



## Star Lore: Imbolc

*'I am a wide flood on a plain'* Song of Amergin

At the beginning of the birth process there is a great gush of water. Birth pains have already started perhaps, but when the water breaks, the real work begins. Imbolc is a celebration of birth, the actual process of birth. The time is sacred to the goddess Bride who is the guardian of childbirth, of smiths and of poets. This is a festival of washing, of purification through water and fire. This theme was retained when Imbolc became Candlemas in the medieval church to celebrate the 'purification of the virgin.' Forty days after the birth of her child, Mary went to the temple to reenter community life following a ritual bath. Now we celebrate washing the earth with rain and snow which has fallen during a time when the earth was frozen hard and could not accept the moisture from above. Here in New England, winter is still well entrenched, yet it's common to find water on top of the ice which coats the forest floor, and if you pull back the snow, you will find green growth has begun in dark soft mud.

The custom of floating candles on water seems to reflect the cold, the wet and the fire as our grove stands in the snow celebrating the birth of spring. As we light 19 candles which float upon clear water this Imbolc, we mark the number of years in the Moon's Metonic cycle; the number of years for the Moon to return to the same place in the sky on the same date. The Metonic cycle was marked in stone circles and now we also connect to the mysteries of the sky in this simple ceremony.

Imbolc means ewe's milk, for this is the season of new born lambs, but milk is also a connection to the stars of the Milky Way, *Caer Gwydion*. There is a theme of whiteness with this festival. And white (*gwen*) is the color of the fairy realm which reconnects us to the Milky Way, the white path of the trickster, *Gwydion*.

Imbolc takes place when the Sun is in the sign of Aquarius, symbolized by a man (or is it a woman?) holding an urn which pours forth water. The Egyptians saw this water carrier as a symbol of the flooding of the Nile and showed him with his staff which was a measure of the depth of the river, for all festivals and religious observance were connected to the yearly rise of and fall of the Nile waters.

The part of the sky where the constellation Aquarius is located was called 'the Water.' Aquarius was called the 'Seat of the Flowing Water' by the Babylonians, and Aquarius is part of the oceanic sea constellations: Pisces the Fishes, Cetus the Whale, Capricorn the Sea Goat, Delphinus the Dolphin, Eridanus the River, and Hydra the Water Serpent. Yet for all this water, Aquarius is an air sign, not a water sign, and is actually quite electric in its energy. This time of year is often full of sudden and unexpected events, and people born in this season often surprise those around them by decisions and statements which seem to come 'out of the blue.'

Luis the Rowan tree and the Snowdrop carry the symbolism of the life force which is both vulnerable and sturdy. Protective Rowan makes a lovely wand for the Imbolc circle and the Snowdrop is a flower which does not seem to know the season, but blooms right through the February and March snows.

This year on the eve of Imbolc, February 1, Uranus and Saturn will be in an exact opposition. This is a pattern which has been dancing in and out for several months, but seems particularly powerful when it falls on Imbolc, in the sign of Aquarius ruled by both of these planets. Saturn is the traditional ruler of Aquarius and suggests manifestation and tradition. It is associated with time and patience, and hard work, with frustration over the demands of physical existence. Saturn is the 'labor' of birth. Uranus is the revolutionary who wants to build new structures and is quite ready to overturn tradition in the search for better solutions to old problems. Uranus is the sudden appearance of a new child or a new lamb ready to be part of the whole web of life.

As we walk the circle under the 'water' constellations, we reflect back our watery natures in poetry and song, we focus with the careful precision of the smith who works with fire and we embrace the potential for healing and rebirth, all in the realm of Bride's arms. This day is dedicated to the goddess, to surprise, to whiteness and shadow. Tonight we will notice the lengthening of the daylight which began at Alban Arthuan and become aware of how far we have traveled.

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