

Anna Burnham:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Anna Burnham:

And welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Salter book, Psalm 142, found on page 71. Please stand as you're able to read responsibly by the whole verse. I cry with my voice to the Lord. With my voice, I make supplication to the Lord.

Congregation:

I pour out my complaint before Him. I shewed myself before Him.

Anna Burnham:

When my spirit is faint, thou knowest my way. In the path where I walk, they have hidden a trap for me.

Congregation:

I look to the right and watch, but there is none who takes notice of me. No refuge remains to me, no man care for me.

Anna Burnham:

I cry to thee, oh Lord. I say, thou art my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.

Congregation:

Heed to my cry, for I am brought very low. Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are stronger than I.

Anna Burnham:

Bring me out of prison that I may give thanks to thy name.

Congregation:

The righteous will surround me, for thou will deal bountifully with me.

Anna Burnham:

So I admit to cheating up here as I give this morning prayers talk. I don't actually know if this is allowed. I did not ask, but I don't have a secret text to share and I didn't get this date by chance. I signed up months ago to get an open date as close as possible to February 1st, all because I was looking for an excuse to talk about St. Bridget, whose feast day is on Thursday to you, my captive audience. So here we are. Let's just pretend it's February 1st and I'm sorry about the inspire text, but I do promise you'll get one every other day this week.

Anyone who spends more than a few hours with me tends to quickly find out that despite my English last name, Burnham, I was raised by my very Irish American extended family, my mom's side, the

McLaughlins. Though I know real Irish people understandably laugh at the American tendency to tie ourselves to a country and a culture that our ancestors left centuries ago, this identity has stubbornly continued to matter for me, especially regarding the complex ways it intertwines with my family's Catholicism and our religious and spiritual practices and proclivities. When it comes to Irish saints, everyone of course knows St. Patrick, but fewer people know St. Bridget, one of the other two patron saints of Ireland. And so I'm here today to tell you about her in the hopes that maybe you'll grow to love her, too, or that maybe you'll be inspired today to go out and find your saint, whomever that might be.

St. Bridget is the patron of cattle, midwives, blacksmiths, healers, poets, the home, Ireland, dairy farmers, and beer, among other things. That is real. I should start by saying that there is a debate about whether or not she was actually a real person, as there is with many early saints. There are very few historical facts about her and even the earliest hagiographies written centuries after her death are mostly little anecdotes of her life combined with miracle stories, some of which are deeply rooted in preexisting Irish pagan folklore. Quite notably, her name is the same, and her attributes and associations fire, cattle, poetry, domestic animals, are strikingly similar to the pre-Christian Celtic goddess Bridget. Her feast, February 1st, is also very conveniently the same date as the traditional Celtic festival of Imbolc, which marked the first signs of spring and honored the goddess Brigid.

Many scholars posit that St. Brigid might merely be a christianization of the preexisting local deity, a process that happened around the world as Christianity was spread and encountered preexisting spiritual traditions. But this is actually part of what I really love about Brigid, something that has always really appealed to me about Celtic and Irish Christianity specifically, is the way in which traditional pre-Christian folk ways seem to so fully live alongside and within the faith tradition. The intermingling of myth, legend, tradition, and history just makes some sort of cosmic sense to me. According to legend, Brigid was the daughter of a chieftain and an enslaved woman who lived in fifth century Ireland. She founded an abbey in Kildare that established organized religious life for women in Ireland, and led a dual community of monks and nuns that became one of the most powerful in the nation. The Abbess of Kildare, who was by default a woman, became one of the most important religious seats in all of Ireland, ranking over many men.

The community that Brigid founded became a center of religion and learning. There are so many wonderful stories about Brigid and her miracles, more than I can detail here. As a young girl, she kept cows and once gave away her mother's entire store of butter to the poor, only to have it miraculously replenished. She was said to turn a plank of wood to a tree with just the touch of her hand. There's a lovely story of her hanging her cloak on a sunbeam. She blessed a woman with an unwanted pregnancy and the pregnancy ended suddenly and without pain. She was said to be able to manipulate the landscape, moving a river, so a road to her cathedral city could be built, or guiding a boulder down a hill to be used as a millstone for the community.

Instead of fighting those who wanted to cause her community harm, she was said to find peaceful resolutions through persuasion, even clever trickery. She's often associated with the home and domestic tasks. And on St. Brigid's Day every year, there is a tradition of blessing the home for the year ahead. Her specifically shaped cross made from reeds hangs in many homes in Ireland, and I have one both here in my office if you want to take a look, and in my house. In modern day Kildare, there is a community of religious sisters who tend Brigid's eternal flame. There is a holy well there, an ancient sight of pre-Christian devotion before it became associated with St. Brigid. I actually went to Kildare when I was in Ireland last summer. I visited her great cathedral. I stopped by the place where the sisters live. I attempted to climb her great brown tower before all the birds flying around at the top freaked me out too much and I had to climb back down.

It was very alarming. I trekked out of town in the rain, of course, it's Ireland, to her holy well, where there are countless bits of fabric tied to the trees there, left as prayers and offerings for healings and other petitions. There's a lovely statue of her there holding a bird in her hand and a flowing spring. It is peaceful and feels ancient and holy, like it has held the hopes and pains of many generations. I really don't know why I love Brigid so much, and I'm not even sure I have some big capital M message or grand resolution in telling you about her, or why I wanted to so badly that I cheated my way to giving morning prayers today. I think I just want you to know about her, and I want you to wonder what stories are out there that might yet influence you, that might root you in a place, that might draw you to a place, that might serve as a guidepost on your journey.

Mostly, I think it's good to share things that matter to you with people when you feel called to do so. You never know what they might hear. Please pray with me. A prayer to St. Brigid. Brigid, you were a woman of peace. You brought harmony where there was conflict. You brought light to the darkness, you brought hope to the downcast. May the mantle of your peace cover those who are troubled and anxious, and may peace be firmly rooted in our hearts and in our world. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please rise as you're able and together let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. Together, let us sing the hymn, Heaven and Earth, and Sea and Air. Number 45, found in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

May you go forth into your day in peace. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other. May the love of God strengthen us in God's service today and every day. And together, let us say, Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.