

***What We Celebrate***  
**Winter – Spring 2010**

*This information about religious and cultural observances in winter and spring, 2010, is compiled and presented by the Rev. Andrea Thompson McCall, Interfaith Chaplain at the University of Southern Maine and a Board Member of Interfaith Maine. It is offered here in the interest of growing appreciation for the richness of our diverse cultures, as well as the themes and coincidences among them that offer us common ground for our community life together. © Andrea Thompson McCall. All rights reserved.*

**January 1<sup>st</sup>** is ***New Year's Day*** according to the Gregorian calendar, which, although it is the commonly accepted civil calendar worldwide, actually has its origin in a Papal Bull, *Inter gravissimas*, issued by Pope Gregory in 1582. The New Year's celebration, which exists in many traditions at various times of the year (notably in spring at the full moon or at the Vernal Equinox), has many features in common across traditions, including personal and spiritual reflection and resolutions about personal behavior, feasting and parties including lights and fireworks.

**January 3<sup>rd</sup>** is the Mahayana Buddhist observance, on the first full moon in January, of the ***Lunar New Year***. Other Buddhist communities observe the New Year on the first full moon in April (Theravadin tradition) or in February (Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese). All are tied to seasonal and lunar observances, and are celebrated with rituals and offerings to the monks and nuns as well as with fireworks and festivity.

**January 6<sup>th</sup>** is the Christian ***Feast of the Epiphany***, celebrating the Three Kings, or Magi, who traveled from "the East" to pay homage to the recently-born Jesus. They were likely Zoroastrian astrologers from Persia, whose study of the stars suggested to them the birth of an important ruler in Judea. "Epiphany" means "manifestation," referring to the manifestation of the messiahship of Jesus to the world beyond Judah. Also known as the Feast of Theophany in Greek, Russian, and other Orthodox traditions, in some communities it is a more significant celebration than Christmas itself.

**January 17<sup>th</sup>** is the Baha'i observance of ***World Religions Day***. It is observed on the third Sunday in January by Baha'is in the US and increasingly around the world, in celebration of their belief in the oneness of all humanity and the unity of all religions.

**January 18<sup>th</sup>** is ***Martin Luther King, Jr. Day***, a national and cultural holiday commemorating the birth of the late American Civil Rights leader on January 15, 1929. He was a Christian minister whose non-violent opposition to racial segregation and discrimination was at the heart of the movement that brought about civil rights legislation and reform across the US. Signed into law as a federal holiday in 1983, the observed with retrospective and future-oriented activities around civil rights in particular and human rights in general, and with service activities to address poverty, which Dr. King identified as an urgent issue in our country.

**January 30<sup>th</sup>** is *Tu B'Shevat*, literally "15th of (the Hebrew month of) Shevat," observed in Jewish tradition as the New Year of Trees. Its origin is in the determination of a point in time at which to measure the produce of a given tree for purposes of determining the tithe, or one-tenth to be given as an offering. It has come to be a kind of Jewish Arbor Day, and is observed with the planting of trees in Israel, as with an adapted Seder, or ritual meal, for the occasion.

**February 2<sup>nd</sup>** is the ancient and contemporary Pagan observance of *Imbolc*. It is the cross-quarter day, half way between the Winter Solstice and the Spring Equinox, and so it marks a turning of the wheel of the year and celebrates the strengthening light and warmth, and is observed with the lighting of candles and fires. Embraced particularly among Celtic cultures, it was dedicated to Brigid (also known as Brighid, Bríde, Brigit, Brìd) is the goddess of poetry, healing and smithcraft.

As Celtic lands were Christianized, *Imbolc* was adopted as *St. Brigid's Day*, also known as *Candlemas*, celebrated in some Christian communities on February 2. Also observed with the lighting of candles, it is dedicated to Mary, who, like Brigid, was revered as a divine mother figure, and commemorates her ritual purification according to Jewish custom, 40 days after the birth of her son, Jesus.

Also on **February 2nd** is the cultural celebration of *Groundhog's Day*. European traditions around Candlemas, brought to the United States by Pennsylvania Dutch (Germans, actually), included the belief that the weather on Candlemas predicted the advent of spring: "If Candlemas be fair and bright, Winter has another flight. If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, Winter will not come again."

On **February 8<sup>th</sup>**, many Mahayana Buddhist communities observe *Nirvana Day*. It is the commemoration of the death of the historical Buddha and his entry into Nirvana. He was born Siddhartha Gautama about 583 BCE in modern day Nepal, and after a life of seeking and teaching spiritual enlightenment, he died at the age of 80, having spoken these final words: "Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation."

