



The Rt. Rev. J. Michael Garrison's Homily

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There is a phrase from an old Cornish peasant's litany that is so wonderful for today and this time of year: "From ghosties and ghoulies, long leggetie beasties and things that go bump in the night, Good Lord deliver us." When we leave here today it will not be long before the annual parade of goblins, gremlins, witches and Michael Jacksons passes through our neighborhoods, if it has not already done so.

Sometimes I find it hard to relate Halloween in our culture and the observance of All Hallows. Like many Christian holy days and festivals it was co-opted or borrowed from the religious practices of our pre-Christian ancestors. The Western Church's observance of All Hallows Eve, All Saints Day, and All Souls Day began in Ireland and then spread to England and the Continent by the ninth century of the Common Era. Our ancestors in the faith made a clear decision to create an overlay on pagan traditions. As the daylight grew shorter with the autumn of the year, this was the time when the Celtic peoples believed that the Lord of the Dead needed to be placated before the arrival of the winter season.

So, the Church borrowed a festival dedicated to the Lord of the Dead observed in Celtic lands from October 31 to November 2, just as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost were borrowed from our Roman and Jewish ancestors. These three sacred days in the autumn of the year are meant to celebrate Christ's victory in individual Christians, all the saints of God, and celebrate Jesus' victory over death and the grave. Preeminently it is a celebration for all believers in God's wondrous gift of eternal life through the power of Christ's resurrection.

It seems that Halloween still needs to undergo some transforming. Ghouls, mummies, skeletons, ghosts say a lot about the human fear of death, but not much about our belief in the gift of eternal life. We believe when we are baptized into Christ, that death is conquered, death is no more. Yes, Halloween still speaks to humanity's fear of death, a fear that is real and not to be ignored. So, how will we reclaim our belief in life eternal? How will we continue to live in the power of Christ's resurrection?

The lessons today give us some clues. Genesis tells us that Abram and Sarai are called out by God. They are blessed by

God. Then they are sent to be a blessing to all others as they respond in obedience and faith, where Adam and Eve failed to do so. They leave behind the familiar and by faith travel deeply into the unfamiliar. They travel to unfamiliar lands and vistas, yet with the assurance that they are sent to be a blessing. In their travels they grow in their familiarity with this Holy One who calls, blesses, and sends.

We are also called to travel into the unfamiliar. However, let's face it; few of us really want to venture there. Faith encourages us this way: "Just do it. Just trust in this Holy One who is the way, the truth and the life." Yet, so often we are reluctant.

With our second lesson we jump from the beginnings of history to its consummation in the future. The vista of the reader or hearer of the message of the Book of Revelation is from a place of safety, a place of health and salvation, a place provided for us by the victory of the Lamb. The reader or hearer is assured that she or he is blessed and gifted through faith in Christ and has obtained the inheritance of the saints. The hearer or reader joins in the worship of the Ancient of Days as the saints and angels are gathered in enjoyment of the glory of the Holy One. The reader or hearer is reminded that it is not our good deeds or great lives that the saints celebrate but the victory of God who makes us saints.

The author wants to console and encourage Christians with his vision of the place where hunger and thirst and scorching heat will be no more, a place where everyone will know that the Lamb seated on the throne will be the Shepard who will guide us to the springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

Dear Friends, I believe that vision is what we should be celebrating to counterbalance the days of ghosts and goblins and ghouls. Let these three holy days in autumn not be about the fear of death, but a celebration of the life that Jesus shares with us who are the saints of God.

It is interesting to me to note that Matthew's account of Jesus' sharing with the disciples the Great Commission follows immediately upon his narration of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary discover an

empty tomb. They are greeted by an angel who commands them not to fear and then to go quickly to the disciples and announce that Jesus has been raised from the dead and that they will encounter him in Galilee. The disciples, like Abram and Sarai of old, go into the unfamiliar, go into discerning this new relationship with the One whom they have called Teacher and Master, the one who called each of them not servant but friend.

So it is friends of Jesus who receive a commission to continue going and making disciples of all peoples with the assurance that Christ is with them even to the end of the ages.

The power of Jesus' resurrection manifests itself in the Christian's awareness and willingness to engage in that work of making disciples and sharing the Good News of our new life in Christ with people everywhere and in every age and circumstance of life. Just as Abram and Sarah were called, blessed, and sent, each Christian, in other words each of us, responding to new life in Christ, is commissioned to make Jesus known, honored, and worshiped.

The author, poet and artist John Ruskin lived in the nineteenth century before the age of electricity. City streets were lit by gas lamps. Lamplighters went along the streets lighting lamps with a flaming torch. One night when John

was old, he was seated with a friend in front of a window in his home. Across the valley on a hillside street, they could see a lamplighter traveling along lighting the street lamps. After awhile Ruskin couldn't see the lamplighter, he could only see the torch and trail of lights that he left behind him. He turned to his friend and said: "That's my idea of a true Christian. You may never have known him. You may never even have seen him. But you know that he passed through this world by the trail of lights he left behind him."

This weekend we celebrate the trail of lights left by all the saints of God. Let us also do our part to live our lives as a testimony to the gift we have received: eternal life from the One who is the true light of the world.

Tomorrow many of us will sing that wonderful hymn that reminds us of the daily challenge of the Christian life: "I sing a song of the saints of God." The last words of each of the stanzas reflect our call, our blessing, and our commissioning: "...we're all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping, to be one too." "...there's not any reason no, not the least, why I shouldn't be one too." "...the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one too."

Saints of God of the Diocese of Western New York, rejoice and be glad!
