

THE MONSTER BASH

Sermon, October 30, 2011

Texts: Matthew 23:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17

For the last few weeks it seems those who watch TV have been subjected to reruns of every monster movie ever made: zombies, vampires, guys in hockey masks, spooks with really long fingernails. Monsters in all shapes and sizes have been the flavor of the month in October, because tomorrow is Halloween. It's easy to forget, but Halloween is actually a holiday with rich religious origins. The "Hallow" in Halloween is the same word we use in the Lord's Prayer, "hallowed be Thy Name." *Hallowe'en* was intended to be an evening to be kept holy, hallowed, set apart in preparation for the observance of All Saints Day. In that sense, it was much like Christmas Eve, a special evening set apart in preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Otherwise known as All Saints Eve, Halloween is the evening before All Saints' Day, the day on the liturgical calendar we commemorate the saints who have gone on before, as well as commemorate and remember and call to mind the grand hope spoken of in the lectionary Epistle reading from Revelation ... that all who belong to Jesus Christ share in the grand communion of saints, and our destiny is that one day we will be in that grand eternal Assembly having our tears wiped away by God Himself. And when God wipes away tears, that will mean the end of tears ... all those things which cause tears of pain, grief and sadness in this life will be no more. But for whatever reasons, the ghosts, witches and monsters have secured center stage, rather than the dearly departed saints and our grand eschatological hope. Now, I'm not here to wring my hands and lament, "Ain't it awful?" and/or to bash the monsters of Halloween ... I admit some of that was in my original intent for this sermon, but ended up on the editing room floor (*one of those problems that occurs from time to time when the bulletin with the sermon title has a Wednesday deadline, but the sermon isn't finished until much later in the week!*) In the end, though, in keeping with my sermon a few weeks ago, I opted to focus on what is good and right and positive ... so, with Protestants world wide, I want to celebrate Reformation Day, which coincides with All Hallows Eve, the day before All Saints Day.

On Reformation Day, we commemorate what happened four hundred and ninety four years ago on Oct 31, 1517, when an Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther posted ninety-five theses, his ninety-five issues of concerns, on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg (*if you travel to Wittenberg in the former East Germany, you can see these 95 theses emblazoned in bronze on that same church door*). At the time, these were simply the theological concerns of an unheard-of Augustinian monk. We have no historical indication Martin Luther had any idea what a religious and political upheaval he would set in motion; all he wanted to do was to get a constructive conversation started in the church. He didn't want to leave the church, he didn't want to cause a split, he didn't want to "bash monsters" in the church; he simply wanted to get a constructive conversation going in the church he so faithfully served and had taken vows to uphold.

Well, it worked! And what a conversation got started; a "conversation" that eventually went on to largely shape and change the course of Western civilization. Once when Luther was bemoaning his problems with the church hierarchy, it is reported that a friend said, "*Oh Martin, you take yourself too seriously. A hundred years from now who will even know about your troubles with the pope?*" Who will know, indeed?

You may have something in common with Martin Luther. You may think the same thing about your own efforts to do what is right, your own attempts to effect a little positive change in your workplace, your home, your neighborhood, your church ... even if it is only something as small as trying to change the tone of conversation in the room or as large as trying to change the conversation in a denomination or even a nation. There are times when you may wonder if it's worth the effort; like Luther, you may think your efforts just won't make any difference, that it all will soon be forgotten. But you don't know that! One of the great blessings of following a God Who is actively engaged in His world is that you can place your faithful efforts and work in His hands. You don't have to worry about lasting significance. That is God's job. Our job is simply to be faithful to the moment at hand. 100% of the time. I like the story about the man who was struggling to be faithful in all things; one day he prayed, "*Oh, thank you, Lord, for helping me be faithful thus far this day. You have helped me control my temper, You have helped me be patient with the children, You have helped me refrain from envying others, You have helped me be loving and gracious and kind so far today. I haven't grumbled, I haven't complained, I haven't told any white lies nor have I cheated anyone ... but in a few moments, Lord, I am going to have to get out of bed, and then I will really need Your help...*" Being faithful to the moment at hand can be a real struggle, and, though we may wonder if it has any lasting effects, it is our calling.