**February 14<sup>th</sup>** is the popular celebration of *St. Valentine's Day*, largely a secular celebration of love, but having its roots in the feast day of the Christian patron Saint of love, Saint Valentine. The figure is traced to at least three Christian martyrs, one of whom was named Valentine. Some sources say his martyrdom was occasioned by his secret and illegal performance of marriage ceremonies, banned because they depleted the fighting forces of the Roman army. He is said to have left a note on his death signed, "from your Valentine." The observance was placed at this time because of an even older legend that it is at the mid-point of February that the birds begin to pair off.

**February 14<sup>th</sup>** is *Chinese New Year*, the Year of the Tiger, 4707. The New Year is observed by Mahayana Buddhists on the first full moon in January; by Theravadin Buddhists on the first full moon in April, but in China and Taiwan, it is celebrated on the first day of the first month of the Chinese calendar. Celebrations vary widely, but most

include thorough cleaning of homes to sweep away ill fortune, together with decorating doors and windows with red banners bearing couplets on themes such as happiness and long life, and with parades and feasts bringing together families and communities.

**February 16<sup>th</sup>** is the Christian observance of *Shrove Tuesday*. Also known as *Mardi Gras*, literally "Fat Tuesday," it is the eve of the penitential season of Lent, in which traditionally Christians fast and abstain from all meat and dairy products. Thus arose the tradition of feasting and partying before the serious spiritual discipline of 40 days began (*Mardi Gras* meaning "Fat Tuesday"), and of using up (being "shriven of") all the butter, eggs and milk by cooking lots and lots of pancakes! In Christian communities of Orthodox traditions, the same traditions apply on the day prior, which is known as Clean Monday.

**February 17<sup>th</sup>**, then, is *Ash Wednesday*, when Christians are reminded in the liturgy that "from ashes you came and to ashes you will return." The ashes placed on the foreheads of some faithful are from the burning of last year's Palm Sunday fronds, and are symbolic of penitence. This begins the period of reflection and spiritual discipline known as Lent and modeled on Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness to be strengthened for his ministry, and leading up to the great feast of Easter. In the early Christian church, it was a period of preparation for Catechumens, those preparing for entrance into the church through Baptism on Easter morning. Shrove Tuesday, Ash Wednesday, and Easter Sunday do not fall on the same calendar days each year, because Easter is a rare holy day in Christian tradition, determined by lunar cycles as well as solar. It is always on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Vernal Equinox. Lent, then, is established by counting backwards from Easter 40 days (excepting Sundays, which are feast days).

**February 26<sup>th</sup>** is the Islamic observance of *Mawlid al-Nabi*, literally, "birth of the prophet." It celebrates of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, about 570 CE. It was first observed around the thirteenth century, though it is not celebrated by all Islamic cultures and communities. Observances include sermons, recitations of litanies, gift giving, and feasts.

On **February 28<sup>th</sup>**, as the sun is setting, Jews around the world begin the annual celebration of *Purim*. It commemorates the courage of Queen Esther, who risked her life to plead with her husband the king of Persia to reverse his plan to kill all of the Jews. Celebrations includes the reading of the Megilla, the story found in the Hebrew Scriptures in the book of Esther, the wearing of costumes, sharing food and wine (especially the traditional three-cornered pastry called hamentashen), tzedakah (literally "gifts to the poor"), and vigorous merrymaking.

**March 1<sup>st</sup>** is the Hindu celebration of *Holi*, also known as the Festival of Colors. Taking place on the day after the full moon each March, it is a spring festival observed in parts of India, Suriname, Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji, Nepal and the UK; in western India and Bangladash, it is known as Dolyatra. The bonfires of Holi are traced to two stories. Both involve burning, though in one the hero is spared from burning, and in the other, reduced to ashes. Also associated with the the immortal love of Krishna and Radha, Holi is

celebrated with bright colors and great festivity, a time when inhibitions and caste differences are set aside in favor of parties, processions, and the tossing of colored powder and water.

**March 2<sup>nd</sup>** begins the *19 Day Fast* for members of the Baha'i Faith. It is the last month in the Baha'i calendar of 19 months with 19 days each. During this time, Baha'is between 15 and 70 years of age do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset, setting aside time for prayer and meditation. The fast concludes with Naw Ruz (or Norooz), the celebration of the new year, which coincides with the Vernal Equinox on March 21.

