

The Owl

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 31, 2021

On Thursday night I heard the hooo-hooo of an owl outside the window at the parsonage. I don't remember hearing an owl here before, and it got me to thinking about them.

Since owls are nocturnal, some see the owl's yellow eyes as a sign that the sun lives through the owl at night, even as it descends in a quick and precise silence to scoop up unsuspecting prey. In that way, owls bring both day and night, life and death, as they call out hooo-hooo into the unseen. The mythology of the owl includes guiding the dead to the afterlife. Life and death, sun and dark, together. That is the owl.

Now is the time for owls. If you go to a Halloween haunted house, you are likely to see an owl in the décor somewhere, along with the skeletons, bats, and various reminders of our mortality. In fact, the word Halloween is the abbreviated version of All Hallows Eve, the night before All Saints Day, when churches hold vigils to prepare for the feast day and frequently light candles on the graves of the dead. In its original form, All Saints Day honored the canonized saints and martyrs of the church, whether known or unknown. The day after All Saints is All Souls Day, which expanded the remembrance to all those who have died.

The Church first celebrated those two days plus the evening before them in May, and the Eastern churches still keep that general timeframe, celebrating the week after Passover. In the 8th century, the Western church moved the date for All Saints from May 13 to November 1. And when we Protestants came along in the 1600s and pointed out that the New Testament referred to all believers as "saints," All Saints and All Souls were blended into one celebration for us.

All Hallows Eve was a time to pray for the souls of those who had died, and, for those who believed in purgatory, a time that those prayers could move a person's loved ones from there into heavenly bliss. That was seen as a dangerous passage, so support was given by baking soul cakes, saying prayers, and presenting frightening faces to scare away evil spirits, who might try to capture a soul making the perilous passage from purgatory to heaven. That was the first role of Jack o'lanterns, which began as hollowed out turnips with candles in them. And eventually that became the role of scary costumes as well. They were not meant to BE evil spirits, but to scare away evil spirits who might target vulnerable souls.

It might have been easier to just rely on the dependable ferry service of the owls, to carry any souls in need of protection.

And while all of that is very staid and somber, here in the dying of the year where the weather turns bleak and cold, in sunnier southern climates, these three days took on a sunnier form. We can see it in the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico and related cultures, which spans the two days of All Saints and All Souls.

Those celebrating the Day of the Dead typically make altars at the graves of their loved ones, decorating them with flowers, a person's favorite foods and beverages, and a mix of colorful skulls, skeletons and, yes, owls. Candy skulls are given to both the living and the dead. People wear skull masks. They write poems that poke fun at living relatives and boys dress up like old men and leap into the Dance of the Grandfathers with energy and joy.

Just as the owl's yellow eyes bring the sun into the night, the Day of the Dead celebrations bring life into death; reminding us that we are but one piece in the long chain of life. That form of remembrance teaches that, while grief and sorrow are normal in times of loss, our beloved once lived and danced, told jokes and sang, had favorite food and drink; and it is also normal to do the same in their memory.

As with many things in the church, a combination of culture, superstition, and deep truth come together as we travel through the rituals of Halloween to All Saints Day tomorrow and All Souls Day the day after that. I am content to let the culture and superstition be what it is, and to enjoy healthy forms of that fun. After all, in my spare time I help my brother write Halloween parodies of popular songs for a singing skeleton quartet.

The culture and superstitions surrounding these days have at their core the holy and deep truth that the owl's yellow eyes signify. The sun never really sets. We are the ones who move—now into the day, then into the night. Life doesn't really end; it's an eternal cycle in which we participate, flowing fluidly through the Love that lies in the center, constantly creating and nurturing it all.

Night can turn to day; sorrow can co-exist with joy; what is living is on its way to dying and what is dead is merely in the process of being born anew. As St. Paul said, at death we are merely changed from glory into glory. "This perishable body must put on imperishability; this mortal body must put on immortality."

Resurrection is the deepest truth of these days, just as it is also the deepest truth of a fall that turns to winter and then again to spring. The light that shines through the yellow eyes of an owl seems to us a fearsome predator, just as children often dress up as the grim reaper for Halloween. But that light is not meant to frighten, but to reassure us that even when death comes on swift and silent wing, those wings are ultimately used to lift us and carry us home to the light and love that is our source and our salvation.