

High Feasts & Holy Days

Lesson 2: Imbolc (Pagan), Candlemas and St. Brigid (Christian), Groundhog Day (secular)

1.29.2017

Objectives: Explore how holidays are often historically layered on top of other traditions.

Materials: flipchart, lesson attachments, stacked boxes (see details below #5), scissors, pipecleaners.

Time allotments suggested and meant to be adapted for **75 minute class**.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ What movie(s) have you seen more than five times?
 - ▶ Write your name under the heading that describes how you feel about winter so far: End, Winter, End! or Bring More Snow!
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: “One Minute, Please!” (5 minutes max)

Pair youth up randomly. Each taking turns, the aim of the game is to talk for one minute on a given subject. Teacher announces the topic and one person in the pair has to speak for one minute on that topic. Then switch. Choose subjects to stimulate the imagination and which may be amusing. Put a stopwatch on each turn to see how long they last before drying up! Subjects might include: my 3 favorite places in the world, why short/long haircuts are good for you, 10 things you can do with duct tape, recipes that should include Nutella, famous people’s lives I’d try out.

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (from Albert Camus, French author and philosopher)

“In the depth of winter I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.”

4. **Joys and Sorrows** (10 minutes): Listening is a precious gift that we offer one another at church. Using the balance scale and the blue (sorrows) and yellow (joys) stones, invite youth to share a joy and/or a sorrow from the past week, as a way of *meeting* one another with our lives and *sharing* in community. You will want to set limits (e.g. two stones max per person) so that no one monopolizes sharing time.

Each Sunday, a copy of the congregation's Embracing Meditation will be made available to your class, so that stones can be put in for those whose names are being spoken in the Sanctuary.

5. **Learning activity: Imbolc/ Candlemas/ St. Bridget/ Groundhog Day** (40 minutes)

Teacher introduces: Often, the holidays we celebrate are built on prior traditions and celebrations. Like people and cultures, holidays have their own genealogy or line of descent, historically layered on top of other traditions. Some elements stay the same, while other elements change and adapt.

Activity (20 min): Find a large box that contains inside a series of smaller boxes within boxes. Each of these represents one layer of holiday and contains objects/pictures that symbolize the meaning of each holiday. **Teachers take time to facilitate discussion**, as youth pass the box around the room, asking each youth to read the gift tag or one of the items inside, and progressing through the boxes. (See below for items accompanying each item)

- First, outer box is **Groundhog Day**—picture of groundhog.
- Second box is **St. Bridget's Day**—St. Bridget's cross, mantle (ribbon), picture, bread-butter-milk-corn, candles.
- Third box is **Candlemas**—candles, Christmas ornament, picture of crepes and chant, picture of Virgin Mary
- Fourth, innermost box is **Imbolc** (pronounced *i-MOLK* or *i-MOLG*), the oldest holiday—picture of Goddess Brigid, candles, Brigid's Wheel, Evergreens, lambskin, snake, bread-butter-milk, salt water.

Discussion Questions (20 min):

- Starting with the most ancient holiday, identify as many elements as you can that are carried through to other holidays. When did some of the elements disappear?
- What did Brigid's Wheel become when the holy day became a Saint's Day? Why the change?
- When did the holiday stop being exclusively about female images? Why the change?
- Why do you think the shift from Mary to St. Bridget?
- How is the Goddess Brigid like St. Bridget? Like the Virgin Mary?

- How is this holiday suited for Great Britain's seasons?
- Notice how an ancient **pagan** holy day became a **Christian** holy day which became a **secular** holiday. Why do you think February 2 is today a secular holiday (Groundhog Day) in the U.S. without any of the religious elements from its history?
- What's the difference between a "religious" and "secular" holiday?

6. Secular and Religious holidays (10 minutes)

Teacher summarizes: **Secular holidays** do not involve a faith tradition. But often, if you just dig a little, you may find something religious underneath in its history. Or if you watch carefully, a culture may try to connect a secular celebration to a religion.

- Example: **Groundhog's Day** is a secular observance of an older, Pagan and Christian holy day that marks the halfway point between the winter solstice (when winter begins) and the spring equinox (when spring begins).
- Example: **July 4th** is our national secular holiday, but is celebrated with great festivity by Evangelical Christians who have added their own religious meaning to this celebration.

