

Hallowing Hallowe'en

(A Sermon for All Saints Sunday)

Romans 8:35,37-39 (NIV)

Pastor John Gill

Q. Why don't witches like to ride their brooms when they're angry?

A. They are afraid of flying off the handle.

Q. Where do baby ghosts go during the day?

A. Dayscare centers.

Q. What monster flies his kite in a rainstorm?

A. Benjamin Frankenstein.

Q. What do you get when you cross Bambi with a ghost?

A. Bamboo.

Q. What do the birds sing on Hallowe'en?

A. Twick or Tweet, tweet, tweet.

This past Thursday, of course, was Hallowe'en. It capped a week or so where our church hosted the Women's Club's Haunted House on our property! It's almost as if you'd think Hallowe'en was a church holiday! Apparently, in Sebastian, it is!

You know, as a child, Hallowe'en was probably my favorite holiday, second only to Christmas. It was a time of fun and excitement as we got all dressed up in costumes that we had to think up and make ourselves. We painted our faces and decorated our trick-or-treat bags. When we finally were finished getting ready, we roamed the neighborhood begging for candy and goodies. Then, of course, there were the fun masquerade parties, with costume contests, bobbing for apples, making popcorn balls, and drinking hot cider. Hallowe'en holds fond memories of my childhood, and it was one of the holidays Terri and I enjoyed sharing with our children.

But, you know, Hallowe'en is a rather problematic holiday. Because of its dubious origins and its frightening themes, throughout church history, Christians have struggled to know just how to deal with it. Should we observe it at all? And if so, how?

The truth is that, unlike most of the other holidays our culture observes, very few people know much about the origins of Hallowe'en and the customs we participate in every October 31.

The true origins of Hallowe'en lie with the ancient Celtic tribes living in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Brittany, who practiced the Druid religion. These pre-Christian peoples believed that physical life was born out of death. Therefore, they celebrated the beginning of their new year in the fall, on November 1, when, as they believed, the season of cold, darkness, decay and death began. The Celts believed in a certain deity, the Lord of Death, whom they called "Samhain" ("SOW-EN"). It was to him that they gave homage at their New Year's festival, a celebration that incorporated such trappings as skeletons, witches, and black cats.

The Celts believed that all the laws of space and time were suspended during these magical hours, allowing the spirit-world to intermingle with the living. Central to this festival was the belief that the spirits of those who had died in the previous year would return during the festival and wander the earth, looking for living bodies to enter and possess. Some spirits of the dead would take up residence in the body of a living man or woman. Other less fortunate spirits would have to settle for the body of an animal.

Naturally, those people who were still living did not want to be possessed. So, on the night of October 31, villagers would extinguish the fires in their homes to make them cold and undesirable. They would carve a scary face in a large turnip and place a candle in it to guard their homes. (By the way, it wasn't until Irish immigrants came to America that pumpkins became the vegetable of choice.) The residents of the village would then dress up in all manner of ghoulish costumes and noisily parade around the neighborhood, being as disruptive as possible in order to frighten away homeless spirits looking for bodies to possess.

The Druids believed that the spirits of the dead that returned during this festival were famished with hunger. This belief brought about the custom of costumed revelers going door to door begging for handouts. The implication was that, if the souls of the dead (represented by their live costumed surrogates) were not offered "treats" to eat, that would provoke the wrath of Samhain, the Lord of the Dead, who would send his minions in the dark of night to retaliate with curses or "tricks."

Now, when the Roman Empire took over the Celtic lands, they added their own pagan customs to the holiday. For example: In honor of Pomona, their goddess of fruit trees, we now have the custom of bobbing for apples and drinking apple cider on Hallowe'en.

When the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century, the entire Roman Empire became Christian, including the land of the Celts. As you can imagine, the Druid New Year festival did not mesh very easily with the teachings of the Church. The Church did its best to do away with the festival, but to no avail. So, in the year 835, Pope Gregory IV decided to move a holiday that honored the dead heroes of the Christian church, which had been observed on May 13, to the first day of November. His hope was that the Christian holiday might finally eclipse the Druid New Year in the hearts of the people. Since then, November 1 is known to Christians as All Saints Day, or All Hallows Day, (as in "Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..."). In our church, we observe it on the first Sunday

of November. If November 1 is All Hallows Day, that would make the night before, All Hallows Eve, or called by its shortened form, Hallowe'en.

