

Thresholds, Flow of Divine Presence and Being Awake

Jeremiah 6:16, Amos 5:24 and Revelation 3:8

January 16, 2022 *Series: Celtic Wisdom for Today #2*

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

God said, "Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls." *Jeremiah 6:16*

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:24

"I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." *Revelation 3:8*

We continue our journey of discovering how Celtic Wisdom can guide us today in our lives, in our church and in our lenses for looking at the world.

As we consider two more important voices from Newell's book, let's start with a question. In your childhood, growing up and on your journey, what were your perceptions of women as spiritual leaders? If you did have experiences in church, were there women in positions in worship, in leadership, offering the sacraments? And what did you hear and see in worship in terms of descriptions of God, of the Holy One? Male? If you were not involved in a church or faith community, what were your perceptions of women in religious communities? Power? Authority? And in terms of the Divine or Holy, was there a gender?

Part of what Newell emphasizes is that Celtic Spirituality fully embraces the sacred feminine. That the Divine is female and male and both and neither. That women have authentic and deep spiritual gifts of leadership.

We are introduced or re-introduced to St. Brigit of Kildare. As you read about her, it is clear that there was a woman named Brigit who lived in Kildare, Ireland. However, there is a mixture of mythology and history when we talk about her. Does it matter? Is there truth to be learned in this mix? I would say yes.

One important lesson we learn from Brigit is the importance of thresholds. Stories and legends about her reflect many thresholds, liminal spaces. Newell lists of 4.

The Threshold between Pre-Christian and Christian.

There is a sense that she was in a place in time (5th century Ireland) where ancient Celtic practices and Christian practices were bumping up against each other in Ireland. She had one foot in each. And the stories about her helped shape this into a longer narrative.

There is a wild legend that Brigit was the midwife at the birth of the Christ Child. Imagine this moment. It requires great imagination! There is a painting in the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh called “St. Bride” by Scottish artist John Duncan. (1866-1945.) Brigit is being carried by angels from island of Iona to Palestine for birth of Christ child. Biblical stories are depicted. Different stories woven together that span time, place and narratives. Thresholds.

Brigit was described as a Druid in the Book of Leinster, a 12th century Irish manuscript The Book of Leinster. She was a leader, a trusted leader who was like an oak tree with deep roots and tall branches. Heaven and earth. She embraced Christ and was seen as Mary of the Gaels, the mother of Christ to the Irish people. She was connected to the pre-Christian earth goddess and the ritual of keeping a fire burning as a sign of Divine presence and hospitality. Later it became a fire inside in the hearth.

How might we see this threshold of ancient Celts and Christianity?

She is also on the threshold of divine and human.

We have talked quite a bit about this. To embrace the theology of incarnation and intermingling of human and divine. It is basic to our experience of the Holy in us and with us. We are not a spirit trapped in a body. Our bodies are beloved, our whole being mind, body, spirit all woven together in Divine Love. She is seen as important as Mary, mother of Jesus. God’s presence and calling in her life. People call on her for divine protection. She is seen as generous and even does miracles to help others. Plenty of milk and cheese and even beer. Brigit invites us to fully embrace divine and human.

She is on the threshold of and relationship between humanity and the earth.

She is close to the earth – to animals, to the seasons, to trees. These are part of her connection to God and all creation. Too often Christian practices were to see God’s beauty in the world, but not fully see our relationship to the earth. The Divine in the trees, rivers, creatures.

She is on the threshold of birth and birthing new life.

The birth of every child is sacred to Brigit. We talked about this two weeks ago in terms of Pelagius in Celtic thought. Instead of original sin and the fall present even in a new born baby, Celtic thinkers assert that every child is bless and sacred. That is who we are. We may forget. We may fall asleep. We are distracted. But we can wake up and come back to this.

Christ as a midwife is a powerful image to me that Brigit has helped me embrace. We together as midwives. Bridget is an icon for sacred feminine strength. It can shape the way we worship, the ways we teach children about who they are and how God, Divine, is in them and with them. In the class today you will have a chance to learn a bit more and reflect on how Brigit and the Sacred Feminine are central to Celtic Wisdom. Beautiful prayer.

There was a time some scholars have called the golden age of Celtic Christianity when the teachings and visions of people like Pelagius and Brigid were embraced. 5th and 6th centuries and in many ways until the 12th century in Scotland. However, the mission of the Roman empire was to seize authority and demand uniformity and to maintain the empire way of thinking – dualistic, patriarchal, not respecting the natural world. Augustine of Hippo and later Augustine of Canterbury had an alliance with the imperial power. Fear of women – menstruation - and sexuality. So much damage to our spiritual lives and the church.

That did not mean the flow of Celtic thought ended. Celtic wisdom says there is a flow of the divine deep within everything that as being. This is one of the foundational perspectives of John Scotus Eriugena, a wandering Irish scholar in the 9th century. The Light of the Divine is like a subterranean river flowing through body of the earth. God is the deep flow of life deep in all things. Every life form reveals God. The Holy is in all creatures.

What a contrast to the more traditional image of God as an old white man in heaven sitting on a throne. I have heard many of you describe moments of being aware of Divine presence in the natural world. It is deeply true. The church did not embrace this. Bigger cathedrals were built. Soaring, beautiful but not the cathedral of the redwoods or the beach.

Eriugena famously said there are 2 books through which God is speaking. The first is a small book, the Bible, Holy Scripture. The second is the big book, the living text of the universe, which includes the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, the sea, the creatures, all life forms. He said we need to read both books. If we only read the little book, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the sounds of the Holy One. If we only read the big book, we will miss the intimacy of the voice, calling us to faithfulness and compassion. (pg. 88)

What do you think? Is that a shift for you? That we need both books?

One of his most profound assertions is that we live in a state of forgetfulness of what is deepest within us. We suffer from “soul forgetfulness.” And that Christ is our memory, our “epiphany.” He comes to show us what we have forgotten, that we are bearers of the divine flow. He reawakens us to our true nature. Christ came to lift the veil, not pay for our sins or pay a debt or die instead of us. We come from Divine Light. Sin and evil are distortions and deformities. Leprosy of the soul. With the medicine of grace, we can be healed and freed.

This is a major change from traditional Christian theology. Eriugena was a threat to the imperial Christianity. To see everything and everyone as sacred and in the Divine flow. Eriugena’s writings were condemned and he was banished.

And yet we can reclaim the wisdom Eriugena offered 1400 years ago. May you awake to the flow of the divine within you, awake to it in every creature, every woman, every man, every person.

And we awaken to the thresholds in our lives and in our church and in our world. We will be asking some new questions about our life together. Who are we now? Who are we called to be? We are walking through a doorway, a threshold. May you awake to the beauty of the divine deep within you in your body, mind and spirit. Amen.

John Philip Newell (2021) *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul*, Harper One.

Highlights from chapters 2 and 3