

A Prayer Bench Celtic Retreat

Living the In-Between Way

In the Spirit of Brigid of Kildare



Welcome to this Prayer Bench Retreat

We join Brigid, a fascinating Irish mystic and saint, who presents us with images and insights into living in the in-between way. Born in the doorway of a barn, celebrated on the first day of spring in Ireland, and always turning the ordinary into mystery, Brigid occupies a space between time and timelessness, between death and new life, between what is known and what is unfolding. Her life is a mixture of legend and history. Who we are is ever-changing and who we are becoming is the quest of living in the in-between way.

Brigid speaks to our time. We draw on four elements of Brigid's story to guide our spiritual journey in this liminal season: the power of her mantle, the tending of sacred flame, the healing by holy wells, and the blessing of St. Brigid's cross. With her guidance and our determination, we practice turning love into making a difference, we ignite passion to light the way for others, we see what needs healing in all creation now, and we glimpse what new life is emerging through suffering.

Using this Retreat

Here are some options for using this retreat: You might consider making this retreat over a 24-hour time, from sunset to sunset. Sunset is my favourite time to begin a retreat. Welcome the darkness. Welcome entering rest. Welcome the space opening around you and sense your inward being responding to the invitation of time set aside simply for being.

Alternatively, you may choose to read through the retreat and sit with what it stirs in you and invite your curiosity to show you what next to explore. You can also work with the retreat material a few minutes each day along with your usual practices. You know what works best for you.

Before you begin, take time to acknowledge the concerns of the moment; the ones swirling in your immediate sphere of being and those taking place in the life of the world. An intentional time of silence, rest and retreat creates energy. We dedicate the fruit of our energy to bringing the spirit of Brigid and her generosity and compassion to the world within and around us.

Getting Ready

Welcome the spirit of Brigid by gathering one or more symbols related to her. I write this retreat with a beautifully woven scarf around my neck. It's beauty and its warmth enfold me and reminds me of the power of Brigid's mantle. Light a candle and remember Brigid as a tender of the hearth. Set out a special bowl and fill it with water. Let it be your holy well. Check out the resources section of this retreat for instructions on making your own St. Brigid's cross as a visual symbol of transformative love or use your own cross. Perhaps you have one you can hold in your hand?

Settling

Here is a traditional prayer. Pray the prayer and then settle on a word or a phrase that speaks to your heart for this time of retreat. Let it be your mantra or prayer phrase.

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.
 Inspire us to act justly and to reverence all God has made.
 Brigid you were a voice for the wounded and the weary.
 Strengthen what is weak within us.
 Calm us into a quietness that heals and listens.
 May we grow each day into greater wholeness in mind, body and spirit. Amen (Traditional)

First Element: The Power of Brigid's Mantle

Legend has it that Brigid wanted to build a convent. She found the perfect place, but the land belonged to the King of Leinster and he refused her request. She and the sisters prayed his heart would soften. Later, she met him on the road and asked for as much land as her small mantle (cloak) covered. Bemused, he granted her request. She threw down her mantle and it grew and spread across many acres. He recognized her as a “holy woman” and granted her the land and she built her convent in Kildare.

Brigid was born on February 1. There is an ancient tradition, marked by some today, to leave a piece of cloth (the size of a handkerchief) outside the home on the night on January 31st. It was thought Brigid's spirit travelled the land and blessed the cloth. The next day, the cloth would be brought indoors and kept safe. Throughout the year the cloth would be used for healing humans and animals and to offer protection from evil.

The stories of Brigid's life occupy a space between myth and history, as do many of the stories of the lives of the saints. Rather than literal truth, they offer us metaphors helpful in guiding our spiritual journey.

What can we make of Brigid's mantle?

From our baby “blankies” to our favourite cozy sweaters we know the power of fabrics to soothe and comfort. We offer those who are ill prayer shawls to let them know they are not alone. We know how the “fragrance” of a loved one lives in the shirt they once wore, and this fragrance brings them close. I wear an exquisite woven scarf, a special gift from someone I love, to help me write this retreat because it brings me close to the spirit of Brigid who I admire for her creativity, courage, and power.

