

## A WAITING BOUNTY

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
October 30, 2016

### Reading:

“Samhain (The Celtic Halloween)”  
by Annie Finch (from *Eve*, Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1997)

In the season leaves should love,  
since it gives them leave to move  
through the wind, towards the ground  
they were watching while they hung,  
legend says there is a seam  
stitching darkness like a name.  
Now when dying grasses veil  
earth from the sky in one last pale  
wave, as autumn dies to bring  
winter back, and then the spring,  
we who die ourselves can peel  
back another kind of veil  
that hangs among us like thick smoke.  
Tonight at last I feel it shake.  
I feel the nights stretching away  
thousands long behind the days  
till they reach the darkness where  
all of me is ancestor.  
I move my hand and feel a touch  
move with me, and when I brush  
my own mind across another,  
I am with my mother's mother.  
Sure as footsteps in my waiting  
self, I find her, and she brings  
arms that carry answers for me,  
intimate, a waiting bounty.  
“Carry me.” She leaves this trail  
through a shudder of the veil,  
and leaves, like amber where she stays,  
a gift for her perpetual gaze.

## **Sermon:**

About a week ago, *USA Today* published a survey of more than 40,000 Americans asking about their favorite Halloween candy. Sadly, candy corn claimed top honors in more states than any other candy. Wyoming, Tennessee, Texas, Oregon, and South Carolina all picked candy corn as their favorite.

Candy corn. You've got to be kidding. They probably also like those ghastly giant orange marshmallow peanuts. It certainly says something about Wyoming, Tennessee, Texas, and South Carolina. Oregon, what are you thinking?

In case you haven't yet done your Halloween shopping, the confection that received the most total votes across the country is Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. Apparently, a plurality of people prefers peanut butter.

As you might guess, people in New Jersey and New York do not prefer candies that assault you with sweetness. The favorite Halloween candy of people in New Jersey is Sour Patch Kids. And the favorite in New York is Sweet Tarts. In candy, as in everything else, people here live on the boundary between things that make life sweet and those that make it tart or sour.

If you find that you have soured on Halloween because of its obsession with sickening candy, ghoulish costumes, and all that is macabre, as I mostly have, then this sermon is for you. Like many holidays, Halloween has roots in experiences you can't buy in a candy shop or costume store.

As New York and New Jersey's favorite Halloween candies suggest, Halloween is a festival of boundaries — between the growing season and the winter, 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 into experiences that can bring anxiety and even fear, but they can also bring comfort and call us to growth.

Halloween, called Samhain by the Celts and later All Hallows Eve, or Halloween, by the 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."

In one of the most famous tales of Halloween haunting ever told, Edgar Allen Poe begins:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore--*

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
"Tis some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door--  
Only this and nothing more."*

*Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow;--vainly I had sought to borrow  
From my books surcease of sorrow--sorrow for the lost Lenore--  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore--  
Nameless here for evermore.*

*And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain  
Thrilled me--filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;  
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating  
"Tis some visiter entreating entrance at my chamber door--  
Some late visiter entreating entrance at my chamber door;--  
This it is and nothing more.*

As Poe begins, we stand at the boundary: between day and night, between what is remembered and what is forgotten, between love and loss, between what lives within the chamber and what lies beyond. The boundary is a place of anxiety, even fear, but also fascination. After all, what might happen if the chamber door opens? The poet grapples with conflicting emotions, saying, "And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain / Thrilled me — filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before." It's only this, the poet says, as if trying to convince himself that all will be well — only this, and nothing more.

But everyone knows there will be more, especially when we're at the mercy of Edgar Allan Poe, who was a heavy-handed poet, and not a very good one. Indeed, the critic Allan Bloom says, "Poe is a bad poet, a poor critic, and a dreadful prose stylist in his celebrated tales." But, Bloom goes on to say, "Poe is also inescapable. No other American writer — Whitman, Emerson, Mark Twain, Faulkner — is so widely read, both domestically and abroad."

Why does Poe remain hugely popular? The reason, according to Bloom, is that "Poe dreamed universal nightmares, and still frightens children. To dream everyone's nightmare has to be genius, which cannot be denied Poe."

In my own view, Bloom is 100% half right. It's true that Poe's poetry is the stuff of nightmares. In this poem, the nightmare is evoked by the midnight appearance of a raven, which Poe describes as a "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore" that persists in croaking a single word: "Nevermore."

