



Wayfaring “Trick or Treat”

BY BILL NABERS

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

— Hebrews 12:1 NRSV

“And when the night is cloudy, there is still a light that shines on me/Shine until tomorrow, let it be/I wake up to the sound of music, Mother Mary comes to me/Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.”— Let It Be by John Lennon and Paul McCartney

The holidays you have been waiting for are almost here. Have you picked out your special outfits? Selected some special music? Maybe even got your decorations ready? The excitement really builds as we move from counting down the weeks to counting the days. That’s right, there is nothing like... Reformation Day and All Saints’ Day! Yeah!

Oh, that wasn’t what you had in mind? Perhaps you are too kind to let me know you think I am bit eccentric in my holiday choices? You were thinking I was talking about Halloween, weren’t you? Well, I say trick or treat! Why? Because all three of these events (Halloween, Reformation and All Saints’ Days) are interconnected.

Luther & Halloween

If you’re unsure about that, let me connect the dots (or events) together. Just what connection does Reformation have

with Halloween?

Well, on October 31, 1517, Dr. Martin Luther chose All Hallows’ Eve (the eve of all Saints’ Day which we call Halloween) to post his 95 Thesis—points of scholarly debate—on Frederick the Third’s castle church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther, who was a professor at a local university, specifically picked that date for two reasons.

First, he knew that All Saints’ Day was one of the most popular days in the church year; a big crowd was sure to be at Mass the next morning. Seats in the Elector of Saxony’s church were a hot commodity; turning down an invitation to “Frederick’s” castle church was considered such a major social faux pas it virtually guaranteed that all of Luther’s fellow professors would see his post. (University doors were the social media hot spots of the 16th century. Think Facebook/Twitter/Instagram, all rolled into one.)

Secondly, Luther noted that All Souls Day was a day of grace and good news for Christians. The term “good news” derives from the Greek word “evangelical” that describes God’s grace. The first and best name given to the reformers was not Lutheran but Evangelical. (The term Evangelical got co-opted and twisted by some conservative American Christians about 450 years later but it is too important to allowed be misused. Luther himself never liked the term Lutheran.)

And what is this good news? “Spirits” are not out to get us and neither is God. In John 20 when Jesus first appears after his death the disciples were afraid and with good reason. They had betrayed Jesus; they expected his spirit or ghosts to haunt them. But after Jesus showed them the marks of the crucifixion and said peace to them, they became joyful.

In 1st Peter we are told that Jesus also proclaimed this good news to the place of the dead between his death and resurrection. God’s love extended beyond this life; even the departed know God’s grace. Thus on All Saints’ Day we remember those who have died, but we also have trust in God’s victory. Both they— and we—are “All Saints”.

A message gone “16th century” viral

What a “trick or treat” 1517 turned out to be. Martin Luther was right about the audience at worship on November 1. What he did not count on was the 16th century version of his thesis going viral.

Someone took his academic document and duplicated it on the recently developed printing press. It spread across Germany, then Europe. Soon a revolution and reformation was underway that shook the medieval church, refocusing it on God’s loving grace and forgiveness as its principal values. These same values are celebrated each and every All Saints’ Day.

When you look at Reformation and All Saints, I think it is easy to see how it fits in as a part of this trilogy of celebrations. I know Halloween keeps getting bad press. Some religious groups even want to ban it. What people forget is that Halloween is a Christian tradition. Sure, there is some pagan influence in Halloween, but all Christian observances (including Christmas and Easter) have many elements that predate Christianity.

In fact, one of the strengths of the Church in the far past is that took the message of Christianity and wrapped it in existing traditions with new understandings. It has been that way ever since Peter and Paul started carrying the good news of Jesus Christ to new countries and cultures. We seem to have forgotten our very roots. Our ancient fear of ghosts and spirits of the dead can be replaced with costumes; we may laugh at our fears because we know of All Saints’ and God’s grace. Sure, Halloween has been abused by some who tried to turn it into “Hell Night” but then many features of Christianity have been abused. They, like Halloween, should be judged on their own merit.

Three holidays, three lessons

So what happens if we put Reformation, All Saints and Halloween together? We learn three vital lessons.

The first lesson is that we are freed from fears. At Halloween you get to wear masks and pretend to be someone (or thing) else. You are free (if only temporarily) from all your burdens. That might be scary, but it also is fun. Reformation frees us from fear about our worth. It is God’s grace and forgiveness that we depend on, not our personal track record. (That is why Reformation is not a hooray for “our” side but hooray for “all” God’s people.) All Saints reminds that we do not need to fear the spirits or our own future. We are free to be God’s people now.

The second lesson is that there is evil in this world. The scripture message is not fairy tale. Bad things can and do

happen to good people. Security is really just an illusion that can be shattered at any moment. At Halloween we still recognize this reality. The Reformation does not shy away from it. Just try singing “A Mighty Fortress” (look up the words) and you will confront it. All Saints’ brings us face to face with our own and others’ mortality. We don’t deal in euphemisms but death and evil itself.

The third and most important lesson these three holidays teach us that although evil exists in this world, it does not have the last, most important say. God does. Evil lost the war; we are witnessing its death pangs. Because our Lord has won, All Saints’ Day is a celebration. We can laugh at evil’s claim over us. Reformation reminds us that we have access to God’s love which is far greater than evil or death.

Because of God’s love, at “Hallowe’en” we can laugh at the broken power of death and evil. No demons, ghosts or monsters are our judge or master. Who is? A loving God who races to Hell if need be with grace, love and forgiveness. In fact, all three of these holidays should remind us that although we may expect or deserve a trick, we actually get a treat.

I could keep going but I was asked write a column, not a book. So these three lessons will do: We are free from fear, we can face reality and we know God’s power. That should do it. These three holidays remind us that we don’t face life and death alone. The readings at the beginning of this column bear witness to this. We can read about it in Hebrews or pick up the same message in a famous rock anthem. Either way, the point is the same: all those touched by grace from every place and time stand with us. Paul McCartney famously turned that grace in a song when during the breakup of the Beatles he had a dream about his deceased mother, Mary. It was she who reminded him that “there will be an answer, let it be.”

So this year as these three holidays come around I encourage you participate in all three of them. Put on a costume or go to a Halloween party. Wear something red to remind yourself of the Reformation. Don’t be afraid to face your own and your neighbor’s mortality with the All Saints’ proclamation that we already have the kingdom through a gift from God. It’s all treat and no trick. Have some fun—be surrounded and supported—and rejoice! Amen.