

# The Cailleach

## Reflection by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

December 17, 2023

“Transformation is the business of winter,” writes Katherine May in her book, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*. This is certainly not the prevailing energy of this time of year for most, or many of us, is it?

Perhaps, like me, you *plan* on being prepared for the holidays well in advance; at least that’s what you told yourself last year around this time. “I won’t do this to myself again.”

It seems to me that folks did start getting ready for the holidays earlier this year. Did anyone else notice that? Lights in our neighborhood went up earlier than normal, including ours. People were out getting their Christmas trees the day after Thanksgiving. One might think this is indicative of people’s growing stress or trying to get it all done “right.” But it doesn’t feel that way to me.

It feels like people need the holidays, not the stress and overconsumption of the holidays, but the tradition, comfort, and embrace of the holidays.

Assuming this is true, this is more in line with the natural energies of this time of year. We are four days away from the darkest night of the year, winter solstice.

Animals are beginning to hibernate. Autonomic changes begin happening for these species. Body temperatures, metabolic rate, heart rate, and respiratory rate of animals decrease to conserve energy. Some animals near here, like the woodchucks and bats, truly hibernate. While other animals slow way down. This happens with bears, skunks, and reptiles; assuming the temperatures do drop enough.

Winter has begun.

In Celtic and Gaelic mythology, the Cailleach (kalliaich) is the goddess of winter. This crone comes into human form at Samhain, or Halloween, which in Celtic tradition marks the start of the “darker half” of the year, or winter.

The mythology surrounding her powers says that a touch of her staff freezes the ground, and she

carries a hammer to chisel out valleys. Story has it that the mountains of Scotland were formed when the Cailleach dropped rocks from her basket. Her very steps “change the land,” writes May.<sup>1</sup>

Her image is on the cover of your order of service. She is said to be the mother of gods as well as the goddess of winter, while Brigid is the goddess of spring.

The Cailleach and Brigid are two expressions of the same goddess. The Cailleach represents wisdom and the birth of new creation that emerges from the dark and Brigid represents new life, energy, and youth.

The cycle of creation, birth, death, and recreation are honored throughout all earth-based religions. This cycle is an inescapable part of our lives.

We lose so much when we lose the understanding and appreciation of this cycle: creation, life, death, recreation. We are in one season of our life. It is over, and after time, a new season begins. These things are not to be feared; they are to be honored. This cycle is sacred and assured so long as we are alive.

We all experience such transitions and change. Something new is always being imagined or born, while other things are leaving, changing, or falling away.

Winter, darkness, and cold are invitations for us to surrender to those changes. The Cailleach reminds us to slow down. Reflect upon these things. Grieve if it is that time. Dream as you are called, and not before. Behold the gifts of the dark.

One of the ways we can do this is through ritual. Rituals matter. They help us to align our lives and the rhythms of our days with the season. For example, our bodies and minds are designed to slow down at this time of year. Eating warm soup, being more introspective, and sleeping more are

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1 Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* (New York: Riverdale Books, 2020), 67.

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natural. These are winter times. They do not last forever.

Katherine May uses *these* rhythms of slowing down to restore her equilibrium instead of using New Year's resolutions. She writes, "This, then, is how I turned my year: not in a single high-stakes moment, but in a series of gestures that gently acknowledge. There are no diets in the days that follow, no pledges to go vegan or dry...the coldest days are yet to come... It won't be long. The year begins again."<sup>2</sup>

The Cailleach or goddess of winter is connected to stones and stone circles. Traditions move stones in and out of cover representing good fortune on the upcoming harvest. Stone circles are made so that you can step into the circle and feel the collective power of the universe around you.

We're going to do a variation on this with white stones. You will see that there are two spirals of white stones: one in the vestibule and the other outside the front of the church. I invite you as you are leaving to take a stone or two.

Between now and January 1, take some time to consider what is waiting to begin in your life, what is ready to end, and what is ready to be born.

Ponder these questions each day you see that stone.

*What is waiting to begin?*

*What is ready to end?*

*What is ready to be born?*

Then when you are ready, take your stone somewhere and give it to the earth. Throw it in the ocean, leave it on the beach, lay it under a tree.

And trust. Trust, my friends, as we all will, that spring will return.

Amen.

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2 May, *Wintering*, 131.