However, even this change in the Church calendar didn't entirely supplant the Druid holiday. Those living in Celtic lands still observed their ancient pagan customs on the evening of October 31, and then went to All Saints Day mass the next morning.

As I said, Irish Catholic immigrants, who came to the United States in the nineteenth century during the Irish Potato Famine, brought their All Hallows Eve customs with them. Now, of course, Hallowe'en is firmly entrenched in American culture, even though 99% of people who observed the holiday last Thursday had no clue as to its origins. But now you do.

Whether we as Christians like it or not, Hallowe'en is here to stay. We have all gotten used to it as part of our lives. But that doesn't mean that the Church doesn't still struggle with how to deal with it. If you were to turn on a Christian radio or television station this past week, you would have no doubt heard many vastly divergent perspectives on how we, as Christians, should respond to Hallowe'en.

Basically, all churches fall into one of four schools of thought:

1) Some churches argue that Christians should have nothing at all to do with this holiday; that it is a celebration of evil, and the church must reject it, and all of its customs.

In an article on the internet, entitled, "Hallowe'en: What It Is, From a Christian Perspective," Gloria Phillips offers this dire warning: "The uninformed Christian has no idea that there truly are demonic spirits which are contacted and activated as people call out to them in jest . . . in actuality (they are) contacting the Satanic realm without knowing it."

And, of course it is true that the Bible warns against dabbling in the occult. In Deuteronomy 18:10, we read, "No one shall be found among you . . . who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD."

Therefore, many pastors condemn Hallowe'en, and all its customs, as "the work of the Devil," and therefore anathema to the Church. That's one, rather extreme reaction held by many conservative Christians.

Now, I recognize the reality of demonic evil in the world, and the dangers of the occult. But I'm convinced that the vast majority of people who participate in the festivities of Hallowe'en aren't Druids or Satan-worshippers, nor are they dabbling in the occult. In fact, by forbidding Christians from participating in innocent Hallowe'en customs, these churches actually give the Devil more credit than he is due. Their conservative crusade against Hallowe'en is exactly what Satan wants. No, banning Hallowe'en isn't the answer.

2) A second group of churches take advantage of Hallowe'en as an opportunity to literally "scare the hell" out of people.

On the Christian radio station I listen too, I sometimes have heard advertisements for a Baptist Church in the Orlando area that is inviting the public to come to their church to walk through a "Hell House," or as other churches call it, a "Judgment House." These are something like Christian versions of a haunted house. Their purpose is to impress upon people the horrors of eternal punishment, and scare people into accepting Christ so that they can avoid damnation and the tortures of hell.

Christians with this view figure, "If people want to be scared on Hallowe'en, they might as well be scared about something that really matters." So, they graphically portray people in the fires of Hell, writhing in pain, letting out blood-curdling screams - and call it "evangelism."

I'm sure these churches mean well, but I have a problem with the image of God that young people take away from their visit to these Judgment Houses. I believe in a God who draws us by his love and mercy, not a God who uses the threat of torture to coerce people to worship him. No, I don't think this approach to Hallowe'en is healthy, either.

3) Another group of churches are those that attempt to transform Hallowe'en into something else less offensive.

While troubled by the pagan origins of Hallowe'en, these congregations do not want to take away the children's fun. Therefore, they will offer safe and more wholesome alternatives to the traditional Hallowe'en customs. Churches with this view will elect to offer the community a Fall Festival or Bible Character Costume Party, or even a Trunk or Treat event on October 31 as a fun outreach event for children and their families. (We held our own Trunk or Treat event two Saturdays ago, and had a great turnout of families.) Churches that schedule such a family festival to conflict with Hallowe'en don't want their squeamishness about Hallowe'en to penalize the children and deny them a chance to enjoy themselves. They just want to offer families a wholesome alternative. They may also see these events as a way to recruit new families to their congregation. And there is nothing wrong with those goals.

4) Then, finally, there are churches that see nothing wrong with Hallowe'en, at least the way it is celebrated today.

Christians with this view would argue that, even if the origins of Hallowe'en are suspect, people who celebrate Hallowe'en today are not worshipping the Lord of Death. They are simply out to have a good time – it's all good clean fun. They consider it an innocent holiday, and may even have the church sponsor Hallowe'en parties. In away, we do this here, as we host the Women's Club's annual Haunted House on our property (by the way, all proceeds of their Haunted House are shared with charitable groups in Sebastian). In fact, in some of the congregations I have served, children were invited to wear their costumes to worship the Sunday before Hallowe'en.