Religious holidays mark important dates to commemorate people and stories from the world's faith traditions. Many high feasts and holy days do one or more of these following things: *[invite youth to brainstorm holidays that might fit into each category.]*

- Commemorate the date of birth/death of an important figure in the tradition
(E.g. *Christmas... Buddha's birthday... Catholic saints' days*)
- Commemorate a historical event that shaped the faith
(E.g. **Passover** that marks Exodus from Egypt... **Night of Power** when first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to Mohammed... **Eid al-Adha** that commemorates the day when prophet Abraham was going to sacrifice his son but was instructed by God to offer an animal instead.)
- Mark a natural event or turning in the cycle of seasons
(E.g. *Moon Festival... Halloween... Winter Solstice*)
- Create space for a prescribed spiritual practice
(E.g. *Ramadan and fasting... Yom Kippur and asking for forgiveness of sins*)
- Celebrate the beginning or end of a certain period
(E.g. **Eid al-Fitr** that marks end of Ramadan... **Shrove Tuesday** that begins Lent... **Sukkot** that celebrates end of harvest season.)

7. Making Saint Bridget's Cross (10 minutes)

Follow attached instructions and make Saint Bridget's Cross to mark this holy day!

8. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying:

"May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts."

9. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- return blue/yellow stones to containers
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets

Box “Captions”

This is the feast of Imbolc (pronounced i-MOLK or i-MOLG), founded in pre-history. Imbolc is an ancient Celtic word that means “womb.”

This is the Goddess, Brigid, who ruled over the fertility of the land and the flocks. She births the Sun God, who died last December. Her temple holds an eternal flame tended by virgins.

This is a Brigid Wheel, a symbol of the year that turns again to life and renewal. It’s made of wheat, representing last year’s fertility come to harvest. It is hung over the fireplace, which gets cleaned out on February 2.

These are candles lit in honor of the Goddess Brigid, as she returns to give birth to the light of the Sun God. They shine from the windows of the kitchen where the fireplace often was located in days gone by.

These are the last of the Yuletide greens. They are burnt in the clean fireplace on February 2.

In Britain, spring shows signs of its return beginning with the birth of the first lambs around February 2 and the flowing of the ewes first milk.

On Imbolc, if a snake is seen coming out of its hole, then winter will be over soon. If the snake goes back in its hole, there is still winter yet to come.

This is bread and milk and butter, all signs of the bounty of the Goddess Brigid. They are left out on the eve of February 2 as an offering to the Goddess in exchange for her blessing on the house.

This is salt water for cleaning and purifying the home.

Happy Candlemas (and Feast of the Presentation of Jesus)! Founded in the early 4th Century.

This is the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ. February 2 marks the 40th day after the birth, when she was purified in the Jewish tradition of the mikvah cleansing bath. Jesus would also have been presented for circumcision at the temple around this time.

February 2 is celebrated as Candlemas in the Catholic church. For centuries, the faithful have brought the year’s candles to be blessed by the priest.

This is a Christmas ornament. It’s appropriate to put all remaining Christmas decorations away on Candlemas.

In France, Candlemas is celebrated by eating crepes, made of flour, butter, eggs and milk. And here are two Candlemas chants:

*If Candlemas Day be warm and fair,
There'll be more winter in the year
If Candlemas Day be cold and grey
Winter soon shall fly away
On Candlemas, should Sun appear
March and April shall pay full dear*

Happy Saint Bridget's Day! Founded c. 1419

This is Saint Bridget, a legendary young Irish slave girl who, because of her kindness, was sainted by the early Catholic Church. Christian tradition says she was born at sunrise and that the cottage in which she was born burst in to flames the day that she left. Early in life, she chose the convent over marriage. She is a patron saint of newborn babies, dairy farmers and poets.

This is St. Bridget's cross. She made the cross of rushes at the side of a road in order to explain the crucifixion to a dying man. On her feast day, February 1, many Irish Catholics fashion similar crosses and hang them on the fireplace as a protection against house fires.

This is bread, milk, butter, and corn. It is left out for the poor and for Saint Bridget, just as Saint Bridget took such food from her father's pantry to share with the hungry when she was a young girl at home. The corn is left for St. Bridget's red-eared, white cow who traditionally accompanies her.

This ribbon symbolizes St. Bridget's mantle/cloak. Irish Catholics hang such a ribbon on a tree or clothesline so that the Saint might bless it, giving it healing powers.

These are candles lit in windows to shine as a beacon to the poor and hungry.

Happy Groundhog's Day! Founded c. 1841

This is Punxatawney Phil, the groundhog that predicts the length of winter. Celebrated on February 2nd, if he sees his shadow, then there remain 6 more weeks of winter.