

TRICK OR TREAT

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

Today is Halloween—October 31. It is a day that we celebrate with candy and costumes and parties and decorating and Trick or Treating (or Trunk or Treating, as the case may be). In this country, Halloween is big business. According to the National Retail Association, Halloween spending this year is projected to reach an all-time high of ten billion dollars.¹ That, however, is still less than half of what we spend on Valentine's Day. So, I guess candy corn still bows before chocolate.

So, how is it that we decided that on October 31 of each year, that we would dress up as pirates and beg for M&Ms? Well, the origins of Halloween are murky. It is believed that the roots of this celebration can be found in the ancient Celtic new year's festival of Samhain (sow-win). The Celts of Ireland, Britain, and northern France observed their new year on November 1. Their end-of-year celebration was not just a harvest festival but also entertained aspects of the supernatural. The Celts believed that on this final night of the year that the spirits of the dead would haunt the living. To appease the spirits, they would place gifts of food and wine on their doorsteps. If they had to leave their homes, they would wear masks or costumes to fool the ghouls.

This tradition likely would have died out if not for the Christians. In the ninth century, Pope Gregory IV moved the observance of All Saints Day to November 1. All Saints Day (which we will observe next Sunday) was originally May 13. Why did the pope make this change? Possibly, his motive was to eclipse the popular celebration of the Celtic pagan festival of Samhain. If that was his intention, then it worked. He also elevated All Saints Day to become a high church feast. In the Middle Ages, vigils were commonly held the night before high feast days, so it was natural that a vigil would be held on the eve of All Saints Day and would coincide with the Celtic festival.

In Old English, the word saint is *hallow*. So, All Saints Day was known as All Hallows Day, and the day before became All Hallows' Eve. In Scotland, they called it *Hallowe'en*.

A few centuries later, in Britain, in the sixteenth century, on All Hallows Eve, young people took to dressing in costumes and going house-to-house singing, telling jokes, or reciting poems in return for treats. They call it *guising*. Irish and Scottish immigrants brought this practice to America in the late nineteenth century. It took hold as Trick or Treating in the 1940s.

¹ <https://nrf.com/topics/holiday-and-seasonal-trends/halloween>

Now, if you would like to draw an historic connection between Halloween and the satanic, then you're going to have a tough time. Nonetheless, the roots of Halloween are found in the very real human fear of death. For Christians, the fear of death is embedded in our awareness of the spiritual realities. We know that God is real, and we know that we have sinned, and consequently we feel lost—we feel that hope has abandoned us. Our sin makes us feel as if God is playing a great trick on us for which there is no treat.

In addition to today being Halloween, it is also known as Reformation Day. It was on October 31, 1517, that the German priest, Martin Luther, published what has become known as the 95 Theses. Four years ago, we celebrated the 500th anniversary of that date. Tradition tells us that Luther nailed his document to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. It is more likely that he posted them on a bulletin board at or near the church. It is a nice church and I doubt they looked kindly on anyone putting nails in their doors. I know that we wouldn't like it here.

This document—the Ninety-Five Theses—was actually titled *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*, and it contained Luther's thoughts on the church's practice of permitting local priests to sell indulgences, thus allowing believers to purchase their salvation. The purpose of Luther's document was academic and was intended to initiate a discussion with the church hierarchy. However, the Ninety-Five Theses struck a nerve with people and it was quickly reprinted across Europe. Luther's words became the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation.

But why did Luther post his writings on October 31? Was that a random date? No. Luther chose this day because it was the day before All Saints and on the following day there would be a great number of people attending Mass at the church. Luther knew there would be an interested audience for his writings.

Although Luther's document changed the course of history, was it a trick or a treat? Was Luther just trying to stir up trouble with the church or did he seek something more?

As a priest, Luther never intended to split from the church. His Ninety-Five Theses were the words of a concerned believer who viewed the selling of indulgences to be ill-advised. Luther was not opposed to indulgences themselves, but he believed they should be obtained through prayer and penance, not gold. He may have intended to stir things up, but he wasn't trying to trick anyone. The church did not agree and demanded that he denounce his words. He refused and in 1521 was excommunicated.

Our reading for today comes from the words of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. This man, Jeremiah, was called by God to be a prophet in the “thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah” – about 627 BC.

Around the thirtieth year of his life as a prophet, his country was invaded by the Babylonians and Jerusalem was captured. Many of the residents of Judah were taken away into exile. Jeremiah, somehow, managed to stay behind. He chose to remain and minister to those who were attempting to rebuild their lives after the decimation of their nation.

Up to this point, most of Jeremiah’s work as a prophet had been to preach judgment on the people and the kings of Judah and Israel. He was harsh but fair.

After the fall of Jerusalem and the exile, he changed his message to emphasize a message of hope in what appeared to be hopeless.

Our reading today is one of these oracles of hope. It is found in a section of his writings that scholars commonly call the **Book of Consolation**.

In our reading, we hear Jeremiah tell of God’s promise of a new covenant, a covenant to be made with the lost kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Remember, both Israel and Judah had fallen to foreign nations. The people felt abandoned by their God, the God who brought their ancestors to this place and promised to watch over them. The people feel that God has “tricked” them.

Jeremiah preaches to the people that God has not abandoned his people and that God is still with them. This new covenant that God intends will be different. It won’t be like the covenant that God made with the Israelites so many generations earlier when they were in the wilderness, when their land was only a promise.

In our reading, God reminds the Jews of how he delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness, God offered them a covenant in the form of the Law and Commandments, which the people had failed to keep.

But now is the time for something new, something different. The previous covenant was external, it was written on stone tablets. This new covenant will be different. God will write it on the hearts of his people. God will place the law within them. It will become part of them.

And by doing this, God will renew the ancient covenant with Abraham—*I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

And then comes the amazing part. This new covenant, because it is now inscribed on the hearts of the people, because it will be internalized in their lives, shall mean that their knowledge of God shall be second-nature. They won’t need to teach one another about the presence of the Lord, they will just know it.

And finally, to make all of this possible, God pledges to forgive the sins of the people. And not just forgive, but forget. *I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.* They begin anew with a clean slate.

This is no trick; it is God's treat—the treat offered to us all—the treat of salvation. We don't have to beg; it is a gift.

To the Jews of Judah and Israel of the sixth century BC, a people who had lost their country, a people who viewed their loss as being a result of their sin against God, a people who had lost their God, this was the offer of a new creation, a new beginning. Jeremiah's oracle of hope is that God will forgive AND forget. It is no trick. God's promise across time is to stay with his people, even if they turn from him.

The ancient Celts chose November 1 as the start of the new year. Samhain is a term that means "end of summer." For the Celts, their new year began with winter, and winter in northern Europe is a time of darkness, of cold, of death—a time when life seems to be more trick than treat. For Christians, sin is like winter—darkness and death. But even in the dark times, the times of exile, God is with us. God even comes to us as the Christ. And as Christ, he is, as the gospel of John puts it, the light that shines in the darkness in which we live, and this darkness does not defeat him. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.* During the Reformation, the Reformers adopted as their slogan the Latin phrase, *Post Tenebras Lux*, "after darkness, light."

On this All Hallows Eve, may we be the people of light who know to embrace the treat of God's love.