We are helped in our time by those who go the way of life before us. Recall the scripture that says, “They rest from their labour but their work follows them.” (Revelation 14:13) I understand this to mean that death changes the physical location of those who once lived and laboured on earth. Yet something of their essence lingers and their conscious work continues to unfold in a new way. We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. (Hebrews 12:1) When there is a capacity or spiritual quality in us, that is part of that essence their being, we find ourselves supported.

As we continue to explore Brigid, what is it about her spirit that inspires or energizes you? What spiritual capacity in you might Brigid support?

“Beneath your mantle gather us.”

– Saint Brigid Prayer

Second Element: Tending the Sacred Flame

The story goes that when Brigid built her monastery, she kindled a flame that was tended by each of her sisters for 19 nights, and she kept the ritual fire alight on the 20th night. It was an “ever-living fire” and represented a tradition that went back to pagan times. It is said that Brigid’s fire burned for 500 years and produced no ashes. The light of Brigid’s fire welcomed the stranger and was a sign that Brigid would do whatever she could for a wanderer. She is remembered for her compassion.

In 2006, Brigid’s sacred flame was re-lit in the Kildare Town Square “as a beacon of hope, justice and peace for Ireland and our world. Her flame continues to burn in the hearts of ordinary mystics.

The experience of a global issues is changing how we see spiritual practice. There is an urgency to bring qualities of kindness, goodness, and compassion to the world and find ways to support the common good. There is much to learn these days about privilege, racism, poverty, and the effects of climate crisis and how all life is connected. We pray for eyes to see so we can tend the call to take part in the unfolding of a greater vision.

We kindle the ever-living fire burning in our heart by asking, “What needs my attention now?”
What am I uniquely called to see?

*“Guide our hands in yours,
Remind us how to kindle the hearth.
To keep it bright, to preserve the flame.
Your hands upon ours,
Our hands within yours,
To kindle the light,
Both day and night.”
– Saint Brigid Prayer*

Third Element: Visiting the Holy Well

There are holy wells all over Ireland. The ancient Celts knew these places as powerful sources of healing and well-being. Each well has a story and a pattern of prayer or custom to be followed. Sometimes pilgrims circle the well clockwise a set number of times. Sometimes visitors leave coins or take a drink of water. An ancient tradition instructs pilgrims to dip a small cloth in the water and leave it hanging on a tree as a prayer remembrance. Ritual and custom join hands at Holy Wells.

Today, pilgrims still visit wells, bringing prayers, their deep yearning, their longing for a sense of Presence. Brigid has many wells named for her. They are thin places of comfort and inspiration offering a sense of communion. Holy Wells (and sacred spaces) remind us that deep inside we

know what we need and will seek to find it. We long still for ritual and meaning and tangible ways of creating silence and making prayer in our lives.

Here at the Holy Well we sense the intimate connection between spirit and place. Landscape and spirituality are woven together. There is oneness and a vision of what makes creation (and we who are a part of it) whole. There is urgent need to heal the connection between spirit and nature.

What breaks your heart?

What helps awaken your heart to new possibilities for Earth care?

*“Calm us into a quietness that heals and listens.
May we grow each day into greater wholeness in mind, body and spirit.”*
– Saint Brigid Prayer

Fourth Element: St Brigid's Cross



Legend has it that Brigid was called to accompany a pagan chieftain into death. While she sat beside him, she took rushes (straw) from the floor and wove it into a cross. He asked what she was doing, and she told him the story of Jesus. Before he died the chieftain had become a Christian. The story lives on. It is traditional to make a St. Brigid's cross on the eve of her birthday and hang it in the house for protection from evil.

The cross is a powerful symbol of “the in-between way.” We are so aware of changes in our world as we pass from one way of being in the world toward another structure of consciousness. We are in what is called “the place between.” This can be potent place of possibility between who we were and who we are becoming. This space beckons a commitment to personal work and the work of community.

Brigid is a perfect guide for this journey of transformation. Legend has it she was born in the doorway of a barn, between inside and outside. She was born at dawn, the space between night and day. Her birthday is February 1, between winter and spring. Her name itself is part of the ancient Irish religion and Christian culture; she occupies space between myth and history.

