

HALLOWEEN



2 Thessalonians 1:11 "(St. Paul writes) We must always give thanks to God for you . . . because your faith is growing abundantly. . . Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring . . . so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him."

The New York Times calls this "the scary movie season," and then reviews the recent spate of horror movies and/or creepy television series premiering at this time. The good news is that

Jamie Lee Curtis may have finally killed Michael Myers, the masked slasher, who has appeared in 14 Halloween films over the last 45 years! But it's not just movies at this time of year; we also have our haunted houses, and ghostly hayrides and even frightening cornfield mazes. By tomorrow night, most of this nation's children will dress up as ghosts and goblins and other creatures that go bump in the night, and go about trick or treating from house to house. But why? What's going on here? What are we doing terrifying ourselves this way?

Well, this Tuesday, November 1st on the Church's calendar is All Saints' Day, which in old English was called 'All Hallows' Day', because the French word 'sainte' wasn't popularized in England until after the Norman invasion of 1066. Thus, tomorrow then is All Hallows' Eve, or "Halloween" for short, a time when the ancient Celts believed that the dead roamed free on the earth for a night, which was such a frightening thought that people hid from them by disguising themselves, or tried to bribe them with treats, or else put out jack-o-lanterns or other such things to scare the spirits away. But why are we so frightened of the dead, and why do we keep repeating these ancient practices and superstitions today? What is really going on here? What is our fascination with being scared? For fear is an emotion usually avoided, and yet at certain times of the year,

none more so than at this season, we seem to go out of our way to become frightened or terrified.

One psychologist suggests that such fears can provide a "jolting escape" from the ordinary. "When immersed in a scary situation, you can suspend your disbelief and live in the moment," she wrote, "And that loss of control can feel really good" and liberating at times. Perhaps our fascination with being scared at this time of year is because we know that these are 'safe' fears, because we know that it is in the end only a movie, or an amusement thrill ride, that no one really gets hurt, and so we can explore our fears, our very real fears, without any real danger. If we really wanted to be scared, I mean really scared, then we would have someone drop us off in the worst part of the big city in the middle of night and leave us there without a cell phone or money. Now THAT would be scary, but it won't be safe. And I think that we prefer the 'safe' scares of horror movies and roller coasters and haunted hayrides, because then we can carefully look at our fears, we can carefully learn about what really frightens us without any real danger. We can broaden our understanding and experience of who we really are as a people and as individuals.

A wise old priest in Seminary once told me to always pay very close attention to your fears, pay attention to what frightens you, don't turn away, for they are a clear clue to

what we as a people fear, both as individuals, and as a nation. When I was much younger, for instance, the scary movies of my childhood seemed to focus more on what might lurk out there in some dark corner of the unknown parts of the world, like King Kong in the deepest jungles of Africa, or the Creature from the Black Lagoon, or the Thing in Antarctica. Others of those scary movies focused instead on *our* dabbling with nature, on our fears of tinkering with the atom, for instance, where nuclear power led to the birth of monsters like Godzilla, or Mothra, or our fears of tinkering with modern science which led to Frankenstein or the Fly or the Terminator. The focus of our horror movies tells us something especially important about ourselves, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes without our realizing it. And our fears seemed to have changed some with the arrival of the space age, where we have opened a new frontier the depths of which we cannot even fathom, such that Martians and spacemen and finally vicious aliens have become a common threat in our movies, at least until ET. Or in this crazy world of ours, our horror movies are sometimes just filled with crazy people, with deranged killers like Michael Myers, and psychos, and serial murderers with chainsaws. Lately, I have noticed that a lot of our horror films are also focused on questions of reality; of what is real and how do we know that, and how not knowing what is real frightens us. Perhaps this all began on the holodeck of

the starship Enterprise. I think of the recent movies the Matrix or the Thirteenth Floor, but also the Truman Show or the Game, or various movies about clones or cyborgs, or any of those digitally adjusted movies, where we know that what we are seeing is not real, like West World, though it seems to be so. In this age of virtual reality, we are struggling sometimes to simply understand what is authentic, what is real and what is not, and we are oftentimes afraid of not being able to tell the difference.

There are, however, two recurring horrors that appear most often in our culture, I believe. One of those is filled with ghosts and spirits and demons wandering the earth, like in Paranormal Activities or Poltergeist or the Exorcist; ghosts coming back to haunt us, those individuals trapped between the two worlds, dead, but still living somehow, yet without form or shape, but still perceivable in some way, the demons and devils and angels that haunt our houses, and sometimes our lives, not limited within four square walls like us, but moving freely about. And until the movie Ghostbusters, we were quite sure how to get rid of them, except perhaps to free them from their cares and anxieties and release them to another world, to that spiritual realm where they seemed to properly belong.

The other principal type of classic horror movie is filled with vampires, or reconstructed men like Frankenstein, or

clones, or mummies, or zombies, things who though dead, or at least not really alive like us, have escaped the grave only to frighten us. Think of the various versions of the movie, "Night of the Living Dead," or the popular tv series of the last decade or so, "The Walking Dead." And like ghosts, again these zombies are not easily killed by us, for they are already dead in some way, yet they wander the earth, and though zombies used to awkwardly move about in a slow dreamlike state, now our movies have fast zombies that roam the earth in swarms, persistent and seemingly unstoppable, and thus more frightening to us.

The Christian theologian, C.S. Lewis, wrote that what mankind fears most is ourselves. And our classic horror films seem to justify that concern: for what are ghosts really but spirits without bodies, and what are zombies really but bodies without spirits. Each a part of us, but not complete without the other. For we humans are made up of both bodies *and* spirits, notes Lewis. We are not whole without them both; body and spirit joined together. We are not complete; we are not really alive without them both, without both we are dead somehow, yet wandering the earth without purpose or beauty because we are divided within ourselves or from ourselves. It is a frightening thought to us at some very deep psychological level, writes Lewis. So that what really scares us in those classic horror movies is the image of our broken selves.

Christians, Lewis notes, have always stressed a belief in the Resurrection of the body. It is not some formless Greek soul that departs from us at death, but our very real and recognizable selves, we say, our spirits and our bodies, together in death as they were in life. St. Paul frequently wrote of the spiritual body that we possess, which is almost an oxymoron in our modern lingo, where we tend to separate the spirit from the body. But that is contrary in some sense to the doctrine of the Incarnation. For the Resurrected Jesus had a very real, visible body, a real body that could be touched, and which bore the wounds and scars of life upon his hands and feet. For only together are we whole, writes Lewis, body and spirit joined together, and only together in such a way can we achieve holiness, and overcome our fears to be that perfection for which we were made by God, and share in that resurrected life to which we are called by God, a life in which there is no fear, no more crying, no more tears, but only life everlasting and God's eternal love. AMEN