

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 visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

This opening of Edgar Allen Poe's famed poem, *The Raven*, always gets me in the mood for Halloween. Visitors tap at our doors as the wet leaves fall outside; little ghosts and tiny witches run down sidewalks, and the front yards of our otherwise-boring neighbors become cemeteries and haunted forests for the evening. Things which we see only in myth and legend appear on our doorsteps. As we look ahead to a long, dark winter, it seems as if the dead might really walk upon the earth on a night like Halloween.

On the ancient hills of Ireland, long before the birth of the Christian Church, the Gauls celebrated the festival of Samhain near the end of October. High on the hill of Tara, the royal court would light a huge fire; on neighboring hills, fire after fire would be lit in response to this flaming beacon. Marking the division between the dark half of the year which was yet to come, and the light half of the year which had already passed, Samhain is the root of our Halloween tradition. Legend holds that, during the days of Samhain, the barrier between the world of the living and those who have passed on becomes thin, and the dead come to walk among us.

It seems appropriate, then, in this time of permeability, of Samhain and Halloween, that our gospel story so clearly focuses on the undead. Lazarus,

dead four days and stinking, is brought out from the darkness of the tomb. Wrapped as he is in cloths, halfway between death and life, I see Lazarus as a ghastly figure, closer to a mummy or a zombie than anything living. Lazarus is a corpse reanimated, rather than a man brought back to life – a prime Christian Halloween costume, right next to a beheaded John the Baptist in my book.

The real pull of the Lazarus story, however, is not the spectacle of a man who is dubiously alive; rather, it is the grief and anger of his sister, Mary. Jesus, who we are told has purposely stayed away though he knew Lazarus was dying, makes an appearance four days later. Mary, torn between her faith in Jesus and her own grief, cries out, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” The English translation really doesn’t do Mary’s reaction justice: while we hear that Mary piously knelt at Jesus’ feet, the Greek says that she threw herself onto the ground, clutching at his feet. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died!”

And so, in response to Mary’s grief, captured by his own grief, Jesus weeps, and raises his friend to walk for one last time. “Unbind him, and let him go.”

Though Mary believes that Jesus is the worker of powerful miracles, she needs to see Jesus’ power made real. She needs proof in her darkness that there is something stronger than her own grief.

Much like Mary, I believe that we need to see and feel Jesus’ power made real to us. Listening to dusty stories, praying the same prayers, speaking our

belief in the resurrection, is not always enough. So much of what we do in church is about making real those things which we understand, but cannot see: while we believe in theory in our participation in the Body of Christ, we make it real, and we touch it each week when we take part in Christ's body in Eucharist. While we believe in the power of baptism and the forgiveness of sins, we make it real each time we cross ourselves, every time we touch the water.

Halloween has a way of making real and visible our fears about death – little vampires and axe murderers and monsters walk around as if our worst fears have come alive. By coming alive, however, our fears are made more manageable – we are able to point and laugh at the spectre of death, made powerless as it shouts 'Boo' from a cheap costume.

What we make visible today, on All Saints Day, is not our fear about death, but rather our hope - our belief that we are irrevocably connected to those who we cannot touch: those who have died, and those who have not yet been born. By celebrating and making real the Christian hope connected with death, we give more power to the light, recognizing that God is in the end more powerful than death.

As we sing songs of the Saints and speak their names, we hold fast to our Episcopal tradition which teaches us that all people may join in the Communion of Saints; that all people, past and future who have in any way been holy are still connected to us through the love of God. Hear the words of Psalm 139, so appropriate for All Saints' Day:

Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

At this time of year between light and darkness, between life here and life beyond, people in the Mexican countryside bring food and candles to graveyards for Dia de los Muertos, where loved ones keep company with the dead. On the hills of Ireland, townspeople still light fires in the belief that there is light in the darkness; and we, as Christians, sing songs of saints at tea, or in lanes, saints that we have met and saints yet to come.

I now invite you to take a moment to speak aloud the names of these saints we have known, especially of those who have died:

May God keep us in eternal communion with these and all of the saints, as we seek the light which perpetually overcomes all darkness. Amen.