

October 27, 2019 I Timothy 4:1-10, *The Message Bible*

I know there are fellow Christians who wonder why we encourage our children, youth, and adults to come to worship in costume; wonder why we want to celebrate a secular holiday, like Halloween, in church, much less in worship. And, there are those who are convinced we are not doing God's work, rather the work of the devil, celebrating as we are here today.

These Christians might use the text from Timothy's First Letter I just read to support their opinion that we are blasphemous. I guess one could read Timothy's words that way. Obviously, I do not. I am drawn to *The Message Bible's* translation that states, "Everything God created is good, and to be received with thanks. Nothing is to be sneered at and thrown out. God's Word and our prayers make every item in creation holy."

Sure, there are people in the world today chasing "after demonic illusions put forth by professional liars" or, as it was translated in the NRSV, "deceitful spirits and teachings of demons". But these "demons" are not the ones we are dressing up as. Or, if they are, our dressing up as demons is not a form of worship on our part, rather a way to keep them at bay. And that is what Halloween is rooted in, if we are to believe what is written about Halloween's origins.

Here is an abbreviated background to Halloween, much of it from Wikipedia:

It seems the Irish Celts had a three-day celebration called Samhain, which marked the end of the harvest season and beginning of winter or the "darker half" of the year. It was seen as a liminal time, a time at the threshold, at the edge of time, when the boundary between this world and the

"Otherworld" thinned. This meant the "spirits" or "fairies" of the Otherworld could more easily come into this world and were particularly active.

At Samhain, it is believed that these "spirits" needed to be appeased to ensure that the people and their livestock survived the winter. Offerings of food and drink, or portions of the crops, were left outside for them.

At this same liminal time, the souls of the dead were said to revisit their homes seeking hospitality. Places were set at the dinner table and by the fire to welcome them. The belief that the souls of the dead return home on one night of the year and must be appeased seems to have ancient origins and is found in many cultures.

Throughout Ireland and Britain, on the three-day Samhain celebration special bonfires were lit. Their flames, smoke, and ashes were deemed to have protective and cleansing powers. Later, these bonfires served to keep away the devil. On All Hallows Eve or Halloween, in medieval Europe, fires served a dual purpose, being lit to guide returning souls to the homes of their families, as well as to deflect demons from haunting Christians.

From at least the 16th century, the three-day Samhain festival included people going house-to-house in costume (or in disguise), usually reciting verses or songs in exchange for food

There are some who believe Samhain is not only the origin of Halloween, but All Saints Day as well, since part of Samhain celebration was to make sure family members who had died were well taken care of in the afterlife.

What I take out of all of this is that God's truth about life, death, and after life is never changing, even though ours is.

It is no accident that cultures from around the world, from the earliest of times, understood “liminal time”, time when the wall between this world and the Otherworld is thin. They understood a connect to those who had died. They understood there are demons and demonic illusions in the world; demons that can harm us; demons from whom we need protection.

As much fun as we have on Halloween (if we allow ourselves), as much money as we foolishly spend, we do ourselves a disservice, if we don’t see a religious connect to, and between, Halloween and All Saints Day. There are demons in this world and the saints who have gone before us have shown us how best to defeat these demons – faith in the love of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Saints have given us this church community to grow in faith in. They have tried to teach us how to live into Timothy’s challenge: “Exercise daily in God - no spiritual flabbiness, please! Workouts in the gymnasium are useful, but a disciplined life in God is far more so, making you fit both today and forever.”

In the sentence before this challenge Timothy wrote: “Stay clear of silly stories that get dressed up as religion.” On the evening before All Saints Day, the evening some know as All Hallows Eve, the evening we know as Halloween, Martin Luther posted 95 Theses or Statements on the Wittenberg Fortress Church door, knowing the church would be full the next morning for the celebration of All Saints Day. He did this desiring to create a conversation about the “silly stories that get dressed up as religion” in the church universal; a pounding on the door of the church that reverberated throughout Europe and changed the church forever.

Martin Luther did not want to stop bonfires or us dressing in costume or going door to door knocking on doors for food (now candy). These were not silly stories in his book, as saints and demons, spirits and fairies were very real and present, as far as he was concerned.

No, Martin Luther wanted to challenge the silly stories that bled the poor dry; bled them dry of money, of joy, of life. He wanted to give the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ back to the people from whom it had been withheld, if not, indeed, stolen.

So, the laughter and fun and joy of Halloween belong in the church as much as the tears and fears the celebration of All Saints Day does. And, if I could, I would resurrect the Samhain festival, at least in the form of a three-day celebration. One that is already present, but one that we don’t allow ourselves time for: Halloween, All Saints Day, All Souls Day, ever and always on October 31st, November 1st, and November 2nd.

This Halloween, as you anticipate and participate or see the costumed revelers and the candle-lit jack-o-lanterns, keep a sharp eye out for the spirits and fairies hovering near. For these are liminal times, threshold times, times to be prepared to join in the laughter and festivities, for God and the saints are especially near. Amen.