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October 31, 2021: Reformation Sunday

## Who Guides Us When Perplexed: Postcards from the Past

Our God, our help in ages past, Our hope for years to come—Hymn 210

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith . . . Hebrews 12:1-2

### **First Scripture Lesson: I Corinthians 15:1-8**

I wonder whether you've ever had a similar experience—a postcard from the past. Last week, I pulled a book off my bookshelf, a book I hadn't looked at in many years, and when I opened it—there it was, tucked inside, an old postcard, from my old graduate school roommate, a friend who died some years back.

It was strange to see his handwriting and read his words: I could almost hear his voice as I read them—they sounded just like him. And suddenly, as I was standing there, the years dropped away, and we were together again, or it seemed like we were together again, as if he were somehow present with me there in that moment, in some intangible way, although I have to say, at the time, it felt very tangible, more tangible than anything else.

Of course, it doesn't have to be a postcard, almost anything can do it: an old letter or birthday card, a ticket stub or graduation program, a photograph or simply the smell of an old jacket you somehow forgot to take to Goodwill. Postcards from the past.

I wonder whether the passage I'm about to read—from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians had a similar effect on them. Whether when they read it, it reminded them so much of him—what he said to them, and how he said it—that it was almost as if the years dropped away, and they were were together again in that moment.

And I wonder whether these words might have a similar effect on us—not bringing back Paul, of course, but those who taught us—who loved us—in the faith. I Corinthians chapter 15, verse 1-8, listen now for God's Word to you:

*Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.*

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*

## **Second Scripture Lesson: I Corinthians 15: 50-57**

Sometimes it's not a postcard, or something written, or even something tangible at all. It can simply be a measure of music, or a phrase, or a line of a poem that pulls us up short: "What is that? I know I've heard it somewhere before."

In those moments, we have, in the words of the English poet, William Wordsworth, "intimations of immortality"—it's as if we're in touch with or being touched by, something greater than ourselves, something beyond our everyday world, something eternal.

For me, lines from our Second Scripture Lesson provide such intimations of immortality. The 15th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians verses 50-57, Listen now for God's Word:

*What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Lo, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*

*When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:*

*"Death has been swallowed up in victory."*

*"Where, O death, is your victory?"*

*Where, O death, is your sting?"*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

### **Sermon**

You know, today's a holiday, don't you? Yes, that's right: it's Reformation Sunday: that day of the year when we celebrate our Protestant heritage, and its continuing contributions to our lives and our world.

As Mel said, it was 504 years ago, today, that Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses, protesting the corrupt practices of the pope and the church, to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, thus setting off what would become the Protestant Reformation to which Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, congregationalists, adventists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and many others, in one way or another, trace their origins.

I know that, to many people, the Reformation seems like distant—and obscure—history: a bunch of guys with long beards and funny hats, arguing endlessly, and at times vehemently, about things that no longer seem important, if they ever really were.

And that's a shame—and a real loss. Because their words, not to mention their teachings and their lives, can serve as postcards from the past for us. Some examples:

“There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice.”

“To pray for others is the most powerful and practical way in which we can express our love for them.”

“Humility is the beginning of true intelligence.”

Those postcards from John Calvin.

“For in the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of gold and silver.”

“To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

“God made man out of nothing, and as long as we are nothing, He can make something out of us.”

Those from Martin Luther.

And it's not just the words, it's the music, too. The hymn we will sing at the end of the service—*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*—and the hymn which is the theme of this year's stewardship campaign that Mel talked about—*Now Thank We All Our God*—are both classics of the Protestant Reformation—postcards from the past.

And, oh, yes, today is Halloween, too. And believe it or not, Reformation Sunday and Halloween are connected. Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door on All Hallow's Eve, that is, the day before All Hallow's Day, or All Saints Day (“hallowed” being the word for holy (as in “hallowed be thy name”) All Saints day being the day when the church honored all the saints on one day. And yes, all hallows eve is eventually shortened to “Halloween,” which through a long historical process, wending its way through Celtic Ireland, Scotland and England, to colonial America, through 19th-century harvest festivals, to mid-20th-century suburbanization, and the mass marketing of pre-packaged candy, becomes our Halloween—more or less.

But there's another common thread, besides the historical, that connects Halloween to Reformation Sunday: Halloween is a thin day.

You might remember, a few weeks back, I talked about thin places, a thin place being, in the words of essayist, Jordan Kisner, “a place where the barrier between the physical world and the spiritual world wears thin and becomes porous. Invisible things, like music or love or dead people or God, might become visible there, or if they don't become visible they become so present and tangible that it doesn't matter. Distinctions between you and not-you, real and unreal, worldly and otherworldly, fall away.”

If there are thin places then perhaps there are also thin days, and perhaps Halloween is our attempt, however clumsy and commercialized, however silly and sentimentalized, at a thin day.

I promise you: I'm not taking Halloween too seriously; mostly, it's just fun. Most of my experience with Halloween has been as a dad, ranging (as they grew up), from "Oh no! It's a scary lion!" to "OK, OK, I'll wait here at the curb while you go up to the door," to "Don't eat any more of your candy" to "Please Drive safely."