**March 3<sup>rd</sup>** is *Magha Puja Day*, the full moon of the third lunar month, commemorating the day on which Buddha recited the "Ovadha Patimokkha" (the Fundamental Teaching) to a spontaneous assembly of 1250 disciples. All were Arahats, ordained by the Buddha himself. Because of the four points of significance, the day is also known as the Fourfold Assembly or "Sangha Day,"

**March 17<sup>th</sup>** is the celebration of *Saint Patrick's Day*, a feast day in honor of the Christian Saint Patrick, Patron Saint of Ireland. He was born in 5th century Britain, to a Romanized Christian family, and was carried into slavery in Ireland as a young man. He turned to his faith for strength, and upon his liberation, inspired by a dream, he undertook a mission to Ireland. He is credited with bringing Christianity to the Irish Celts, and in large part to the Picts and Anglo-Saxons as well. Before the end of the 7th century, many legends had sprung up about Patrick, the most well known among them the legend of the shamrock, in which he used the three-leaved plant to explain the Christian concept of the Trinity. The shamrock has become the national flower and widely recognized symbol of Ireland, and St. Patrick's Day has become a popular celebration of Irish culture. Although today the color green is commonly associated with St. Patrick's Day *blue*, used on Ireland's Presidential Standard or flag, and on the plume of the Irish guards is, in fact, the color originally associated with St Patrick. The "wearing of the Green" became popular in the 18th century as a sign of sympathy with Irish independence. Here in the United States, it is said that everyone is Irish on St. Patrick's Day, and there are parades and celebrations of many kinds. In Chicago, the river has been dyed green each year since 1962, although the quantity of dye has been reduced by 60% for environmental reasons.

**March 20<sup>th</sup>** is the first astronomical day of Spring, the *Vernal Equinox*. At 1:32 PM EDT, the annual tilting rotation of the earth relative to the sun brings us in the Northern Hemisphere into the point at which we have precisely the same amount of daylight and darkness, signaling the first day of spring. From this point until the summer solstice, daylight and warmth will increase, bringing forth new life from the earth. It is also the day of two significant religious and spiritual observances.

On **March 20<sup>th</sup>**, *Naw Ruz* is celebrated as the beginning of the New Year by Persians, and subsequently by followers of the Baha'i Faith. It is the first day of the 19-month Baha'i calendar, observed with the end of the 19 Day Fast and celebrated as a time of

spiritual growth and renewal. This day is also observed as **Norooz** or **Nav Ruz** ("The New Day") by Zoroastrians.

**March 20<sup>th</sup>** is also observed as **Ostara** by followers of Neo-Pagan (Wiccan and others) spiritual paths. It celebrates the quickening of the earth with the arrival of spring, and is a significant spiritual observance, marked with ritual and retelling of ancient stories of rebirth and renewal, the goddess as maiden, and symbols of new life such as young animals and eggs, symbols of renewal and new life. An interesting legend is that at the exact moment of the equinox, a raw egg will easily balance upright on end, owing to the balance at that moment of the earth's gravity. This balance is integral to the celebration, regarding the wheel of the world, the darkness and the light, and life itself.

**March 27<sup>th</sup>** is the observance in some Hindu communities of the **Hindu (Lunar) New Year**. Although the official calendar in India is the national one, regional variations make for several different new year's celebrations, but all about this time of the year. Hindus of Nepal begin their new year **Nava Varsha** in the third week of March, and the people of Kashmir start the Kashmiri Lunar year - **Navreh** - in the second week of March. The southern Indian states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh begin their new year - **Ugadi** - in late March or early April. In most places and cases, it is associated with the advent of spring, and observed with cleaning and decorating homes with elaborate rangoli designs and wearing new clothes. Prayers are offered for a prosperous new year, and families visit temples to listen to the yearly calendar, the Panchangasravanam, as priests make predictions for the coming year.

March 28<sup>th</sup> is **Khordad Sal**, the celebration in Zoroastrian communities of the birth of Prophet Spitaman Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) near the beginning of the first millennium BCE. It is celebrated on the sixth day of the Parsi month of *Farvardin*, and in many ways marks the beginning of a new year. Religious observances include the offering of thanksgiving prayers to God, reviewing of past behaviors and resolutions for the year to come. Celebrations include large gatherings of extended families, the wearing of new clothes and vermilion spots on the forehead, gathering of flowers, and feasting. Homes are cleaned and decorated with randoli, intricate patterns characteristic of Indian and other south Asian cultures.

