

# Searching for Signs of Hope at Imbolg

*A sermon by William McEvoy*

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At the end of this week, we will come to the middle of winter – halfway through the coldest, and I think we can say up here in the Northeast, the bleakest time of the year. The days are slowly, so painfully slowly, getting longer. But they've been short for such a very loooooonnnngggg time. And then there's the clouds. Sometimes days, even weeks will go by without the sun peeking through. It's weakening, it's wearing, it's wearying.

It's at this point in the winter that I feel compelled to look for some sign of hope. To see the light at the end of the tunnel, or if not exactly a light, to have the darkness be a little less oppressive. As Reverend Schatz pointed out in his poem earlier, that daffodil or crocus will make an appearance. Right now, in my front yard, there has been a remaining patch of snow sitting in a spot that doesn't get much sun. Over the last few days, since I returned from Chicago, I've been watching that patch get smaller and smaller, and this morning, as I left for services, it had disappeared. That was my sign of hope. Not quite a sign of spring, but a sign of hope for spring.

In pre-Christian Europe, at this cross time between Solstice and Equinox, there was a holiday celebrated that sought for these signs of hope. It is called Imbolg, which is made up of two Irish words I and mbolg (the B is silent in the word). It means "In the belly." While astronomically, there is a precise halfway point between the two quarters, for pastoral people, the sign was much more utilitarian, the sheep started to lactate, because the lambs "in the belly" were developing. The grass was starting to grow.

This was a sign of hope for the people – it wasn't quite a sign of spring, but rather it was a sign of hope for spring. In the United States, we have our own holiday where we search for signs of hope for spring around this time. Can anyone guess? That's right, Groundhog's Day. In the United States, we have our own holiday where we search for signs of hope for spring around this time. Can anyone guess? That's right, Groundhog's Day.

National news comes to a halt on the morning of February 2<sup>nd</sup> and focuses on the small borough of Punxutawney, Pennsylvania where Punxutawney Phil allegedly spots or doesn't spot his shadow and that predicts whether we'll have six more weeks of winter like the calendar says, or an early spring. Why do we do this? Why do we pay any attention at all to this hokey event? Because it makes us smile, maybe even chuckle a little bit. And it reminds us, hey, sometimes the calendar is wrong. It gives us a break from this bleak time of year.

No one really believes Punxutawney Phil can predict the weather, in fact, his success rate is 39%. And if I'm honest, when I see those daffodils or crocuses shoot up in early February my hope is tinged with a little sadness. Sadness because I know that this warm spell is temporary, and that Mother Nature has played a cruel joke on these fragile flowers, that the frost is going to

return. That the ground that is muddy today will harden again. I know that patch of January ice in my yard is likely going to return at least once before spring truly comes.

That's the kind of hope this season kindles, a fragile hope, a little hope, maybe we could call it a preliminary hope. We have these preliminary hopes throughout the year of course. They're hopes that we're pretty sure are going to be dashed in the short run, but they'll eventually be filled. Not all hopes are like that. Rather than a preliminary hope, like a daffodil or a sheep starting to lactate, some hopes are temporary.

I think about buying lottery tickets. When I buy a lottery ticket, I usually spend a few moments thinking about what I'll do with the money. Same for you? Yeah? Lottery dreams are nice. Some of you have gambled at casinos or at the racetrack, and you know that hope you feel just before the roulette wheel spins or the horses leave the gate.

These are temporary hopes.

Sometimes, though, these temporary hopes are necessary, even when we know, in our calculating, logical minds, that the hope may be slim, slimmer than the 10-1 in the 4<sup>th</sup> at Belmont. I think about the people I met when I was a hospital chaplain, particularly those afflicted with cancer. Some numbers in their vitals had improved, or hadn't worsened. A night was spent without pain. A new treatment would be started after other treatments had failed, and there would be that hope.

Oftentimes, it was the patient's families that embraced the hope more than the patient's themselves. The patient had usually been through this hope cycle more often than the others, and they knew the odds better. That didn't make this hope any less valuable. A brief respite from the bleak, sometime relentless experience of a disease is often the buoying ingredient we need to fuel our resilience.

I think we do this as a society, sometimes. Just as we'll stop our day next Friday to appreciate the cute feature about the groundhog, sometimes we scour the news for signs of hope, because we need respite from the bleak.