And really most of our Halloween horror movies are the cinematic equivalent of a sugar high: up and down, gasping and screaming, scared out of our wits, by the end, you're left completely spent—like a parent whose child has eaten way too much halloween candy.

But still, as a culture, we love Halloween—over the past 50 years it's gotten bigger and bigger, it's now our second biggest holiday in terms of dollars spent—and that tells us something. It tells us that we intuitively know, or at least we for one night a year we want to believe, that there is something beyond the boundaries of our world.

Even our grown-up Halloween parties—what are they but a suspension of the normally accepted boundaries of social identity?

For one night a year, you don't have to be your ordinary humdrum every day self. No, you can be a witch or Spiderman, or Cruella DeVille or Julius Caesar or a pirate or Chucky or a US president—only your imagination and the available stock at the thrift store limit you. And of course at many a grown-up Halloween party, the normal boundaries of social behavior become porous as well, with ample assistance from various spirits. People do things—dance!—in a way that they wouldn't on any other day of the year.

On Halloween, the barrier between the physical world and the spiritual world wears thin and becomes porous. Invisible things, become visible; distinctions between you and not-you, real and unreal, worldly and otherworldly, fall away. If you don't believe me, look at video of a Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico, no further argument needed: Halloween is a thin day.

Which is why we the church needs to be here.

Now if you think I'm up here to denounce Halloween as Satanic and debauched, you misunderstand me, although, I would say "please drive safely there are lots of kids out there." No I'm up here to say that one day a year—especially a day that has become as commercialized and preternaturally silly as our Halloween has become—is not sufficient to honor our intimations of immortality.

"O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us, with ever joyful hearts, and blessed peace to cheer us, and keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next."

Those were the lines Mel quoted from the hymn, *Now Thank We All Our God*, written in 1637.

And as I listened to the story of that hymn, I had no desire to romanticize those days, much less return to them. Reverend Rinker presiding over 37, sometimes 50, funerals a day, coming home to a meal of potato soup with a little onion (if he was lucky), Europe divided by religious conflict through 30 years of war—It made me want to thank God for all kinds of things: not only for food and shelter but for advances in medicine and public health, anesthesia and vaccines, public education and public order, representative government—all those things and many others, that do free us from the ills in this world.

And yet for all that, for all our advances, we seem every bit as divided in our day as Rinkert and his fellow Germans and Europeans were in theirs, and every bit as prone to hatred, war and destruction, the only difference being that the devastation we might cause will be even worse, precisely because of our advances in knowledge and technology.

And so I think the past—including all the saints who have gone before us, all the Reformers, and our Reformed tradition—has something to teach us, something to guide us when we're perplexed and to bless and cheer us on our way. For example, I think it has something to teach us about the beauty of our world, the centrality of prayer, and the importance of humility—to name only a few on any number of possible examples.

Which is why the church needs to be here.

Because if the past is with us only one day a year, and then only because we dress up as historical figures, watch legions of zombies lurch across the screen, and eat too many Reeses 'Cups, if that's the only day and the only way that we can honor our sense of being in touch with, and being touched by, something greater than ourselves, something beyond our everyday world, then we are impoverished indeed, far more impoverished than Rinkert and his 17th-century compatriots who had only potato soup to eat.

This church needs to be here: to honor our intimations of immortality, to make sense of them as part of the larger story of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, to honor them with wisdom and the teaching of wisdom, with guidance for the living of our daily lives, with a community that includes not only those alive today but all the Saints who have gone before us, to share in service to others, the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

Lo, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. Death, where is thy victory? Death where is thy sting?

When I found that postcard in the book, I did feel the presence of my old roommate—but as a friend, not as a ghost. I thought of the conversations we had late into the night, of his gifts as a teacher and a person, how his friendship affected my life for the better, simply how kind it was for him to think to send a postcard (he was spending a Fellowship Summer in Greece and sent a postcard with a picture of that famous bust of Socrates, you know the one where his legendary ugliness is so apparent—“saw this and thought of you,” he wrote) . . . And as I stood there in my office, holding that book in my hand, I felt him there as part of that great cloud of witnesses, and I was thankful to God for him, in a way and to a degree I'm sure I wasn't when I first tucked that postcard into that book so many years ago.

“Every love story is a ghost story.”—that line, more than any other, pulled the late American novelist David Foster Wallace up short; he came back to it time and time again in his writings. It's one of those lines, I think, that although it touches you, moves you deeply, it's still not easy to say exactly what it means, perhaps because it has multiple levels of meanings, perhaps because it's an intimation of immortality, maybe both.

But try this: this world, this church, our lives, our souls—they're haunted. Haunted by the love of a God, who is never fully present in any of our experiences but always there with us in every experience—every thought and every feeling, every action and every reaction that has any truth or beauty to it all, the love—the love we know, the love we have in them, is an image of, is part of, God's love for us and for the world.

We need the church, and all her saints, that great cloud of witnesses, to remind us of that and to make sense of that.

*Every love story is a ghost story.* It's not a bad postcard for Reformation Sunday or for Halloween, for that matter.

Now Thank We All Our God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.