**March 28<sup>th</sup>** is celebrated by Christian communities as **Palm Sunday**. Sometimes also known as **Passion Sunday**, it commemorates the entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem where he was received as a hero by the people, in hopes he would free them from the crushing weight of Roman occupation. The palms that many worshipping congregations distribute and wave in their worship, and for which the day is called, recall the branches that the crowds waved and lay in Jesus' path as he entered the city to observe the Passover with his followers. His arrival in Jerusalem set into motion the events recalled through this week, known by Christians as Holy Week, culminating in his arrest and torturous execution, thus, Passion. Christians in the Eastern and Orthodox traditions,

following the Julian calendar, hold these observances on April 12th and the week following.

**March 30<sup>th</sup>** is the start of Passover (*Pesach*), when Jews around the world gather around traditional *Seder* tables at sunset. It is the 8-day Jewish celebration of freedom, commemorating the journey of the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the land which became Israel. It is named from the account in the Torah of the "passing over" by the angel of death of the Hebrew households whose door posts were marked by the blood of sacrificial lambs, which occasioned their escape. The central feature of the observance is the ritual meal, the *Seder*, in which symbolic foods - including a lamb's bone, a boiled egg, fresh and bitter herbs, and *charoseth*, the fruit and nut mixture symbolizing the mortar with which the Hebrew people were forced to build for their taskmasters - are instrumental in recalling elements of this liberation. The ritual retelling of the story is prompted by the question traditionally asked by the youngest at the table: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" and concluding with the symbolic welcome for Elijah, and prayers for peace and freedom for all the people of the world.

**April 1<sup>st</sup>** is the Christian observance of *Maundy Thursday*. So called after the Latin word *mandare*, commandment, it commemorates the event of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. Likely a *Seder* (see yesterday's notice about Passover, or *Pesach*), it was the occasion for his institution of the ritual that has come to be known as Holy Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, and of his commandment to his followers that they "love one another as I have loved you." Many churches will hold special services of Communion on this day.

**April 2<sup>nd</sup>** is known as *Good Friday* in Christian tradition, so named in an ironic acknowledgment of the bad that took place - it commemorates the torturous death of Jesus by crucifixion - and the good that came of it - the Christian proclamation that he nevertheless lives.

**April 4th** is *Easter*, the Christian celebration of Jesus' resurrection to new life, illustrative of the promise of new and imperishable life which he proclaimed. Christian communities observe this as the most significant celebration of the church year, with joyous services of prayer and song, and families gather for special meals, wear new clothes, and of course, there is the custom of giving children Easter baskets filled with treats. Often separated by a week or more because of their adherence to the Gregorian and Julian calendars, respectively, in the Western traditions of Rome and most Protestant churches and Easter in the Greek and Eastern Orthodox traditions Easter this year falls on the same day. In both cases, the date is calculated by a lunar and solar formula: The first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox.

**April 6th** is **Tartan Day** in Canada and the United States, an occasion for North Americans of Scottish heritage to celebrate and share Scottish culture. It is named for the distinctive plaid fabric representing Scottish clans. While today, tartans are created to represent or commemorate events, towns, and families, they were developed historically

because of the naturally occurring dyes native to various parts of the country and so became identified with the clans that inhabited those areas.

**April 11<sup>th</sup>** is *Yom Ha Sho'ah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. "Shoah" is the Hebrew word for the Holocaust; the full name of this commemoration of victims of the Holocaust is "Yom Hashoah Ve-Hagevurah"\* literally the "Day of remembrance of the Holocaust and the Heroism." It occurs on the 27th of Nissan in the Hebrew (lunar) calendar, so the date on our calendar varies. A week after the seventh day of Passover, and a week before Yom Hazikaron (Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers), it marks the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It was selected by the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) on April 12, 1951, and since that time, has become a day commemorated by Jewish communities and individuals worldwide.

**April 21** is the first day of *Ridvan* for members of the Baha'i Faith. "Ridvan" is the Persian word for "paradise," and this commemoration of the beginning of Baha'u'llah's prophetic work in 1863 is named for the Garden of Ridvan outside Baghdad, where he stayed for 12 days before traveling to Constantinople. The first, 9th, and 12th days of the festival (April 21, 29, and May 2) are particularly meaningful, with work suspended and devotion and study increased. It is perhaps the most significant Baha'i festival, sometimes referred to as the "Most Great Festival" and the "King of Festivals."

**April 22<sup>nd</sup>** is celebrated as *Earth Day*, and in 2010 we celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. First organized in 1970 by Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-Wisconsin) as a way to organize around his commitment to the environment, it has become a worldwide observance, although some prefer to hold the observance on the Vernal Equinox in March.

