

Lessons from St. Brigid and Imbolc

Rev. DC Fortune

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We have come into the time of the year when I begin to long for spring in earnest.

Two things offer hope in these weeks of the calendar – the feast of St. Brigid and seed catalogues.

St. Brigid, like so many Catholic saints, was co-opted from ancient pagan characters to make the colonizers' new religion seem at least a bit familiar and palatable. Brigid's celebration is on February first, which seems like a truly premature celebration of spring, but it is about six weeks after the winter solstice, and a time when the days are growing convincingly longer each week. It is also likely the time when pregnancies conceived during the fall's harvest celebrations made themselves apparent.

It is a time of promise and renewal and rebirth, a time to plan for the spring, for planting, for fresh air and warm sunshine.

Here in Pennsylvania, of course, it is the time of the year designated to roust a pudgy, sleeping rodent from his burrow and ask him in a flash of cameras and video lights to predict the weather for the next couple months. I think it is a gift of nature that we are not able to understand the language of groundhogs, for surely Phil must have some choice words for humans later this week.

In Maine, my younger sister is making haggis, for reasons I do not understand. Something about Robert Burns, she said. I was raised by the Irish side of the family. She was raised by the Scots. We Irish may boil our food, but at least it's food.

As we move forward into 2023, keeping in mind our discussion a couple weeks ago about making bite-sized progress toward a larger goal, there are so many issues in the world that need our attention. How do we, as a congregation, figure out which one to focus our collective energy toward?

I noticed on the geodesic sphere that there are a lot of triangles that name climate change and the environment as a big issue that needs to be addressed. All of the issues written there are valid, and heaven knows we all dedicate some portion of our time and energy to addressing them – even in trim-tab sized bites.

But it seems that the environment is a concern that is shared by many people. Our geographic location brings climate issues and pollution to the forefront every day. Many of us live in flood zones, yes? Or near flood zones? The town of Sunbury is particularly vulnerable. As is Northumberland.

The North Branch of the Susquehanna River was named Pennsylvania's River of 2023 by the PA Organization of Watersheds and Rivers. According to the POWR website, the "honor is designed to elevate public awareness of specific rivers and recognize important conservation needs and achievements." This is the 40th year of the program.

That river, just a few hundred yards from our building, is a vital natural resource, bringing water from the Poconos down through the Susquehanna Valley and feeding into the Chesapeake Bay, with its oyster aquaculture program and crab fisheries.

As many of you know, there is a project slated to be built almost across the road from us – almost directly between us and the river itself – to do some sort of recycling process for plastics. It's not the kind of recycling place we generally think of, though. It won't be chopping up plastic bottles and butter tubs to make park benches. Instead, it will be extracting liquid compounds from the plastics through a high pressure chemical process, then loading those chemicals on railcars and trucks for transit to plastic factories around the country.

I spent a perverse number of hours in the last month trying to learn all I can about this fancy technology, and honestly, it is beyond my comprehension. So I did the next, most reasonable thing: I looked at what chemists were saying about it, and I was more than a little concerned.

A person named Sandy Field will be here to talk about the proposed Encina project after worship next week, and I expect many of you will want to hear what she has to say. A large number of people are concerned about the

idea of putting what amounts to a chemical refinery on the banks of such a valuable – and vulnerable – natural resource as the North Branch of the Susquehanna River.

That project may be a bit beyond what some of us feel qualified to address, but there are other, trim-tab-sized things we can do to affect change in our environment. The UUA has a program called the Green Sanctuary Project in which congregations can take steps to reduce their carbon footprint by doing things like eliminating the use of disposable paper plates and napkins, or putting solar panels on the roof, and things like that. We could put in a charging station for electric cars. We can plant flowers that attract pollinators and butterflies. There are a lot of things we can do toward that goal. Last week, Sara and I were interviewed by Rev. Ashley Horan of the 30 Days of Love project about our geodesic project here, and she said the Green Sanctuary Project is rolling out a new set of guidelines in the coming weeks and was excited to think that we might consider being one of the first congregations to engage in that project.

I love this new pulpit. Hutch did such a marvelous job depicting the motion of the river in these wooden slats. I think I spent an hour just looking at this thing on Friday, walking all around it, touching it, admiring the craftsmanship and creativity. This is a thing of beauty. And it, like the brass sculpture by Dick Bonham behind me, evokes the water that surrounds and nurtures our community.

The choice is yours, of course, to consider if you'd like to focus your collective energy on environmental concerns, but it seems like you're already doing that, without being consciously aware of it. This place is OF the river. The towns up and down the valley understand the river as part of their community. Everyone in this room, I bet, knows which direction the river is from where they are, no matter where they are.

I know that the river is over there (points east). When I am in my home, I can see Penn's Creek as it flows between my house and the Isle of Que on its way south to join the Susquehanna a half mile down. People here know where the river is in the same way people who live on the coast always knows where the ocean is, or how people who live in Colorado know where the range is. It is a touchstone, a thing that centers you, a natural familiar.

St. Brigid was the patron saints of a lot of things, including poets and bards, and fire and smithcraft and healing wells, and birth and death. Her pagan goddess myths and legends tangle with the saintly narrative of the Catholic colonizers, to make her accessible to a lot of people. Multiple wells and springs and small rivers in Ireland bear her name, as do parishes and churches.

We are midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox. Warmer weather is undeniably approaching. It a time to consider what needs our attention this year. To what will we direct our attention and resources?

St. Brigid has much to offer us. Certainly more than poor Punxsutawney Phil.

May we be thoughtful and intentional as we consider our power. How will we use it? Where will we point it? How shall we focus it?

Let the work of justice forever be our practice and our prayer.

Amen.