I told you this story ten years ago on Reformation Sunday, but it bears repeating: It was a beautiful fall day in Pennsylvania and I was walking my old black Labrador, Samson. We were on the property of a large construction company owned by a member of my former congregation in Berwick, PA. Samson heard another dog bark in the distance, and being a dog, Samson did what came naturally. He barked back. It was consistent with his character to respond; that was his "calling" as a dog. Well, as chance would have it, Samson

was standing next to a large drainage conduit, a concrete culvert, down near the stream. His bark was amplified by the natural echo chamber effect of that culvert, and it echoed back his much-amplified **WOOF!** right back at him, and boy, did he jump! Note three things: (1) Samson faithfully responded in a way consistent with his character, and (2) he was in the right place at the right time when he faithfully responded according to his character, and as a result (3) his faithful response was amplified much louder and carried much farther than he expected! The result greatly surprised him.

Well, Martin Luther also reacted in a way consistent with his character. He “barked”, he spoke up, he faithfully responded to the moment at hand. And due to a number of coinciding circumstances and simultaneous events (*such as the nearly simultaneous invention of Gutenberg's printing press which spread Luther's words far and wide*), Luther's bark carried louder and farther than I'm sure he ever could have imagined! He was faithful to the moment at hand, he consistently and faithfully responded to the situation he faced, his faithfulness was carried and amplified by a divine “drainage culvert,” and his faithful response to the moment at hand reverberated throughout the western world and reverberates still to this day!

You just never know how your faithfulness to the moment at hand will reverberate. The result may surprise you. It matters what you do. Our faithfulness in matters large and small can and does matter.

I'd like to tell two (true) “pastor stories” which I think convey this point well: The first is a story Pastor William Trice of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, tells on himself about how a new faculty member from the nearby Louisiana State University started visiting his church. This professor was a man with an international reputation in academia, so Dr. Trice started pulling out some of his best doctrinal sermons, painstakingly presenting them in a superb manner week after week in the hope of winning over this choice church prospect. After about a month of this profound preaching, the professor did finally present himself for church membership and came to the new member's class. After becoming better acquainted, Pastor Trice finally asked, “What made you want to unite with our church?” Thinking the professor would respond by saying something complimentary about his fine preaching, Pastor Trice was a little humbled by the professor's response. He said, “There was a sweet elderly lady in the back row of the church who made me feel so much at home by telling me how much she missed me when I wasn't there. That's why I made this church my home.” That little lady's faithfulness in what would seem to be a relatively small matter apparently carried more influence with this particular professor than the hours and years of study and labor put into this pastor's best preaching! Our faithfulness to the moment at hand in matters small and large can and does make a difference.

The second pastor story comes from Presbyterian pastor Frank Vardeman, in Tampa, Florida. He wrote about using the word “pastoring” in something he was typing. He was using Word Perfect on his computer, and the spell check highlighted “pastoring,” saying the word “pastoring” was unknown. Word Perfect suggested the following alternatives: “Pestering” and “Posturing.” After a good laugh, wrote Vardeman, he realized how prophetic the Word Perfect program was. We can and often do spend too much of our time either pestering or posturing, rather than *performing*. I think this is Jesus' main concern with the Pharisees in our lectionary Gospel text this morning. Religious leaders who spend too much of their time pestering and posturing, rather than performing. Professing religious ideologues who major on too many minors and somehow miss doing the things that are really important.

There is so much that could be said about this Gospel passage that time won't allow, but hypocrisy is on display here. Now, some of us can use other people's hypocrisy as an excuse for our own lack of commitment and/or action, but I like how someone put it, “*If a hypocrite is standing between you and God, it just means the hypocrite is closer to God than you are.*” At least the “hypocrite” is trying! In fact, there's a sense in which we are all hypocritical; none of us fully live up to our own ideals, let alone the high ideals of the God we profess to serve, but that's almost another sermon. In historical fact, most Pharisees tried really hard to be good people, and for the most part, they succeeded. One of the major stumbling blocks in Jewish-Christian relations over the centuries has been the perceived Christian caricature of the Pharisees. To many Jews, the Pharisees were heroes; they were seen as reformers who saved and preserved the Jewish faith from corruption and even extinction during times of great upheaval. Yes, the Pharisees were human beings with many faults, but there was much more that was positive about them than negative.

But the main targets of Jesus' invective were that small number of hypocritical (*and hyper critical!*) Pharisees who kept coming after Him, trying to discredit Him, and who spent too much of their time pestering and posturing, rather than performing. To these AND to all within earshot, Jesus says, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

In short, as Martin Luther, Pastor Trice, Pastor Vardeman and our Lord Jesus Christ would attest, what matters is *service* ... faithful, consistent, service. Faithfulness to the moment at hand.