Ravens are scavenger birds that eat the flesh of other creatures that have died. Not only does the raven therefore symbolize death, death is the raven's very sustenance. In this case, the beloved Lenore has died, and it is her death that calls forth the raven and her absence that gives the poem its motive force.

But death is not the end toward which the poem drives. The question posed by the suffering poet to the raven is whether the pain of Lenore's absence can eventually be soothed in some way.

*"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!"*

If Poe had been a better poet, he would've figured out how to end this stanza without having the Raven quoth, "Nevermore." The suffering poet wants something more: his fear to be relieved, his heartache to be healed, and his longing to be satisfied. He seeks a soothing balm, from Gilead or from somewhere else.

Gilead, a town in the ancient Middle East, appears several times in the Hebrew Bible. A town rich in spices and aromatic gums from which soothing ointments were made, it was also a place of refuge. Over time, Gilead came to symbolize a place of healing and wholeness, a source of comfort and hope.

As the African-American spiritual puts it:

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

There is a balm, the song says, but it's not here. It's in Gilead. If there is a balm for the suffering poet, it lies beyond the chamber door. It lies beyond the boundary of what is comfortable, and known, and safe. And unless he risks opening the door, he will never find what he seeks.

In its original setting, Halloween marks the 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 has passed and the trackless ways of the year yet to come, between the love that's been lost and the love that still remains. At its best, Halloween marks the moment when we open the door and venture forth, emboldened by our faith in what lies beyond the boundary erected by fear. It signifies our courage to choose life over death and growth over decay.

In our reading this morning, the contemporary American poet Annie Finch describes the boundary between what we have and what we seek by invoking a religious metaphor. In her poem titled “Samhain (The Celtic Halloween)” she writes:

*Now when dying grasses veil  
earth from the sky in one last pale  
wave, as autumn dies to bring  
winter back, and then the spring,  
we who die ourselves can peel  
back another kind of veil  
that hangs among us like thick smoke.*

Even as each season in turn peels back the veil over a season yet to come, the poet says, we who are mortal can peel back another kind of veil. In so doing, we can see things in a way we have never seen them before. We can experience things in a way we have never experienced them before. But we need access to what lies on the other side.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the inner sanctuary of the temple where the ancient people of Israel worshipped was called the Holy of Holies. This inner sanctuary was where the presence of God dwelt. No one could enter the Holy of Holies except the high priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. The people were separated from the presence of God by a heavy veil, which Jewish tradition says was four inches thick.

In one of the early Christian gospel accounts, the followers of Jesus attempt to explain that Jesus gave believers direct access to the presence of God. At the very moment when Jesus died, the Gospel of Matthew says, “The veil of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.” With the veil ripped apart in this way, the Gospel claims, people could have direct and personal access to the presence of God.

As Annie Finch suggests, we who are mortal can peel back other kinds of veils as well. And one of those veils separates the living from the dead — separates us from loved ones who have gone before us. Finch writes, ostensibly on All Hallows Eve:

*Tonight at last I feel it shake.  
I feel the nights stretching away  
thousands long behind the days  
till they reach the darkness where  
all of me is ancestor.  
I move my hand and feel a touch  
move with me, and when I brush  
my own mind across another,  
I am with my mother's mother.*

*Sure as footsteps in my waiting  
self, I find her, and she brings  
arms that carry answers for me,  
intimate, a waiting bounty.*

The presence in spirit of those who have crossed the great boundary between life and death before us can give us comfort and strength. Because they have crossed the great boundary, we can find courage to cross lesser ones. We can open ourselves to experiences that may bring trepidation, but can also bring new answers and new discoveries — a bounty waiting for us.

Whether you eat lots of candy this Halloween, or little, or none, remember that Halloween is an invitation to open the chambers of your heart to whatever wonders lie beyond. But here's the challenge, which Halloween amply portrays: you never know what lies beyond your chamber door. Life is full of risks. People can be unkind, even abusive at times. Things may go well, but they may also go badly. The memories of times past may continue to haunt the present, recalling experiences of love that's been lost or pain that yet remains.

But don't miss out on life's sweetness for fear of what might go sour. Open the chamber door of your heart. Move beyond your qualms. Take in all the sweetness you can. Give out all the love you can. Beyond the boundary, you will almost always find somewhere a waiting bounty.