

The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost - Year B  
October 25, 2009 - 5:30 PM  
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

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## All Hallows' Eve Sermon

Readings: 1 Samuel 28:3-25 (The Witch of Endor),  
Job 4:12-21 (Eliphaz the Temanite), Ezekiel 37:1-14 (The Valley of Dry Bones)

So what is wrong with witches? The witch of Endor (in our translation the medium, because she conjured up the spirits of the dead), this witch seems a sympathetic character if anything made the victim by Saul's deceiving her about who he was. But she does his bidding, and she even feeds him when his strength fails him. Often times these days witches seem to be sympathetic characters, and Halloween seems to get weirder and weirder every year. And I mean that in the old sense of the word, weird having to do with magic, and evil, and strange occurrences not from God. As in the weird sisters, who were witches in Shakespeare's play MacBeth.

Some of the stuff surrounding Halloween, seems like it's related to a need to excite our fear sense because we do not live with fear on a daily basis the way people in some parts of the world must. They would think it was weird, to want to be scared. So it's a sort of thrill seeking, for bored people.

And certainly the fun of dressing up, and being in a different character for a party or trick-or-treating, is a simple kind of entertainment, that many of us do not grow out of, even after we lose our home dress up box, and become adults. We like to pretend we're something we're not. Harmless stuff really.

But the stuff around witches is interesting, and I think it deserves a little closer look, because it's a phenomenon, an activity that God takes issue with.

The Witch of Endor was afraid of punishment because King Saul had made a law based on God's prohibition of witchcraft that made their practices illegal, among the people of God. The problem behind that can be seen in Saul's own actions. He went to the witch because he was afraid, and he felt like God wasn't answering his prayers. So rather than simply trust, as we all have to do when faced with God's silence, that God still loved him and was going to take care of him. He decided to take matters into his own hands, or really the hands of other people, he decided to leave behind his faith in God, and trust instead in what humans can do. He walked by fear, instead of by faith.

We all struggle with this at times in our lives, there was a time when I was struggling to figure out who I was, and what lay ahead for me, I had not reached the point of despair but neither had I had the close relationship with God, that Saul had had. I thought it would be harmless to have a friend of mine read tarot cards for me. The result gave me some insight into myself, and into what would come in my near future, but the rest of the result, the side effects if you will, were much worse than the small measure of fleeting help I received. I fell into deeper fear, about what I heard, and became more self-conscious as I reflected on what I had heard about myself. This feeling lasted for a long time, and I wished I had never played with those ungodly things.

Saul experienced the same thing, to a much greater extent, the result of his turning to the witch, to conjure up the spirit of his deceased prophet adviser, Samuel, was that Saul was filled with fear, so much so that his strength left him. The problem with witchcraft is that it seeks to provide for us, spiritual consolations and even control, that rightly only belongs in the hands of God.

God reserves this power for himself, and reassures us constantly of his love for us, but his scriptures also warn us against trying to dabble in the spiritual world, out of our misplaced need to control our own lives, and have security in ourselves. When we try to wrest control from God, we are plunged into fear, and our strength fails us, for our true strength comes from God, and God's love casts out fear.

The good thing about Halloween, is when we can dress up as these scary, or delightful things, and not be afraid, for we put our trust in God, and know that he has power over our deepest fears. That's what the Saints who we celebrate on All Saints Day, have as their consistent witness. They turned to God, even when God was silent, as he sometimes was, even in their lives and in those times, the Saints continued to turn to God, rather than seeking to fix things themselves, or with the help of those who do not worship God alone. The Saints walked by faith, not by fear. We don't need witches to seek answers for us because strength, and love, which casts out fear come from God. And we can learn from Saul's example, that we should not mess with witchcraft even if it seems in our best interests.

God always knows our best interests better than we do. So Let's follow the saints, rather than Saul and walk by faith rather than fear.