

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
October 28, 2018
Mark 10:46-52

*From ghoulies and ghosties and
long-leggedy beasties
and things that go bump in the night,
good Lord, deliver us!*

~ An old Scottish prayer

From ancient times, the point of observing Halloween has always been to confront our fears of the dark, of death, of evil spirits and all the things that “go bump in the night.” I couldn’t resist selecting the hymn we just sang—“A Mighty Fortress” on the eve of the eve of the eve of Halloween, especially verse 3.

*And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.*

In the first church I served, the organist was an older man with the last name of Grim. He was a rather austere, serious choir master with long-sleeved robes. He conducted the choir with a baton and grand movements. The children, as children are wont to do, called him “the prince of darkness Grim” and giggled when this hymn was sung on a Sunday. Actually, he really was a kind older gentleman whose wife often brought treats for the children.

Martin Luther wrote this hymn, these words, as a sort of battle cry during the dangerous tumult of the 16th century Reformation which spread across Europe. Their cause — to worship God as they chose—was seen as a battle between the forces of good and evil. Their lives were

threatened and the fate of their cause all but lost. He based this hymn on Psalm 46 and I Corinthians and Ephesians 6. I thought it was a fun hymn to choose—but that was before the tragic attack in a synagogue in Pittsburgh yesterday morning—at Living Tree Synagogue where 11 people were killed and 6 were injured at a baby naming ceremony. The promise of God's protection and ultimate victory—the assurance and conviction of this hymn, the freedom to worship and practice faith in this country, is in fact, serious business. And something we called to honor and uphold.

*The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His Kingdom is forever.*

Darkness, death, and evil spirits are scary realities when we see them on the news or read about them in the newspaper.

Virtually all present Halloween traditions can be traced to the ancient Celtic day of the dead. For them, the turning of the year was celebrated on November 1 called Samhain. (pronounced Sah-ween) It was a day to mark the death of summer and the beginning of a dark and forbidding winter. On the night before, they believed that spirits could cross from the world of the dead to the world of the living in order to look for a body to inhabit. The people wore costumes to confuse the spirits—as if they were one of them—and they made offerings to appease them. This practice of roaming and performing tricks is called mumming. And giving treats, evolved from making cakes for the wandering souls. People went "a' soulin'" for these "soul cakes." Witches, ghosts, and skeleton figures of the dead are still among the favorite Halloween disguises.

A little more history—In 601 A.D. Pope Gregory I attempted to replace this pagan celebration with one that was sanctioned by the church, naming a day to remember the dead—All Souls Day or All-Hallows Day and the night before was called All-Hallows Eve. Or Halloween. The celebration is believed to have been introduced to America by the waves of Irish and English immigrants in the 19th century—the inheritors of Celtic traditions in Church. The ancient rituals were intended to master the evils without.

Carl Jung, an early 20th century psychologist, a contemporary of Freud, believed that we also need to master the darkness within. His theory suggests that we all have a shadow side, a part of our personality that is darker and hidden from the world and often from ourselves. What evil lurks within each of us?

I wonder, if this year, we might take a moment, before the annual autumn festivities begin, and all the dressing up and pretending, to acknowledge the darkness, death and evil spirits that are real in the form of hatred and injustices that haunt our own hearts, our nation and the world. While we celebrate the evil make-believe world, many men and women must live in the real-life terror of evil. Humankind is the author of such hatred and evil. I wonder if there is something from the traditions of Halloween that might help us as we grapple with real horrors. Maybe something about Halloween, this festival when darkness and death and evil spirits are acknowledged...maybe there is something about this make-believe that helps us be ready with our faith when evil is real.

I looked about and found this poem written by Jan Richardson of Wellspring. She is an artist, methodist minister and author.

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it ha ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.
It has not come
to cause despair.

It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply

sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

“Turn your face toward the direction from which the light will come. “ Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth who was close by he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” In the blindman’s darkness and death, and in spite of the evil spirits that haunted him every day of his life, Jesus came to him in that place where he lived, he listened to him and blessed him. The blindman’s faith brought him to God, and now that same faith would be the source of his new-found sight and purpose. “And he followed him on the way.”

Do we follow him? Do we go mumming with Jesus in the dark and evil places that haunt us and those for whom the world has not been kind? How might we confront the horrors of hate and injustice we see in the world around us—the hate and injustice that perhaps we would rather not see? Following Jesus means responding not with hate and fear, but with the ideals we cherish—to confront darkness, death and evil spirits with mercy, compassion and love. Mercy, compassion and love are best practices and traditions we have, to share with our children. These are not just words but actions, a way of being in all that we do. And be sure, our children are watching us.

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