

Horrors & Haints

I'm sure it will be no surprise to any of you when I say that the Church (that's church with a capital "C," as in "the Church Universal"), the Church tends to be rather counter-cultural when it comes to the celebration of holidays. The same holiday celebrated in both Church and secular world are often quite different. Of course, since holidays or, more properly, "holy days" actually began in the Church, perhaps we should say that the culture is "counter-churchural" in its observance but that's both awkward to say and a little precious, so let's just say that the Church is counter-cultural. For example, in our broader culture, there is a great deal of buildup prior to holidays like Christmas and Easter, presumably to sell more stuff, and then "boom" it's over and nobody mentions it anymore. In the Church, on the other hand, preparatory times are all about prayer and fasting, as in Advent and Lent. But the real celebrations continue for days or even weeks later – there are twelve days of Christmas leading into the next Church feast of Epiphany and Eastertide is several weeks long before Pentecost. Somehow, the Church and culture have become reverse images of each other, which would make a great sermon for another time.

As a result, then, I feel perfectly justified in prolonging the observance of All Saints Day from this past Tuesday until today. Since high church folk call the prolonged observances of Christmas and Easter Christmastide and Eastertide, as I previously mentioned, let's call today the sixth day of Hallowstide. There's a nod to the old English naming of the night before All Saints Day as Hallowe'en as well as an homage to the deeply Christian work of popular YA author JK Rowling and her "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows."

I was also moved to pursue this idea by the lectionary readings for today, of which I'm going to reference a whopping five – but in short considerations, so don't panic. If prolonging the time in which we observe a holy day is counter-cultural, here's an interesting way in which the Church and the culture have a great deal in common. All five of these Scripture passages, including the Psalm we used for our Call to Worship, could be said to owe something to the genre of horror stories. Just as our culture is fascinated with tales of gore and ghosts, especially at this time of year, so the lectionary for today is filled with stories of horrors and haints. That's a Southern expression, by the way, roughly equivalent to the more common English word ghosts. A haint is what haunts you. We have all kinds of linguistic oddities where I come from. I discovered a few years ago, for example, that the reason both sides of my family say "booger man" instead of "bogy man" is due to the interaction of Irish-Americans and the Cherokee Nation. But I digress...

Back to horrors and haints: as I discovered with delight this resonance between the lectionary passages and the cultural emphasis on "ghoulies and ghosties / And long-leggedy beasties / And things that go bump in the night," I began to ask myself, "Well, why do we love ghost stories?" Previous reading supplied me with some ready answers and I did a little extra research as well. I already knew, for example, the literary theory that literature of horror is often prevalent in times of great societal stress as a sort of palliative – it both allows us to release our repressed fears and distracts us from the real reason for them. It's been noted that this has been especially true around the turnings of the last several centuries – "le fin de siècle" for you English majors and Francophones. We're not approaching a year ending in two or even one zeroes but many folks see in the election cycle which will finally culminate (Deo Gratia!) on Tuesday the potential end of the world as we know it. There is, safe to say, a fair amount of free-floating anxiety out there waiting to be channeled into the catharsis of a good ghost story.

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There is also the theory that ghost stories and other tales of mayhem, particularly when told to children, help to prepare them for the chaos of life and the courage they will need to address it. As children hear stories of brave heroines and heroes plunged into supernatural danger, they learn from those stories real strategies for overcoming fear and triumphing over threats. One of my favorite current authors is Neil Gaiman, who writes everything from spooky children's stories such as "Coraline" to graphic novels such as "The Sandman" to award-winning novels like "American Gods," "Anansi Boys," "Stardust," and "The Ocean at the End of the Lane" to scripts for science-fiction favorites "Babylon 5" and "Doctor Who." Here's part of an essay he wrote on why we love ghost stories: "Why tell ghost stories? Why read them or listen to them? Why take such pleasure in tales that have no purpose but, comfortably, to scare? I don't know. Not really. It goes way back. We have ghost stories from ancient Egypt, after all, ghost stories in the Bible, classical ghost stories from Rome (along with werewolves, cases of demonic possession and, of course, over and over, witches). We have been telling each other tales of otherness, of life beyond the grave, for a long time; stories that prickle the flesh and make the shadows deeper and, most important, remind us that we live, and that there is something special, something unique and remarkable about the state of being alive.

"Fear is a wonderful thing, in small doses. You ride the ghost train into the darkness, knowing that eventually the doors will open and you will step out into the daylight once again. It's always reassuring to know that you're still here, still safe. That nothing strange has happened, not really. It's good to be a child again, for a little while, and to fear — not governments, not regulations, not infidelities or accountants or distant wars, but ghosts and such things that don't exist, and even if they do, can do nothing to hurt us... In order for stories to work — for kids *and* for adults — they should scare. And you should triumph. There's no point in triumphing over evil if the evil isn't scary."

Into Gaiman's lovely prose, I read the ultimate lesson of scary stories. It's hope. Triumph over evil is the ultimate story of hope.

So with that rather extended background, let's take a quick look at our lectionary stories and see how they fit into these ideas about literary terror. We'll begin with a story that I think is all about that "fin de siècle" anxiety and distraction. In Luke's story about Jesus today, his antagonists are, for once, not the Pharisees but the Sadducees, the group that was their primary rival for religious influence among first century Jews. The Sadducees supported the status quo; they were, for the most part, members of the families and friends of the well-to-do Temple priests, part of the remnants of the power structure left behind by the defeated priest-kings of the Maccabean era. They were the "strict constructionists" of their time, allowing no scriptures or interpretations to hold sway above the original five books of Moses, the Torah. They had no truck with the new-fangled idea of bodily resurrection, preached by the Pharisees and by Jesus. In fact, that has given one of the best mnemonics I've ever heard for remembering one of the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Brian McGowan, an Anglican priest in Australia, tells the story of trying to explain to a class of 9 year-olds that the Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection. Said one young wit, "Fr. Brian, that's why they were Sadd-u-cee."

