

THIS IS HALLOWEEN

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As with other holiday celebrations in our modern, American culture, Halloween, as it is celebrated today, has diverged quite a bit from its original incarnation. I'm not an anthropologist, and I won't bore you with the details, but the short version of the story goes like this:

Prior to the arrival of Christianity in the British Isles, the pagan religions of the region celebrated a Festival called Samhain on October 31st. (Or right around there, as they weren't using the Gregorian calendar) This was the final harvest feast of the season, and a time to honor the ancestors and those loved ones who had passed on in the last year. When the Catholic Church arrived, it found that those people converting to the new Christian faith had a hard time letting go of the cultural traditions that were tied to their pagan religious roots. So, the Church did a little creative adoption and adaptation so that the old festival traditions could be recast in a light that was compatible with the new faith. Thus were created the holy days of All Saints and All Souls. To ease the process further, some of the old pagan gods were given a slightly revised biography and made Saints, so the celebrations continued to have some familiar faces. The traditions of carving vegetables into lanterns and going from house to house to collect food for the village feast just migrated over from the pagan festival into the Catholic Holy days ... and those traditions came to America with the immigrants (largely attributed to the Irish influx), where they have continued to evolve into today's Halloween.

Many of you know that I am one of the church's resident witches. I practice one of those pre-Christian, polytheistic religions where the roots of the Halloween holiday grew. And that has absolutely nothing to do with why I'm here speaking with you this morning. I am here today as to true advocate for Halloween as a secular celebration, completely apart from the spiritual or cultural significance of Samhain to the pagan, or the Catholic All Hallows' Eve, or the Latina Dia de Los Muertos. I come to urge you to celebrate this Halloween in all its silly, spooky, candy encrusted glory.

I expect that more than a few of you will think to yourself, "I outgrew Halloween a long time ago." But this special occasion really has something wonderful to offer revelers of any age. Yes, the kids will enjoy the sheer frolic of it. Dressing up and going out collecting sweet treats. This is one of the simple pleasures of childhood that will create good memories for our young ones that will last them a life time. Be sure to take those really embarrassing pictures that you can tease them with for the rest of their lives.

But, as adults, we need to remember to allow ourselves those simple pleasures. We often get so caught up in our busy and stressful lives that we forget to enjoy the living of them.

When thinking about the themes of Halloween for this service, I ran across a great quote. “For as children tremble and fear everything in the blind darkness, so we in the light sometimes fear what is no more to be feared than the things children in the dark hold in terror and imagine will come true.” That was written by Titus Lucretius Carus (circa 50 BCE). I was really moved by the realization that two millennia later, things really haven’t changed.

Halloween is, in some ways, all about fear. It is an annual occasion that allows us, collectively, to mock the things we are afraid of. Children dress up as ghosts and vampires, and Frankenstein Monsters, and for that one night, maybe longer, they are less afraid of the things that hide in the shadows. As adults, we may have outgrown the fears of hidden creepy-crawlies, but there are still monsters lurking under our beds. Don’t try to sell me on the thought that I’m the only one who has had a few sleepless nights recently worrying about the economy or the presidential race. And the simple truth is that we can accomplish no more by staying awake worrying about those problems than a child can accomplish by being frightened of the boogie man.

Most particularly, this Halloween, I am a little frightened of the ghosts in my calendar. That would be the Dickensian ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. It seems to me not quite coincidental that in the reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” that all happened “in the bleak December.” We have all experienced at some point that disoriented feeling of wondering where time has flown. I know, absolutely, that as soon as the calendar turns over to November next week, I’ll wake up in the morning, and it will be Thanksgiving, and the pies won’t be baked, and the turkey didn’t thaw right, and the house isn’t cleaned for company ... and no sooner than I make my way through that mine field, I’ll wake up the day after, and it will be Christmas Eve ... and the pies won’t be baked, and the shopping won’t be done, and the gifts won’t be wrapped ... and ... it seems to be a never ending list of expectation and obligation. Some of it that I heap upon myself, some that gets added to my load by my loving, well-meaning family, and a little more that I just pick up along the way from the media message of what it means to have a “perfect” holiday.

Well, I’m here to tell you that Halloween is my “perfect” holiday. As I see it, no couple ever fought over whose parents to have Halloween Dinner with. No one ever gets their nose out of joint because you forget to buy them a Halloween present. It’s just a day and a night of dressing up silly, eating yourself stupid on chocolate, and having a good time. And what could be better than that?

Halloween as a phenomenon is gaining momentum, but for now, it is still a simple celebration that does not carry the same expectations or obligations of other big occasions. There are two bigger days for throwing parties every year, New Year’s Eve and Super Bowl Sunday. And in spite of the persistent rumors that Halloween is second in holiday spending only to Christmas, that figure only applies to the purchase of decorations. Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and Valentine’s all rake in more retail dollars, because of the associated expectation of gift giving.

On Halloween, the only gift I have to buy is some mini candy bars, ... and if we don't get any trick-or-treaters where we live, believe me, the candy won't go to waste.

On Halloween, our visitors won't want to get past the front door. They'll never see that I have a sink full of dirty dishes, so they can't think less of me for it.

On Halloween, I only have to bake a pie if I want to, not because the family holiday feed will be a disaster if I show up empty handed.

On Halloween, I only have to pretend to be a ghost, or a gypsy, or Miss America, depending on my costume. (You know I own my own tiara.) What I don't have to do is pretend to be the perfect hostess, the perfect housekeeper, the perfect in-law. Miss America's tiara is much easier to wear than the halo of perfection.

Then, why do I try so hard to live up to all the obligations of the Holiday season? Most of them are unrealistic goals I set for myself, in the first place. Why does it matter so much at Thanksgiving and Christmas that I "have it all together", when at Halloween, it's such a joy to be silly and scattered and even a little scared? I think it's all summed up by that great philosopher, Charles Schultz in his enduring "Peanuts" comic strip. Linus takes great pains to differentiate his hero, the Great Pumpkin, from that other holiday visitor bearing gifts. When children write to Santa Clause, they list in detail all of the things they want for Christmas ... and increasingly through the years those become lists of things they really expect to get. You don't ask the Great Pumpkin for things. You write to let him know that you believe in him, and then you wait, in that most sincere pumpkin patch, for him to bring you whatever he chooses.

With our traditional Fall and Winter holidays, there is always that specter of anticipation. Maybe this will be the year when everyone gets what they want ... everyone is able to get together ... everyone will finally get along." The pressure to be part of that "perfect holiday" picture can be nearly overwhelming. At Halloween, we are meant to go out on our own, with maybe one or two intrepid companions, and troupe through the darkness in search of the sweet things in life. Halloween gives us permission to have no expectations. We anticipate only being frightened, and can then be pleasantly surprised when the spooks turn out to be friends and neighbors in plastic masks instead of real monsters.

I'm going to work very hard this coming season, through the Holiday gauntlet, and on into the new year, to remember the lessons of Halloween. I will try to take with me my empty pillow case and let it be filled up with sweet surprises and simple pleasures. By allowing myself to lay down the pressure I put on, and take on from others, I can be free to walk up to the doors of opportunity, knock politely and chime "Trick or Treat!" If I can do this without expecting unrealistic things of myself, and of life, I know that I'll end up with plenty of candy bars to offset the weight of the occasional rock.