

A NEW BEGINNING

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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Halloween is a festival of boundaries — between the growing season and the barren season, between the old year and the new year, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. It's a celebration of the one night each year when both the ancient Celtic tradition and the contemporary pagan tradition view these boundaries as porous and permeable. Following their lead, Halloween invites us to reflect on past experiences that have brought sorrow and loss, but it also invites us to open our hearts to present experiences that can bring comfort and invite us to grow.

Halloween, called Samhain by the Celts and later All Hallows Eve, or Halloween, by the Christian Church, had its origins in a harvest festival, which the ancient Celts celebrated when herds returned from pasture and homes were prepared for winter. The festival coincided with the Celtic celebration of the new year on November 1. The Celts believed the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead became more permeable on the night before the new year began. It was the time when the souls of those who had died would return to visit their homes. The word “haunt,” by the way, originally meant “to visit often.”

Edgar Allen Poe's poem titled “The Raven” is perhaps the most famous tale of Halloween haunting ever told. It describes the midnight visit of a raven to the door of the chamber — the room — where the poet sits alone, reading a book late into the night. Because ravens are scavenger birds, they symbolize death. In this case, the beloved Lenore has died, and her death calls forth the raven, and her absence gives the poem its motive force.

But death isn't the main point of the poem. The question that the suffering poet eventually poses to the raven is whether the pain of Lenore's absence can be soothed in some way. The poet addresses the raven:

*“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!--prophet still, if bird or devil!--
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted--
On this home by Horror haunted--tell me truly, I implore--
Is there--is there balm in Gilead?--tell me--tell me, I implore!”*

Despite Poe's tendency to overwrite, it's clear that Lenore's loss looms large in the silent emptiness of the poet's home late at night. More than anything else, he wants his

heartache to be healed and his longing to be satisfied. He seeks a soothing balm, a calming comfort — either from Gilead or from somewhere else.

Gilead, a town in the ancient Middle East, appears several times in the Hebrew Bible. Rich in spices and aromatic gums from which soothing ointments were made, Gilead's location in the mountains also made it a place of refuge in times of danger and conflict. Over time, Gilead came to symbolize relief and comfort, a place of refuge and healing.

One of the best-known African-American spirituals reflects this meaning of Gilead:

*There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.*

The song answers the poet's question. Yes, there is a balm in Gilead. It can help make wounded hearts whole. It can also heal people who are sin-sick — no matter whether they are weary of sinning or weary of being sinned against. In either case, there is a balm available. For Christians, of course, the balm comes through the ministry of Jesus.

Marilynne Robinson's novel titled *Gilead*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2005, broadens the meaning of Gilead considerably. The novel tells the story of a preacher named John Ames, who serves a small congregation in a town in Iowa named Gilead. Ames is dying of heart disease, which prompts him to write a series of letters to his young son — letters that reflect on Ames's faith, which is profound, but also on his doubts, which are also profound. One of his deepest struggles, which forms a primary theme of the book, comes into view as he describes the sorrow and loneliness that followed the death of his first wife and their infant son decades before.

After numerous ruminations on the topic, Ames concludes that the sorrows we suffer in life will never completely fade away. At one point in the novel, Ames reflects on the relief morning might bring after a night of suffering, or perhaps the relief heaven might bring after a lifetime of suffering. He says:

Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think, all that fear and all that grief were about nothing. But that cannot be true. I can't believe we will forget our sorrows altogether. That would mean forgetting that we had lived, humanly speaking. Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life.

Sorrow seems to be a great part of the substance of human life. Robinson's words are characteristically well-chosen here. She doesn't only say that sorrow is a great part of human life, which it often is; she says that sorrow is a great part of the substance of human life. It's a significant part of the stuff of which we as individuals are constituted. It's also what makes a healing balm that can soothe our sorrow so essential, so necessary.

My own sense is that many of us now need a balm to soothe our sorrows and lighten our despair. I know that some of you have experienced losses like those described in the poem and the novel — the death of a spouse or parent, even the death of a child. Such losses loom so large and resonate so deeply that we may at times feel overwhelmed by the absence of our loved ones, perhaps even haunted by what might have been had they not died. Or, perhaps more poignantly, death makes profound absences permanent: things that never were can never, ever be.

Other losses regularly invade the normal rhythms of our daily lives: the loss of a job, the end of an intimate relationship, the alienation of a longtime friend, or the decline of a physical capability. But sorrow and despair also come from other sources. One is the pain we feel for victims of natural disasters and victims of human disasters, of which there have been a great many in recent weeks. Another is the increasingly narrow focus of our president and his enablers on ensuring that the well-off become even better off, while also ensuring that everyone else gets left increasingly far behind. In some of these situations, despair is the residue that's left when we exhausted our capacity for outrage.

No matter how varied the sources, life presents us with no end of troubles. It's a great part of the substance of human life. But sorrow and despair do not have the final word. There is a balm in Gilead. As the pagan priestess Starhawk, who wrote the responsive reading we read together earlier in the service, said in an essay about Halloween, "Remember the deeper meaning of the holiday: that death is no barrier to love, and every ending brings a new beginning."

This is certainly true for John Ames. He eventually marries again and has another child. Throughout the course of Robinson's novel, as Ames continues to reflect on the meaning of his profound loss, it becomes apparent that his faith has been crucial in helping soothe the sorrow — not by taking it away, but by somehow making it bearable. For Ames, as it turns out, there is indeed a balm in the little town of Gilead. He feels it when he opens his heart to the wonder and beauty of life. His despair about what's past may endure, but his delight in what's present soothes his pain. Every ending brings a new beginning.

In one letter, Ames describes a scene that takes place early one morning, when he observes a young couple walking together. He says, writing to his son:

The sun had come up brilliantly after a heavy rain, and the trees were glistening and very wet. On some impulse, plain exuberance, I suppose, the

fellow jumped up and caught hold of a branch, and a storm of luminous water came pouring down on the two of them, and they laughed and took off running, the girl sweeping water off her hair and her dress as if she were a little bit disgusted, but she wasn't. It was a beautiful thing to see, like something from a myth. I don't know why I thought of that now, except perhaps because it is easy to believe in such moments that water was made primarily for blessing, and only secondarily for growing vegetables or doing the wash. I wish I had paid more attention to it. My list of regrets may seem unusual, but who can know that they are, really. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it.

On these terms, the problem with being haunted by the past is that you miss the blessing of the present. This is an interesting planet. It deserves all the attention you can give it. And you can't give it to your full attention if you are constantly being haunted by what's past.

Like John Ames, you and I are also bolstered by our faith, even in the face of our most searing disappointments and our most persistent losses. We remind ourselves that life is good, that goodness will abide, that love will endure. Even when confronted by all that is past, no matter how distressing, we insist on opening our hearts to what's possible, no matter how elusive.

In its original setting, Halloween marked a boundary — between the bounty of the harvest season and the yet-unknown rigors of the winter season, between the well-marked ways of the year that had passed and the trackless ways of the year yet to come, between the love that had been lost and the love that still remained. At its best, Halloween marks the moment when we open our hearts to the present, emboldened by our faith in what lies beyond the boundary erected by sorrow. It signifies our courage to choose life over loss and growth over despair, even in the face of inevitable death.

My suggestion this Halloween is that you dress up as yourself — your beautiful, brilliant, exuberant self. You are made up of all you have experienced in the past, including your deepest losses and your most profound sorrows. But the sun comes up even more brilliantly after a heavy rain, and its light invites you to notice what is wonderful about this most amazing day. Yours is an interesting life. It deserves all the attention you can give it. Today is a new beginning.