

'Sharing the Light'
Luke 2:22-40
February 1, 2009

In the midst of a dark winter, we long for light. Like our ancestors before us, we look for any sign of spring, for any sign that the power of winter is easing its grip.

Most of us are not quite as close to the Earth as our ancestors were, but even so, we've probably noticed the almost imperceptible growing of the light. Ever since the shortest day, December 22, the light has been growing, and throughout recorded time, today and tomorrow have been marked by celebrations, both in the church calendar and in the old religion.

In the old Celtic tradition, today, February 1st, was known as Imbolc, one of the four great festivals that are gateways into the seasons of the turning year. At Imbolc, new life began as lambs were born, fishermen could once more put out to sea, and the ground became soft enough for seeds to be sown. (We're talking about Ireland now, not Colorado! And Georgia, too, where I lived for 12 years. In Georgia, the snowdrops would have been out already, and the tulips, daffodils and camellias not far behind.) Today marks the halfway point on our journey to the spring equinox, which occurs this year on March 20th.

In later centuries, with the spread of Christianity, Imbolc came to be known as St. Brigit's feast day. The daughter of a druid, Brigit was supposedly born in the year 453 C.E. although we have little historical evidence of her existence. She was, and is, greatly beloved by the Irish people. She is associated with both fire and water, which are necessary for life. The hearth fire was kindled with her blessing, mothers called upon her help during childbirth and people prayed for her healing in times of sickness. From the *Carmina Gadelica*, a collection of Gaelic prayers, hymns, charms, incantations, and blessings, here is Brigit's Blessing:

I am under the shielding

Of good Brigit each day.

I am under the shielding

Of good Brigit each night.

I am under the keeping

Of the nurse of Mary,

Each early and late,

Every dark, every light.

Brigit is my comrade-woman,

Brigit is my maker of song,

Brigit is my helping-woman,
My choicest of women,
My woman of guidance.

On the eve of Brigit's feast day, bands of boys and girls went around the house with a brideog doll to announce Brigit's return to her people. There was feasting and celebration. At this time, Brigit herself was believed to travel around the countryside, blessing the people, and the farm animals. In some parts of Ireland, women would place a piece of cloth on a bush on St. Brigit's Eve. They believed that during the night the saint would pass by, touch the cloth and by doing so, give it healing properties.

People also made special St. Brigit's crosses out of rushes and hung them high in house and barn to honor the saint and ask for her protection. St. Brigit's Cross comes in many different shapes, some of which look like symbols of the sun. Another kind was actually not a cross at all but a figure with three legs, symbolizing the trinity.

In the Christian calendar St. Brigit's festival was eventually replaced by Candlemas Day on February 2, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and featuring candlelight processions. But a powerful female symbol of light presides over both celebrations, and Brigit was often called Mary of the Gael.

Candlemas is also called the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord, and commemorates the purification of the Virgin Mary and the presentation of Christ in the temple. Jewish women traditionally went through a purification ceremony 40 days after the birth of a male child

Luke tells us, quoting Exodus 13:2, 12, that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem because every firstborn child was to be dedicated to the Lord. They also went to sacrifice a pair of doves -- this showed that Mary and Joseph were poor. Once in the temple, Jesus was purified by the prayer of Simeon, in the presence of Anna the prophetess. Simeon, upon seeing the Messiah, gave thanks to the Lord:

'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.'

Candlemas was the day of the year when all the candles that were used in the church during the coming year were brought into church and a blessing was said over them - so it was the Festival Day (or 'mass') of the Candles.

Egeria, who may or may not have been a nun, made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 4th century, and gives an account of the feast of the Presentation in the Jerusalem Church. It was kept on February 14th. The ceremony was marked by a procession to the Constantinian basilica of the Resurrection, with a sermon on Luke 2:22-39. However, the feast had no proper name at this point; it was simply called the 40th day after Epiphany. In places where Christ's birth

was celebrated on December 25th, the feast began to be celebrated on February 2nd, where it is kept in the West today. In 542, the Emperor Justinian introduced the feast to the Eastern Roman empire in thanksgiving for the end to a great pestilence which afflicted the city of Constantinople. Sergius, a 7th century Pope, added a candlight procession to the Candlemas service. The blessing of candles came into common use in the 11th century.

Ever since then, in the Roman Catholic church, the priest blesses the candles (which must be of beeswax) and then distributes them to the lay people, while the choir sings the Canticle of Simeon. The congregation all carry lighted candles, and this procession symbolizes the entry of Christ, who is the Light of the World, into the Temple of Jerusalem.

Candles were important in olden times not only because there were no electric lights. Some people thought they gave protection against plague, illness and famine. For Christians, they were (and still are) a reminder of something even more important – the light that Jesus' birth had brought to the world. We still light candles during church services in remembrance of His coming.

The promise of the return of the light and the renewal of life which was made at Christmas is now becoming more and more clear. It's the dawn of the year. It's time to creep out of the hibernation of winter, cautiously, like the Ground Hog who supposedly emerges on February 2nd to check his shadow. It's a time to remember that there is no darkness so long as we all share the Light of God's love, and that All Winters End!

Amen.