

October 31 – Solomon’s Temple, Reformation and Halloween

So, today we’ve got Solomon’s Temple, Reformation and Halloween, all on the same day. Is it possible to weave them together? If ever there’s a day to do it, this is it, so we’re going to give it a shot.

I’m actually going to start with Halloween.

The origins of Halloween, like Christmas and Easter, is an interesting mix of Christian and pagan rituals and traditions.

Let’s start with the pagan. Samhain was an ancient Celtic festival observed from sundown on October 31 to sundown on Nov. 1. It marked the end of harvest and the dying of the earth. The lush green of summer had given away to the brown and gold of harvest, and now to the barrenness of the land as winter approached.

It was a time when death was on people’s minds. Even now, more people die in the winter than the other seasons. People are more packed into indoor spaces, so respiratory and other infectious diseases increase. In ancient times, the absence of vaccines and antibiotics made this all the worse.

The Celts believed that Samhain was a time when the boundary between this world and the world of the dead became blurred. Spirits were believed to raise from their graves and wonder the earth.

A big bonfire was lit and people gathered round. Celtic tradition is noted for thin spaces. Samhain was a thin space...a liminal space, a space where the boundaries between worlds thinned.

Two important things impacted Samhain. The first was that the Roman Empire became Christian. The second was that the Roman Empire conquered the Celtic lands in Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and northern France. As Celtic Christianity adopted some of the older pagan Celtic traditions, thin places became places where the boundary between heaven and earth was blurred, or thinned.

Then, in the 8th Century, Pope Gregory declared Nov. 1 All Saint’s Day in the Church. October 31 then became All Hallow’s Eve – the evening before all Saints. That’s the origin of the word Halloween.

By and large, Halloween has lost all religious significance in much of our culture. But there are still echoes of Samhain. There is still a vague sense of the blurring of boundaries between

worlds, even if you're more likely to see Harley Quinn, Spider Man or a dinosaur on your front step than a ghost.

OK, next let's look at Solomon and the temple. Solomon is one of my least favorite characters in the Old Testament. He gets lots of credit for his wisdom. He built a magnificent Temple and an even more magnificent palace for himself.

He made himself and Israel unbelievably wealthy. He was very good at international alliances and diplomacy and his reign was one of peace and prosperity.

But he built this Temple with forced labor and it's not clear how much Israelite peasants benefited from Israel's wealth. It seems much of that wealth primarily benefitted the Temple institution and Solomon himself.

He had 700 wives and 300 concubines mostly from other nations. These marriages were motivated, at least in part, by his desire to ally with the surrounding nations. The issue with his marriages, besides the staggering number, is that those foreign women worshipped other gods. And Solomon joined right in with them.

To make a long story short, Solomon was a mixed bag. Ultimately, his errors led to the division of the kingdom into the Northern Kingdom still called Israel and the Southern Kingdom called Judah.

I'm not really going to spend a lot of time on the Temple structure. If you're interested there's like 3 chapters of detail.

But I do want to talk a bit about the function of the Temple. The most helpful image is this one in verses 10 and 11 – a cloud filled the Temple and the glory of the Lord filled the Temple, so that the priests could not even be in that presence.

The presence of God was overwhelming.

The Temple was a place where the boundary between heaven and earth became blurry. It was a place to encounter God. Neither Solomon nor the rest of Israel believed the Temple could completely contain God...but it was a place where people could go to access God. It was a thin space.

It also remained a place of mystery...a place of blurred boundaries. The Lord said he would dwell in thick darkness...to try to take away that mystery is always a temptation we have.

In time, the Temple became a place of hypocrisy. The kings after Solomon were mostly corrupt. The people still worshipped in the Temple and thought that's all they needed to do. But it was mostly about obligation, and their worship did not shape how they lived their lives.

The Temple became no longer a place God had any interest in being – it became no longer a thin place. We'll talk a bit more about that when we get to the prophets.

For now, we'll just note that this Temple did not in fact last forever. It was destroyed by Babylon in 587 BC. And the Temple that was rebuilt after the exile became a "den of thieves" as Jesus put it. It too was destroyed.

As Christians, we believe that access to God comes through a person...Jesus Christ...and not a building. But by the Holy Spirit, the church, as in the people, is the embodiment of Jesus. Our encounters with Jesus are not limited to the church building.

But gathering as the body of Christ remains a profound way to encounter him. At its best, the church is a thin space.

So, Reformation.

By the 16th Century, the Church had become a crusted institution that focused more on wealth and lavish buildings than on life-giving encounters with Jesus.

The church had put layers and layers of obligations on Christians...special masses which cost money that went into the church's coffers...indulgences, or get out of purgatory cards...all sorts of pilgrimages and so on, all meant to insure going to heaven when you die, for a price

The church was supposed to be a thin space...a space to encounter God. Instead, the boundary between heaven and earth, between God and humans became a wall almost impossible to break through.

Martin Luther and the other reformers shook all that up. Luther said, no we are saved because of Jesus, not because of anything we do. And the Bible is our source for faith, not all these rules and obligations placed on people by the church. When we encounter Christ in the spoken gospel word and in the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, we experience the transformative presence of God.

In the word and sacraments, the boundary between physical and spiritual is blurred – in fact they become one. The boundary between God and humans becomes thin.

Part of celebrating Reformation is recognizing that the church always needs to reform. We are always tempted to once again make those boundaries solid and impregnable. We are always tempted to make a structure that can contain God...so that we can control God.

This last almost two years has been one of remarkable boundary shattering. We've had to wrestle with what it means to be the body of Christ when the word comes through Zoom...or the US postal service. We've wrestled with the question of whether or not online communion is legit. Some of us say yes, others aren't sure.

Whatever different congregations have done to keep faith alive and nurtured during the pandemic, it's been a major upheaval...a time of questioning and cracking of boundaries.

Is the time we are living in itself one of those thin places?

How can our churches learn how to be thin places...places where Christ can be encountered, when it appears that actually coming into the building isn't that important, even for many Christians?

If Jesus is our access to God, and we can encounter Jesus anywhere, what is the role of the church? How can the church facilitate that encounter or help people recognize those encounters outside the building? For that matter, how do we help people who think they are being guided by the Spirit consider the possibility that they're not?

Even before the pandemic, the church was being shaken up. Christian author Phyllis Tickle famously said that every 500 years, the church goes through some major upheaval that results in reshaping and recommitting. The last one was the Reformation 500 years ago.

If she's correct, we were due even before the pandemic. How will all that shake out?

I confess I still don't have a lot of answers.

But I continue to believe that the church – the people gathered as the church in some way or another – has a vital role. I believe that the church can still be a thin place...a place to encounter the risen Christ. And in Christ, we encounter God.