Another candle tradition is simply to light up your home with dozens and dozens of candles to symbolize the returning light of the Sun.

Candle magic has also been used for centuries to perform spells or other magical works. Candle magic evolved from the old lunar cults where torches were lighted to invoke the Moon Goddess.

There are many resources to learn how easy it is to make your own candles, which can then be infused with particular prayers and symbols, though store-bought candles are perfectly fine to use.

**Brighid’s Cross**

Brighid’s Crosses are a handicraft or art form woven of straw or rushes. The difference between a Brighid’s Cross and certain types of corn dollies is a little hazy, and occasionally the terms are used interchangeably. Although some of the figures created are crosses, the custom is likely pre-Christian in origin; the crosses are equal-armed, and resemble solar symbols used by the Norse and other pagan societies.

Sun symbols may have been a form of sympathetic magic, encouraging the Sun to grow in strength and usher in the Spring. Many historians believe they were connected with ceremonies preparing seed grain for the Spring planting. In either case, they were and are used as talismans to bring fertility, prosperity, and protection to the household.

The crosses are traditionally made at Imbolc, on the evening of February 1st. They were hung on the door or over it, near the hearth, under the eaves, or in the barn - anywhere that protection and luck were needed. The rushes used for the art were usually picked by hand, not cut, on January 31st, the night before Brghid’s Day. They were blessed and the crosses were made in a sunwise direction, from left to right.

To make a Brighid’s Cross:

1. Gather several pieces (9 or more) of rush or straw, about 8-12 inches long (you can make them any size, but this is a good size for beginners). Soak the rushes for a half hour, until they are flexible. Meanwhile, get 4 rubber bands to hold the ends temporarily, and four pieces of string or ribbon to bind the ends permanently. You may also want some paint or clear coating to seal the cross after it is completed and dried.
2. Holding one straw vertical, wrap a second around it with the ends facing right.
3. Hold the center tightly and rotate it to the left. Fold a third straw over the second, to the right.
4. Rotate it all left again, and fold a fourth straw tightly over both the third and first straws, to the right.
5. Continue by turning the cross left each time, and adding another straw around the vertical ones.
6. Keep holding the center tightly as you turn and add new straws, until you have used them all.
7. Snug each straw into the center. When all straws are in place, fasten the ends.



**Breadmaking and Baking**

Like all the sabbats, the celebration wouldn’t be complete without a proper feast. Historically, this would be the time of year when our agricultural ancestors would be getting lower on winter reserves. Foods for the celebration were left over from the previous harvest and kept edible mostly by smoking, drying, or storing in a cool, dark root cellar. The people would have had turnips, carrots and lots of onions, leeks and garlic. They stored cabbages and beets, radishes, lentils, dried peas, and beans of many kinds.

The primary staple were the prevalent grains grown in the area: wheat in England; oats and barley in Scotland and Ireland; and wheat, barley, and rye on the continent. These grains were made into porridge, flat cakes, and heavy breads often used as trenchers, or plates, under servings of stew that moistened them enough to eat.

The ancient breads were heavy and often sour, difficult to eat by themselves without being dipped in soup or broth. Below is a recipe for a classic braided bread, adapted to suit our modern tastes:

**Brede’s Bread Braid**

In a large bowl combine 2 ¼ cups white flour, 1T salt, 2T sugar, and 2 packages dry yeast.

Beat the following ingredients by hand or in a mixer for two minutes: 1/4c butter, 2 eggs, 2 1/4c very warm (not hot) water. Then add 1c white flour.

Beat at high speed for two minutes, then divide equally into three bowls. In the first bowl add and beat in 2T molasses and 1 1/4c whole wheat flour. In the second bowl beat in 1 1/4c yellow cornmeal. In the third bowl, beat in 1 1/4c white flour.