I think this explains the popularity of Fake News – even if the story is too good to be true, sometimes you just want to believe it, sometimes you need to believe it, even if it's just for a few minutes. I think it's why we see some articles go viral, not because they ring true, but because they give hope. Like much hope, it is driven by the heart, not the head.

And that's fine, as far as it goes. These temporary hopes can be a momentary balm, just like how you might put Anbesol or clove oil on an aching tooth to tide you over until you can get to the dentist. The pitfall to these temporary hopes is when they're used to deny reality. When the clove oil's temporary relief leads you to cancel your dentist appointment.

When a gambler believes that if they just place one more bet, they can break even.

When a person believes so fervently that the experimental cancer cure is going to do the trick that they've convinced themselves, and are crushed when the news comes that the condition is worse, that the cancer has spread.

Or when a society believes so fervently in a viral news story, they go on repeating it even when logic tells them it's not likely.

And don't think for a minute that only one side of the political fence is subject to these delusions. We all know that it's unlikely a mental health professional is going to walk into the White House, sit down with the president and call for the invocation of the 25<sup>th</sup> amendment. It's just not going to happen folks.

So where do we look for these signs of hope in the world in the space of despair about the world or despair about one's personal life? Some people look to the bible, others to science and reason. I find my fundamental source for inspiring hope is right in front of me right here, on Sunday, the congregation itself. I think humans, we're fundamentally social beings, and the community that is represented by our congregations is one of the more inspiring forms of social organization we create.

So look around, no really look around the room, look at the faces of your fellow congregants, it's okay to smile. Some of you have been coming for years, others for just a short time. For some of you it might be your very first visit. Look around, and appreciate how rare and wonderful this is. A fully voluntary group of individuals, coming together for mutual support and often for collective action, devoting their time and treasure to people who are often strangers.

This coming together speaks of a degree of unconditional trust, a dedication by many to improving the lives of others, whether that be through social justice work, charity, or pastoral care. We come here on Sunday, or during the week, and we know that we're not alone, that there are people in this world who care. We share our sorrows here seeking that support. That to me is a great source of hope.

Another is my belief, my faith, that the universe is in a state of constant change and creation. The world is constantly in motion, even if we can't see it. There is a never ending cycle of destruction and creation. And as an optimist, because I think you can't help but be an optimist if you're a human being, I believe that the world is slowly, ever so slowly, getting better.

Sometimes it's two steps forward and one and seven eighths steps back, but it moves forward. You know, the walls around us are very slowly falling down, the roof is wearing away, the foundation weakening, ever so slowly, not that we'd ever notice from one day to the next, or even one year to the next. Now I know our Board and Grounds committee don't relish that thought, but I also know they'll step in and build anew long before we get to any crisis point.

I believe that Theodore Parker was right, that the moral arc of the universe does turn towards justice, though that arc is not as smooth and pristinely one directional as we might dream, it moves forward. Where does your hope come from? Where do you turn to in times of despair?

I think about the advice Mr. Rogers received from his mother when faced with a large public tragedy, like a fire or a bombing. She told him to look for the helpers, look for those who turn towards the danger or the tragedy, and find hope there.

Many Christians will ask themselves, what would Jesus do, and find hope and inspiration there. Where do you turn, where does your hope come from? And more importantly, where would you point to for your fellow congregants when they come to a time when they need hope?

Let's all ponder that for a few moments. Breathe in slowly, breathe out.

Hope is not a promise. Hope is not a contract. Hope doesn't always pan out, sometimes there is no light at the end of the tunnel, sometimes the bad guy wins. But we need hope, hope is sometimes what gets us to tomorrow, and sometimes, tomorrow is all we need. Hope may not be a contract or a promise, but hope is a gift. A gift we give to ourselves and to others to help us get through the nasty in life.

As I close, I want to leave you with one of my signs of hope, my signs of hope for spring. Each year, I see this and I step a little lighter. Now I know, this is not something that will work for everyone, some people may even find it works in the opposite way, and gives them despair. And for that I am sorry. But this is a source of joy for many, and I share it with you now. On February 13, 2018, pitchers and catchers report to the New York Yankees training camp in Florida. Can I get an amen?

Let's sing!



William McEvoy, 2018

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