

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

October 31, 2021, The 23rd Sunday After Pentecost/The 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 27:1-5, 11-14, Romans 8:31, 35, 37-39

HALLOWEEN IN CHURCH?

I want to begin this morning by thanking the Rev. Judy Anderson-Bauer for a conversation we had together while we were on Study Leave a couple weeks ago. Many of the ideas in the sermon come from her and that conversation. Because of that conversation, I want to talk this morning about Halloween. I know you may have been bracing yourself for a stewardship sermon on this Consecration Sunday, but I'm sad to say if you weren't here last week, you've missed it...at least for now! Stewardship is forever!

I know I'm also missing the chance to preach about the Reformation. It was on Oct. 31, 1517 that Martin Luther, (the German monk, not Martin Luther King, Jr., the African American Civil Rights Leader) posted his 95 theses, or ideas, on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, calling for public debate on the topic of selling forgiveness, called indulgences.

Instead, since it is Halloween on a Sunday, which hasn't happened since 2010, and won't happen again until 2027, I thought you might like to know more about this church holiday.

Yes, you heard me right, although you may not be aware of it, Halloween is a church holiday. Like Christmas and Easter, Halloween has been taken over by the culture and turned into a commercial enterprise, that now rivals Christmas for the amount of money spent on decorations. I read an article this week that said Americans are spending \$9 Billion annually on Halloween.

<https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/it-wrong-celebrate-halloween>

But Halloween's beginnings and its roots are religious, both Christian and even pre-Christian. Halloween is "Hallow's Eve" or the evening before All Hallow's Day, what we now call All Saints Day. We will be celebrating All Hallow's Day, or All Saints' Day next Sunday November 7th.

Incidentally, Martin Luther chose to post his 95 theses on Oct. 31 because he knew lots of people would be in church on the next day, All Saints Day. The name was shortened from Hallow's Eve to Halloween. But the day was holy even before the Christians came along.

Among the ancient Celtic people in northern Europe and the British Isles, Oct. 31 was also a holy day, and was called Samhain. This is a Celtic words spelled SAMHAIN, and pronounced sow-in. It was the death of the year, the last day of the year, New Year's Eve for them. Samhain was the end of summer, and long days of light, and the beginning of the season of winter, of cold and dark. Having lived in Northern Ireland for a year, I can tell you that in the deep of winter it was dark until 9 or 10 in the morning, and dark again by 3 p.m.

As the daylight waned, in those ancient Celtic lands, it was the time to retire to the warmth of the hearth and home, to enjoy the harvest's bounty, and to tell stories. That often meant sitting around the fire, eating apples and cracking nuts, hence two British names for Halloween – Nutcrack Night or Snap Apple Night.

(See <http://researchingfoodhistory.blogspot.com/2013/10/snap-apple-night.html> for fun explanation of "snap apple" game)

Samhain was also the time to remember loved ones who had died, and to tell stories about them. Sometimes food was left out for them, or an extra place set at the supper table for them. Our ancestors believed that at this time of the year, the veil between our world and the spirit world was especially thin, and that loved ones could visit more easily.

They also feared that evil people and evil spirits could return, so they would dress up in

costumes and build huge bonfires to keep the evil spirits away. They would put carved turnips outside the door to keep evil away.

In fact, most cultures around the world have a day set aside to honor and remember loved ones who have died. That's why Halloween is also called the Day of the Dead, not in a morbid or twisted sense, but in a sense of remembrance and honoring and love for those who have died.

If you saw the Disney movie, *Coco*, that was about the Mexican traditions of the Day of the Dead. On Oct 31st, people in Mexico take a picnic out to the cemetery, to prepare the graves for winter and to spend time with those they love and remember.

Carving out pumpkins didn't start in this country, though pumpkins are native to the Americas. The Irish and Scottish peoples first started the tradition of hollowing out vegetables, usually turnips, rutabagas, or beets. I saw carved turnips when I lived in Northern Ireland. The turnips were grown much bigger than we are used to; the size of a small pumpkin. It was a lot harder to carve a turnip, than a pumpkin! But the yellowish glow is beautiful.

The name "Jack-O-Lantern" comes from an Irish legend that says an old man named Jack died and could not enter heaven because he was stingy with his money. He wasn't allowed into hell because he had played tricks on the Devil. So, he had no other place to go but to wander the earth, carrying out a hollowed-out turnip for a light.

Hence, Jack of the Lantern, or Jack-O-Lantern.

The ancient Romans also had a holiday at the end of October to remember their loved ones who had died. When they came and conquered Britain, the Celtic holiday of Samhain and the Roman holiday of Feralia merged. The second day of the Roman festival honored the Roman goddess Pomona. She was the goddess of fruit and trees. Her symbol was the apple. As cultures and traditions blended this led to the games of snap apple and bobbing for apples in the British Isles.

Later, when Christians came to Britain in the 6th century AD, they changed the celebrations again to November 1st being a day to remember the saints of God, All Hallow's Day or All Saints Day. And All-Hallow's Eve or Halloween on October 31st being the day of preparation for All Saint's Day.

Many centuries later, when the Puritans came to America, they forbid the celebration of most holidays, including Christmas and Halloween. It wasn't until the late 1800's that Halloween was celebrated very much in this country.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the tricks were getting so out of hand that there was talk of passing a law to ban the celebration of Halloween all together.

There are Christians today who believe Halloween is a celebration of evil and should not be allowed. But Halloween isn't the first of our holidays to be stolen. Look at Christmas and Easter! They have both been commercialized almost beyond recognition. Yet as Christians we hold tightly to the true meaning of those days.

It's time for us to reclaim the original meaning of Halloween or All Hallow's Eve . As we come to the end of the green, growing season and enter the season of cold and darkness, we need to retreat to the warmth of our souls, of our memories, and the sure promise that our loved ones are safely Home with God in Heaven.

As the green, growing world around us dies, and leaves fall from the trees, and the harvest is gathered, and as even the light dies and the dark nights grow longer, Halloween is a time to we make our peace with the dead, with death, and with grief.

Halloween is a time to remember the unfailing love of God who provides us with bountiful harvests, and who cradles our dear ones who have died, safely in God's arms.

There is nothing wrong with dressing up, with pretending to be someone else for a while. There's nothing wrong with making fun of evil, because we know that our God has overcome all evil. Halloween is a good holiday, the day we poke fun at the hosts of evil, knowing that the great goodness of God is more powerful still.

We can gather together, and eat apples, and share candy and dress in scary costumes and play games and tell stories of those we love,

knowing that we are following in the footsteps of our mothers and fathers of faith,

preparing ourselves for All Saints' Sunday and its remembrances of those who have gone before us into Heaven,

confident that nothing, nothing in all the world can ever separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

AMEN

See articles:

<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/is-the-origin-of-halloween-rooted-in-a-pagan-holiday.html>

<https://www.bibleinfo.com/en/questions/it-wrong-celebrate-halloween>

<https://www.gominno.com/parents/halloween-meaning-history-christianity/>

<https://www.discoveringireland.com/newsletter-halloween-09/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/history-of-halloween>

<https://www.newgrange.com/samhain.htm>

<http://researchingfoodhistory.blogspot.com/2013/10/snap-apple-night.html>