**May 1<sup>st</sup>** is *Beltane* in Pagan (Wiccan) tradition. Also called Beltain or May Eve, it is one of the eight main holidays, or Sabbats, and a Greater festival, historically one of the Celtic Fire Festivals. The cross-quarter day halfway between the spring equinox and the summer solstice, it is a spring festival that celebrates the mythological conjoining of the goddess with the energy of the god in the sacred marriage which is the basis of all creation.

**May 2<sup>nd</sup>** the first full moon day in May is observed as **Buddha Day**, also known as **Vesak** Puja, celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. He was born Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century, BCE, the son of a wealthy and powerful ruler. Protected from want or pain of any kind until adulthood, he was shocked when he learned of the suffering that exists in the world. His path to enlightenment included years of searching, finally achieving "awakening" by looking inside. His enlightenment and subsequent teachings led to the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism: That life is suffering, that suffering is caused by craving and attachment, that craving and attachment can be overcome, and that the path toward overcoming craving and attachment is the Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Purpose, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Alertness and Right Concentration. Vesak is the major Buddhist festival of the year, named for the name of the month in the Indian calendar.

**Sunday, May 9<sup>th</sup>** is the American cultural observance of Mother's Day. Perhaps traceable to ancient Greek celebrations of Rhea, the Mother of the Gods, it was "Mothering Sunday" in England in the 1600s. In the US, it was Julia Ward Howe, author of the text for the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," who organized Mother's Meetings for Peace in Boston every year on this day beginning in 1872. Ana Jarvis of Philadelphia began a campaign in 1907 to establish a national Mother's Day, which was accomplished in 1914 when President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed Mother's Day as a national holiday to be held each year on the 2nd Sunday of May.

**May 23rd** is the Baha'i celebration of the **Declaration of the Bab**. "Bab" means "Gate," and the celebration commemorates the declaration in 1844 by Siyyid Ali Muhammad that he was the anticipated "Coming One" of all religions. He is remembered as the forerunner of Baha'ullah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith. The day is celebrated with gatherings of families and religious communities, with prayer and devotion, and with the suspension of work.

Sunday, **May 23rd** is Pentecost, a Christian observance that is tied historically to the Jewish celebration of **Shavuot** (see below). Also known as Whitsunday, it is celebrated fifty days after Easter, and commemorates the manifestation of the Spirit of God which Christian tradition says was dramatically evidenced among followers of Jesus who were in Jerusalem for the Shavuot celebration following the death and resurrection of Jesus (which took place around Passover). The Biblical account tells that believers experienced the presence of Spirit as flame and wind, and in their ability to be understood by all those who had gathered in the city for the celebration from diverse lands and cultures, in their own languages. The day is celebrated in many Christian communities as the birth of the church, and is marked by the wearing and draping of worship space in red.

At sunset on **May 29th**, the Jewish holiday of **Shavuot**, celebrating the harvest season in Israel, begins. Also known as the "Feast of Weeks," or the "Day of First Fruits," the festival is held seven weeks after Passover (Pesach) and recalls the custom of bringing a tithe (the first 10%) of the harvest as an offering at the Temple. Shavuot also commemorates the anniversary of the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai. Feasts often feature dairy products, recalling the promise of "a land flowing with milk and honey," and celebrations include flowers and plants, recalling the legends of the promised land being a flowering oasis.

**May 29th** is also the Baha'i celebration of the **Ascension of Baha'u'llah**. It commemorates the death of Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith. He was born in Tehran in present day Iran (at that time, Persia) in 1817 and was embraced by his followers as an incarnation of God. He migrated under pressure to Acre, Palestine (now Akko, Israel) and there developed his doctrine into a comprehensive teaching centered in the unity of all religions and of the human family. He died in Acre in 1892 and that place has become a center of pilgrimage for Baha'i believers. The day is observing his death is marked by prayers and readings, and traditionally work is suspended.

**May 30<sup>th</sup>** is *Memorial Day* in the United States. It originated in 1868, when Union General John A. Logan designated May 30th as "Decoration Day," an annual event in which the graves of Civil War soldiers were decorated. By the end of the 19th century, it was observed in all the former Union states, with former Confederate states honoring their Civil War dead separately. After World War I, it became a unified Memorial Day dedicated to the memory of all U.S. war dead. In 1971 it became a federal holiday, and is now observed on the last Monday in May.