These churches see nothing wrong with people enjoying, what they view to be a harmless custom of our culture.

As you can see, the Church has always been very conflicted over what to do about Hallowe'en.

- Sometimes we have been alarmed by it and have attempted to wage war against it.
- At other times, we have tried to shun it, hoping that it would just go away.
- Still at other times, we have embraced Hallowe'en as an innocent and harmless folk tradition.

But none of those approaches seems satisfactory. They either take Hallowe'en too seriously, or not seriously enough.

- Is there way for the Church to redeem Hallowe'en?
- Is it possible for Christians to participate in Hallowe'en in such a way that would allow us to discover some deeper meaning that might strengthen our faith?
- Is there a way that we can hallow Hallowe'en?

I believe there is.

The secret to a healthy Christian approach to All Hallows Eve is to link it firmly with All Hallows Day. To lots of people the connection between Hallowe'en and All Saints Day may seem arbitrary. But, I believe that by comparing and contrasting the two, we will discover that the light and hope offered by Christianity is far superior to the hopelessness and fear offered by the dark-forces of Hallowe'en.

Just consider how similar, and how dramatically different, the two holidays are. How are they similar? Well...

- Both holidays were created to remember those who had died in the past year, and in their own unique ways, both paid respect to the dead. But that's about where the similarity ends.

Now consider the contrasts:

- The Druids worshiped The Lord of Death. On All Saints Day, Christians pay homage to The Lord of Life.
- The Druids' festival was dominated by fear and dread. The Christian All Hallows Day was marked by hope, joy, and peace.
- The Druid New Year focused on the hopelessness of life and death, with homeless spirits wandering the world, forever vagabonds, never finding an eternal place to rest. The Christian celebration of All Saints emphasizes that those who have died in faith have the hope of everlasting life in heaven - an eternal home, prepared just for them.

Do you see how the dark night of Hallowe'en can actually foreshadow the bright dawn of All Saints Day? - how acknowledging our natural fear of death can remind us of the hope we have in the resurrection? - how the demonic forces of evil who roam the earth, as powerful as they may seem, ultimately have no authority over us, because God is on our side?

Hallowe'en, and all it represents, can become for us a reminder of the hopelessness and desperation of life when we try to live apart from God. All Saints Day, by contrast, is a celebration of God's victory over sin and death, and the promise that we have the hope of eternal life.

If that is true - if we actually believe what we profess to believe, then as Christians, Hallowe'en holds no power over us. Yes, Satan and his evil forces are real and powerful. But our God is more powerful! In the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, God defeated Satan, and he has promised that you and I can share in that victory!

That means that, when we take part in Hallowe'en, we are not worshiping Satan. We are mocking him! We are laughing in his face, ridiculing him. He doesn't scare us, because God has assured us of the victory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In his book, The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis quotes the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther: "The best way to drive out the devil, if he will not yield to texts of Scripture, is to jeer and flout him, for he cannot bear scorn." And Lewis also quotes Sir. Thomas Moore: "The devil . . . the proud spirit cannot endure to be mocked."

So, instead of trying to do away with Hallowe'en, we ought to use it as an opportunity to mock Satan. Hallowe'en can be an occasion to remind ourselves, and tell the world that, as Christians who have been promised eternal life by the one Eternal God, we can enjoy an evening of poking fun at the Devil.

This year, Hallowe'en fell between Reformation Sunday – the last Sunday of October – and All Saints Sunday. In fact, the actual "Reformation Day" is always on Hallowe'en, October 31! So, Hallowe'en is now forever linked with Reformation Day.

Traditionally on Reformation Sunday, Protestant congregations sing the greatest hymn of the Protestant Reformation, written by Martin Luther, a text that takes seriously the power of evil, but reminds us that our God is even more powerful:

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;
our helper he amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.
2. Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,

were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabbaoth, his name, from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.

3. And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God hath 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.
4. That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours, thru him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever.

So, my friends, I believe it's fine to go ahead and enjoy Hallowe'en. It is a vivid reminder that "the Prince of Darkness grim" has met his match in "the Prince of Peace."