The “in-between way” is often an uncomfortable space between who we were and who we are becoming. We resist its invitations, especially as time goes on. Transformation always takes longer than we expect, and sometimes the energy of holding possibility dips under our awareness and it feels like nothing is happening. Sometimes we lose sight (vision) of any hope or goodness that can come from this ripe time. We despair at the lack of care for the common good. We centre ourselves and our opinions and fail to listen to others. We see division and troubles where once we tasted

kindness and community. The in-between way surfaces our best dreams for change— and our worst leanings.

This is the transformational journey. It is the journey of the cross, the journey of Love's deepest possibility.

This is our moment. We are in this doorway between death and life. We live the in-between way by deepening conscious awareness and trusting the vision of wholeness. We gather up whatever straws of compassion and courage we can and weave them into a new way of seeing. The spirit of Brigid is with us.

What words or images describe your transformational journey? Make your own map with words or images of your in-between way. What is the voice of Brigid saying to your heart?

*"This day and night,
From dawn till dark,
From dark till dawn."
— Saint Brigid Prayer*

Prompts & Spiritual Practices

Our spiritual practices are what we do in response to something God has already started within. Look through the choices and allow your wise and knowing self to help you choose one or two that might support your journey.

Spiritual Becoming

I invite you to consider one or two spiritual qualities or capacities you want to nurture in yourself. Perhaps this desired spiritual gift is inspired by the story of Brigid. Perhaps you already have a word or an intention that already showed itself this year. Work with it and explore if Brigid has any prompts to help you reflect further on it and help bring greater goodness to our world.

Meditation on Scripture

Candle mass is celebrated on February 2. It commemorates the visit of Mary and Joseph to the temple 40 days after the birth of Jesus. Here is a lovely story, recorded by Alexander Carmichael in the *Carmina Gadelica*, of Brigid walking before Mary with a lighted candle in each hand shedding light on her path.

"It is said in Ireland that Bride [Brigid] walked before Mary with a lighted candle in each hand when she went up to the Temple for purification. The winds were strong on the Temple heights, and the tapers were unprotected, yet they did not flicker nor fail."

You might want to light a candle.

Slowly Read: Luke 2:22-40

Journal or draw your response to any of these prompts that compel you:

- Who serves as “Brigid of Brightness” in your life?
- In what ways are you shedding light on the path of others?
- What phrases or images from the gospel story invite your attention?

Becoming Seers

The scientist theologian Ilia Delio writes: “Seers learn to see what does not yet exist, and act to make something exist in a new way.” We need seers in such a time as this. What are some practices you’ve tried that helped you see in a new way? When did your gut teach you a new truth? When was the last time going for a walk helped you with a breakthrough?

Crossing Thresholds: A Prompt for Reflection or Journalling

The Irish poet John O'Donohue reminds us that we cross thresholds several times a day. Literally, we pass from one room to another, but there are also thresholds to be found in the pauses between doing one thing and then the next. We also work our way through internal thresholds in our journey of becoming.

About inner thresholds he invites:

"At any time you can ask yourself: At which threshold am I now standing?

At this time in my life, what am I leaving?

Where am I about to enter?

What is preventing me from crossing my next threshold?

What gift would enable me to do it?"

(From his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us*.)

A Closing Celtic Blessing

I arise today

Through a mighty strength:

God's power to guide me,

God's might to uphold me,

God's eyes to watch over me;

God's ear to hear me,

God's word to give me speech,

God's hand to guard me,

God's way to lie before me,

God's shield to shelter me,

God's host to secure me. (*Traditional, attributed to Brigid*)

Resources to Explore

Web Article: [The Legend of Brigid's Mantle:](#)

Web Article: [The story of Brigid's Fire:](#)

St Brigid Offers Healing for Today's Divided World <https://uscatholic.org/articles/202001/st-brigid-offers-healing-for-todays-divided-world/>

Music by Laura Ash, [Song of Brigid](#)

[Video](#): Making a St. Brigid Cross

Song and Spoken Word by Alana Levandoski, "[So Far to Go.](#)"

"It is a time where I need to be patient and prudently courageous and let myself transform one day at a time. This is where I learned to trust we are on a path not of our own making and I'm being transformed in this." – Thomas Merton spoken by James Finley in this song.

Book: *Illuminating the Way: Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics*, by Christine Valters Paintner. 2016

The Carmina Gadelica, a collection of prayers, legends, and songs from the Western Isles of Scotland collected by Alexander Carmichael. [See here.](#)