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But if they were sad or anxious at the prospect of their time of power, their cycle, coming to an end, they certainly weren't going to show it to Jesus that day. They had distracted themselves with the notion that they were going to make him look foolish by drawing out the concept of freshly re-embodied spirits to its absurd end: a woman with seven husbands. But Jesus refuses to play along. He tells the Sadducees that they have missed the whole point of the resurrection scenario. Jesus says, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage." The concept of resurrection overturns the Sadducees belief that the only immortality available to humans is through their offspring and subsequent generations. But if, as Jesus reminds them, all believers in God, from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob to their present, if all of these are still alive to God, then their immortality relies on God and not on human memory and procreation. And, if marriage, as the Sadducees believed, is all about procreation, then there is no longer any need for it. Resurrection equals no procreation equals no marriage, fanciful ghost stories notwithstanding. The faithful ones' relationships with God are their hope, not their children and grandchildren.

That message of hope in the face of horror winds its way through the rest of our passages this morning. You've already heard Paul's apocalyptic passage in his second letter to the Christians in Thessalonica. "Don't worry," he seems to say, "the really bad stuff hasn't happened yet. And even when it does, when the lawless one comes, God will still be in control. So, don't worry. Our hope is in the God who triumphs." Paul's message is nothing new. It's in the apocalyptic passages in the prophetic books of Daniel and Zechariah. It's even in the Psalms. Look again at our call to worship. The Psalmist is terrified; he imagines himself trapped in a world of horrors. His enemies are ready to carry out untold destruction – they are like lions crouching to spring on him. "Protect me like the apple of your eye," the poet begs God. "Stretch out your eagle's wings and keep me safe!" Even through the panic of the lyrics, we hear the hope, indeed the faith, that God will save and preserve the life of God's servant.

This same theme of faith in God in the midst of horrific suffering is included in two other readings from the Old Testament suggested for this morning. The first comes from the Book of Job – now, there's a character who knew about being caught in a nightmare of terror. Job loses his wealth, his health, and all of his children. His friends gather around him and, after comforting him with their silence, begin to say the unhelpful things that are so often said after tragedy: "You've got to have more faith," "God always has a plan," and so forth. Job finally lifts his voice in protest: "O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another." Despite everything that has happened to him, Job's faith in God's faithfulness is unquenchable. He doesn't understand why he has been made to suffer but he still relies on God for his ultimate blessing.

The last of the five passages to which we'll turn this morning is a doozy. The Books of the Maccabees, there are four of them, are among those we Protestants call "the Apocrypha" and our Catholic and Orthodox sisters and brothers refer to as "Deuterocanonical." For those of you who are unfamiliar with this set of scriptures, it suffices to say that no group of Christians give them

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the same weight as the rest of our Old and New Testaments but that they are often useful in filling in historical gaps and tracing the development of theology between the Post-Exilic era and that of Jesus and his contemporaries. 2nd Maccabees is largely concerned with the story of the domination of the Promised Land by the political descendants of Alexander the Great, including the Seleucid Empire based in Syria, Israel's ancient enemy. Ultimately, a rebellion erupts, led by the Maccabees of the title, but our story takes place under the Syrian domination. The practice of Judaism has been suppressed and those who dare to conduct the rites of their religion or to ignore the state-mandated worship are arrested, tortured, and executed. Chapter seven tells the story of a widowed mother with seven sons, all of whom are tortured in the most gruesome ways and killed. Read it sometime – if a movie was ever made, it would have to be rated “R” for gore. But as the eight martyrs are killed, one by one, they each express their faith that God will reward them for their faithfulness and punish their killers. The fourth brother to be killed, for example, says to the Syrian tyrant, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” It's stirring stuff. And, according to 2nd Maccabees, the tale of the widow with seven sons got out and led directly to the revolt of Judas Maccabeus and his followers, who won Israel's only short-lived independence from the time of the Babylonian Exile until the 1948 establishment of the modern state. In the face of horror, their hope was in God.

And then, there's the horror story that wasn't. It contains a peculiar metaphor that gave rise centuries ago to the charge that there was a new religious sect that practiced cannibalism. Their leader, it was said, had directed his followers to eat his flesh and drink his blood. He'd been put to death as a criminal, tortured and executed in a way that all civilized people found quite horrific. But, the story went, he wouldn't stay dead. He was seen alive, the scars of his execution still on him. He ate and drank but he could also pass through locked doors and was said to have finally ascended into the clouds, never to be seen again. We know that it's no horror story; it's our ultimate story of hope. We celebrate the astonishing resurrection of Jesus on this first day of the week as we do every week and, as is our tradition, on this first Sunday of the month, we hear again his words: “This is my body that is broken for you... this cup is the new covenant in my blood... Do this in remembrance of me.” From the horror of a good man cut down, the very best of men killed in the worst possible way, we move to the realization of the ultimate hope of creation – that God, loving all things, forgiving all things, redeeming all things, promises a like resurrection for us. It is our protection against all horror. It is our hope. Thanks be to God.