

Living in Season
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Note: The sermon is an oral event. This manuscript may not reflect the exact spoken words. If you want to hear what was actually said, you can purchase a CD of the sermon in the church office. © Matthew Johnson-Doyle, 2011.

Celebrate and gladly sing!

I've been thinking and asking about Halloween stories this week.

I have pretty good Halloween memories:
when I was 10, 11, and 12, I would go trick-or-treating in my cul-de-sac neighborhood with my friends Chris and Kurt,
they were step-brothers, the same age as me, and lived just three houses down.
I don't remember our costumes,
but I remember coming back to their house afterwards.
They had one of those tri-level split levels,
and the basement was a big open playroom.
We'd head down there and dump out everything we had got.
It was a big pile.

We separated out the stuff we didn't want –
the almond joys and mounds, mostly –
and then survey the stash.

This was the era when people worried about poised candies and razor blades.
We had to examine every single wrapper and make sure
that there was no tears, no pin-pricks, no holes.
Any like that, we just threw away.

You know, I read recently that despite all that fear that went around then
there was never a single reported case of Halloween Candy being poisoned by a stranger. Not one.
We all lived in fear for no reason at all.
One parent did try to poison his own children with their candy,
that must have been where the legend came from,
but we never needed to be so afraid.

Anyway, there was plenty of candy, so we didn't worry about.
We eat for a while, whatever we wanted.
Then we'd each take an equal share home
to satisfy us for the next few weeks.

It was awesome.

I also have an early Halloween memory from late October, 1984,
carving pumpkins at our dining room table,
watching Walter Mondale campaign for president –
he was in the snow, somewhere, New Hampshire maybe.
My parents – my father who loved Reagan and my mom who couldn't stand him,
glowered at each other and make snippy comments,
while I worked on making funny-looking teeth.

I promised I would not reveal where I got these stories,
but I also heard stories of long-age Halloweens.
Home-made costumes – which are making a comeback,
and parties at the church, bobbing for apples.
School parades.

Halloween, some of you know, didn't used to be about candy.
Indeed, there was a time, after the great depression,
when people couldn't afford to be giving out candy to the whole neighborhood.
Instead, it was a time to stay up late with your friends,
roam the neighborhood, and play pranks.

And, oh, I had no idea you all could be so naughty.
A spool of thread, notched in the right places, and tied the right way,
would be attached to a window in the middle of the night,
and, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang!

Or a bar of soap used to draw or write on windows.

But the most popular Halloween activity was, apparently,
out-house tipping.
Run up, knock it over.

If you were really mischievous, you'd wait in the woods for the out-house to be in use,
then you'd run up and knock it down.
And best if you knocked it from the back, so that it fell with the door side
facing the earth.

Although this could be dangerous.
One group of boys always knocked down the same out-house each Halloween,
and always with the homeowner inside, and door face down.
So, one year, the homeowner moved the outhouse about 8 feet up toward the house, covered the hole with a cloth
and a few leaves.
Halloween night, he went outside, closed the door,
and waited for the splash as the boys, running up from the woods,
fell in the hole.

The prank-ee becomes the prankster.

How you're going to get that image out of your mind
for the rest of the sermon, I don't know.
But after hearing that story, I couldn't not tell it.

This is my fourth Samhain, or Halloween, or All Souls service with you all.
It is my ninth time in my career preaching on this.

I've preached nine sermons on Yom Kippur, nine Ingathering services,
eight Thanksgiving services, eight Christmas Eves, eight Easter services,
eight stewardship sermons, and eight earth day sermons.

Seasons.

They keep coming up, don't they?

Every year.

Oh, look, it's spring again – the daffodils are up.
Here is another July 4th, out on the bridge, watching the show.
School buses out again, and the leaves start to turn once more.
The days get shorter, and it's time for the harvest,
and the harvest feast.
The flurries fly, the night gets really long,
and then it stops getting longer,
and we light our candles and sing,
glory, glory, joy to the world.

Every year, the seasons turn again and again.
The wheel of the year,
the ancients called it,
and they felt as Barbara Hendryson felt:
that only the moon knows what is repeated, what abides,
so they marked it,
the 28 days from full to full again,
and celebrated.
And they noticed the sun, as we went round and round,
and when it was longest present,
and when it gave over the most to the night,
and they marked out the year in quarters,
and then marked those in halves,
to make 8 celebrations,
and we are here on the cusp of one of those:
the beginning of the pagan year,

Samhain, the half-way point between the fall equinox and the winter solstice,
the day, according to the legends,
when the veil between the world of the living
and the world of the dead is lifted for a night,

a day of costumes and feasting,
a day for pranks, sure,
and a day to leave out tokens – fruit, candy,
for the dead who will, this night, come to visit
and bless us in their memory and ours.

A celebration and a marker,
a reminder that memory matters,
that the dead never really leave us,
that life is precious.

And we do it once a year.