Knead each batter on a lightly floured board for 5-10 minutes. The dough should be smooth and elastic, bouncing back when poked. Grease all three bowls, place doughs in them, cover with damp cloths, and let rise in a warm place for about an hour. Punch down. On a lightly floured board, divide each dough in half, rolling each half into a rope about 15 inches long. Braid together a white, a corn, and a whole wheat rope (easiest to start in the middle, go to one end, then come back and do the other). Tuck ends under and repeat with remaining three ropes. Place in greased loaf pans, cover with cloth or waxed paper, and let rise again until doubled, about an hour.

Heat oven to 350 degrees, and bake for 25-30 min. Baste with butter, return to the oven and bake for 10-15 min. Loaf should sound hollow when tapped. Remove from the oven and allow to cool on a wire rack, waiting at least a half hour before cutting. Serve with butter and jams.

**Divination**

Brighid was known as a goddess of divination and prophecy; an oracle in Her own right. Therefore, a common part of the Imbolc festival’s activities is to perform divination, either as a lighthearted game, or as serious magical work. Any divinatory practices including the use of fire, smoke and candles are most appropriate for Imbolc. Below are some popular techniques to explore:

**Pyromancy / Fire Scrying**

Pyromancy means divination using fire and comes in many forms. The simplest form of pyromancy involves simply staring into a fire. This technique differs from simple fire-watching (which we are all prone to do, as the hypnotic flames lull us into dreamy states) in that a specific intent is present, possibly accompanied by a ritual designed to focus the mind to be receptive to any images which may appear. Technically, pyromancy is a form of scrying, a kind of focused viewing in search of meaningful images, like using a crystal ball or magic mirror.

Listening is also important in pyromancy. The logs may snap and pop, and keep up a merry pratter. They may speak to you, coming through in that still, small voice inside - your intuition, the voice of Spirit.

As the fire burns down to embers, images may appear in the glowing coals. These are frequently easier to read than the flames, because the visions tend to last longer, and the fire’s dwindling heat allows us to gaze longer as well.

**Libanomancy / Reading the Smoke**

Libanomancy is finding meaning in the way smoke rises from incense. Frequently, the straighter and higher the smoke rises before dissipating, the more positive the omen. You’ll want to do this away from central-heating or air conditioners, so the forced air flow does not disturb the smoke.

If there are no outside influences that you can detect, but the smoke eddies in an agitated way, it’s usually taken as an ill omen. Occasionally, the streams of smoke may make fascinating shapes, such as spirals, and you have a sign that something very significant is about to happen. To determine what it might be, follow up with a more information-rich form of divination, such as reading tarot cards or rune stones.[[8]](#footnote-7)

**Sharing the Wisdom: Preparing Your Ritual**

Use this space to consider how you would honor this sabbat in a ritual way, whether for yourself or for others. This is meant to be a loose guide to inspire you, and to build confidence in your own intuition, vision, and abilities to incorporate more ritual in your life.

1. **What would your ritual space look like/what environment do you envision?**
2. **What items would you include on your altar? What do they represent to you?**
3. **What Elements would you include? How will you include them? And why?**
4. **What words do you feel should be spoken or sung? You might jot down your ideas, and create a loose outline to follow.**
5. **What is the best way for you, personally, to connect with this sabbat? How will you demonstrate that through ritual action?**

**Reflections and Integration**

Going back through your life in increments of 5 years, reflect upon this season/sabbat in the Wheel of the Year and what it has meant to you in those various stages of life. Use these questions as a guide:

* **What memories stand out to me the most about this season in each stage of life?**
* **How did this season/sabbat make me feel emotionally? Physically?**
* **How do my past experiences of the season/sabbat correlate to the present?**
* **In my highest vision, how would I best connect with this season/sabbat?**
* **From this year forward, what changes might I make to align myself more with the energies of this season/sabbat?**
1. From “Imbolc” by Grace Themes [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. From Wikipedia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. From “All About Imbolc” by Eileen Moylen [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. From Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe by Marija Gimbutas [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. From Candlemas, Feast of Flames by Amber K and Azrael Arynn K [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. From “Imbolc” by Circle of the Sacred Muse ATCC [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. From “All About Imbolc” by Eileen Moylen [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. From Candlemas, Feast of Flames by Amber K and Azrael Arynn K [↑](#footnote-ref-7)