Here it comes again.

The liberal minister is challenged –
what will we say different this year,
than we said last year?

The rule is, basically, that you have to give 5 or 6 years between repeating the same message.
Most folks won't remember a month later,
and for them, you could just preach the same sermon again and again –
but there are always those few observant ones,
the ones who remember well, and you know who you are,
and will call you on it if you go back to the well too quick.

But other traditions don't feel this urge
to do it new this year, to be different.

The more liturgical traditions, they just do it the way it has always been done.

The Orthodox Priest doesn't try to invent a new ritual every Easter.

They do it the way it has always been done.

The Wiccan Priestess doesn't invent a new ritual for Samhain.

She opens the book, remembers the stories,
and does it the way she did it last year, and the year before,
and so on.

Sometimes I wonder if they know something we don't.

Don't get me wrong, I would go stark raving mad
if I had to preach the same thing, year after year.

You might not get bored, but I would.

And these really good holidays admit of many interpretations and meanings,
so it's usually not too hard.

But, still. I wonder if they know something we don't.

I wonder if there is something about marking the season,
about marking the holiday,
which comes again and again,
in pretty much the same way,
year after year.

Take Samhain.

The dead come to visit,
and we remember them.

We remember their lives, which live still in us and among us,
and we take this day to do so,
and, also, to have a little fun.

Would it be enough if we just celebrated this once in our lives?

Imagine it.

Maybe when we are old enough to understand,
to understand the way ancestors live in us,
the way the dead never really leave –

23 maybe, or, 46, or some such age.
And we have a ceremony, and recite the names of the dead,
and leave candy for them.
And that's it.
Would that work?

I don't think it would.
I think, once a year, we remember,
because we need to remember once a year.
Recall to ourselves these beloved,
let them bless us and let us bless them.
I think if we were longer than that, we'd forget too much.

In the same way,
I think we need, once a year, to remember about hope and new life,
and I think we need, once a year, to rededicate ourselves to the earth,
and I think we need, once a year, to remind ourselves how to forgive,
and so on and so on.

Some lessons we don't dare forget.

I think we are hard wired this way:
the earth goes round the sun once a year,
and it moves up and down, just enough to make the seasons,
and it is in these seasons that we live.

It is in these seasons that we live.
Celebrate and gladly sing,
for we live, and we live in seasons.

Life doesn't hold still.
Like the old man in the junkyard,
we need life to live –
change.
If all we had were the hard driving gray rains of fall,
we could not live.
And without that season, we could not live.

It is change, movement, that makes life possible and beautiful,
the changing seasons.
I grew up in Seattle, where we have only two seasons:
the summer, and rain.
I like having four. I like the colors of fall,
the cold breath of winter and snow on trees,
the first signs of green, then more colors,
then the hot steam of summer,
each for a season,
knowing always,
this will pass.
This will pass, then come again, then pass again.

What is repeated, and what abides.
The seasons are repeated.

Life abides.

And we have our seasons.

We abide, like a season, like the earth round the sun,
for a while,
and then we return to the circle of return.

Remember Berry's words:

*Within the circle of our lives
we dance the circle of the years,
the circles of the seasons
within the circles of the years,
the cycles of the moon
within the circles of the season,
the circles of our reasons
within the cycles of the moon.*

*Again, again we come and go,
changed, changing. Hands
join, unjoin in love and fear,
grief and joy. The circles turn,
each giving into each, into all.*

*And then we turn aside, alone,
out of the sunlight gone
into the darker circles of return.*

We come, we go,
hands join and unjoin:

what Halloween teaches,
what Samhain teaches,
is that we live in seasons and die in seasons,
the paradox of memory and life and time:
don't get too attached,
and don't forget:
both, at the same time,
are true:
this too shall pass, and this too shall come again,
in its own way.

Autumn, we know, says Robert Weston,
Is life en route to death.

*Yet other lives will come.
So may we know, accept, embrace,
The mystery of life we hold a while*

*Nor mourn that it outgrows each separate self,
but still rejoice that we may have our day.*

*Lift high our colors to the sky! and give,
In our time, fresh glory to the earth.*

This is the way of candy and pranks,
of knocked over out-houses,
and piles of chocolate bars spread on playroom floors:
for yes, the season says,
we remember,
and we know that, like the leaf fallen from the tree,
we shall cease,
yet today, today, we lift high our colors to the sky,
we play, we are whimsy and naughty,
we laugh out-loud,
for we rejoice that we may have our day,
and we give thanks for this day,
we give thanks for this life,
we give thanks for the harvest,
we give thanks for children and their sport,
we give thanks for elders and their wisdom,
and we know:

we know that we return again,
the fall come round once more,
the moon round the earth again,
knowing as it knows what is repeated, what abides,
knowing that we abide,
for a time,
and it is good,
we know that we return again,
that life returns again,
and this is good.
We live in seasons.
This is good.
Let us sing.