

## **Voices from Beyond the Grave: Veterans Cheering Us On**

**Presented by Jack Heppner at Gospel Fellowship Church,  
Steinbach, MB, October 31, 2004**

### **Introduction**

Today is both the Lord's Day and Halloween. This has sparked some controversies in various communities across the land. Some have moved Halloween forward a day because they feel the two just don't belong together – worshiping the Lord in the morning and in the afternoon dressing up like ghosts, goblins or demons and hitting the streets to stock up on candy that will last until Christmas.

I don't know where you stand on this issue. I have done a lot of thinking, studying and praying about what one should say on such a double-decker day. The fact that Halloween falls on Sunday this year forces us to reflect a little more seriously than usual about how faith in God and Halloween relate or don't relate in our lives.

Many of us have struggled for years with this issue. Some of us remember what we thought of as happy, although somewhat scary fun, on Halloween. We always had a Halloween party in school when I grew up. Later, as a youth leader, I remember being invited to speak to the Morden EMMC youth group at their Halloween party. Maybe it was a time of innocence, I don't know. Everyone likes apples and jack-o-lanterns are fun to carve.

Then came the razor blades in apples and the warnings to be careful. Then bullies began stealing the bags of goodies from children. Innocent fun had become dangerous and sometimes futile. Fewer children ventured out from door to door. More recently children go to "trick or treat" in controlled areas like malls. And various Christian groups have begun putting on costume parties to offer their children an evening of fun and treats without reference to witches, ghost and goblins – an alternative Halloween party. Personally, I admit that Ruth and I have sometimes tried to become invisible on the night the ghosts and goblins come ringing our doorbell. Many of us remain confused and somewhat uncertain about how to respond to Halloween. And now on Sunday.

I will try to address this dilemma in a couple of ways. I will talk a bit about this wheel I have brought with me this morning. Then I will take you to Hebrews chapters 10 to 12 to give a biblical perspective on how those who have died still speak to us today. Following that I will briefly tell you a 2000-year story of what has happened in the church with respect to remembering our dead and how Halloween came to be connected with it. I will conclude with a suggestion or two that might give us handles and perspectives on our present situation.

## The Wheel

I keep this old metal wheel in my back yard as a reminder of my connection to the past. I found it on the abandoned farmyard where my father grew up southeast of Lowe Farm. I like to think it comes from one of my grandfather's implements. But I also keep it within sight as a constant reminder of my own mortality. In many Christian writings, the wheel is a symbol of how life and death function in our experience. The wheel of life keeps on turning as steadily as the earth rotates on its axis. Each of us, at the time of our birth, gets on board the backside of the wheel as it lifts itself off the dust. It reminds us that we are made of dust, but that we have been raised above the dust by the breath of God.



All of us alive today find ourselves on the rim of the wheel. And all through our joys and sorrows, through our pains and pleasures, through our learning and growing – this wheel keeps on turning. Sometimes we forget or deny that we are on the rim of the wheel that will eventually take us back to the dust. Some even pretend that they are perched on the hub of the wheel, convinced that they are special. They call out encouragements to others on the wheel from their safe position above the dust. But, as Henri Nouwen suggests, true ministry happens only through those who take their places on the rim of the wheel. They too will die. They too will hit the dust. They are fellow pilgrims.

So I am reminded whenever I see the wheel that my turn is coming - that sooner or later death will confront me like it will everyone else. For my brother's grandson it came violently a week ago Friday. I think this is the first murder in my family tree. It hurts like crazy but it is true. David is now buried, a victim of crime. At least that is what the police said to his parents when they came to apologize to them a day before his funeral for misleading the press. They came to say that David's name was clear – that he had been trying to protect someone who had been a witness to another crime.

And death has come through various illnesses and circumstances to members of our congregation this past year. And it will come to me too, as it will to you. I will go to meet my maker. I will lay my successes and failures before him and look forward to experiencing to its fullest measure the grace that is greater than all my sin. And when the wheel has taken my body back to the dust, I would be honored if someone would write the epitaph on my gravestone that Abel of old got on his “He died, but still speaks” (Heb. 11:4).

## The Great Cloud of Witnesses

With that thought I would like to take us to the book of Hebrews to help us gain a perspective on the role of that “great cloud of witnesses” who die before us. We find reference to the role of the departed dead in a section of Hebrews that exhorts us to continue following Christ in the way of faith, beginning in chapter 10:19. Actually the

whole book was written for those who were tempted to look for a better way than that of following Christ.

After having made his case that Christ is the better way, the writer to the Hebrews here begins to get quite personal.

*Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our faith without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Heb. 10:19-25).*

In short, because Christ has opened the way, let us draw near, let us hold fast the confession of our faith, and let us stir up one another to love and good works. Why? Why do we need to do these things? The answer comes in verses 35 and 36.

*Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.*

We need to be encouraged – that is why we draw near, hold fast and stir up.

Having set the stage or the purpose for this section, the writer to the Hebrews now launches into a listing of those who have gone before us and an explanation of how they still speak to us. None of the people mentioned were super-human. They were people like us. They had high moments and low moments in life. They failed and fell, but got up and kept following the God they knew. The first on the long list is Abel. I still don't know what exactly happened here that made his sacrifice more acceptable to God than Cain's. We will leave that in the realm of mystery for now.

But with this first person on the list comes the famous line, ***He died, but through his faith he is still speaking.*** That becomes the theme for all those who follow on the list. He died – she died – but still speaks today! That is why it would be a great honor to me, as I stated earlier, if those who come after me carve this epitaph on my tombstone: He died, but still speaks.

We don't have time to look at each person on the list specifically, but what is of interest to me is that each one on the list of the heroes of faith made it onto the list for a unique reason. Their commonality is that they all had faith, but that faith was demonstrated in many and varied ways. For Abel it was bringing a right sacrifice. For Enoch it was walking with God. For Noah it was building an ark. For Abraham it was going to a new land. For Sarah it was bearing a child in old age. For Moses it was defying civil authority.

For Rahab it was offering hospitality. For others it meant chains, imprisonment, stoning and worse.

The point is that they were not cookie-cutter believers, all coming out the same way or demonstrating their faith in the same way. Each one of them was called to a unique manifestation of faith. It is a sad day, if and when, we try to make our individual journeys of faith carbon copies of each other. There's a wideness in God's mercy, and there's a wideness in the variety of ways to express our faith. It will depend on your unique situation, your unique gifts, and your unique calling. Together we form a kaleidoscope of expression of a common faith.

In any case, in chapter 12 the writer comes directly to his main point.

***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which 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, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (12:1-2).***

Here I confess to ignorance with respect to just how those who have died before us surround us. Some have suggested from time to time that those who have gone before can see us who remain and are cheering us on, even though we can't see or hear them. This creates some theological and practical problems for me. Others have suggested that departed loved ones come to us in our dreams to encourage us. Or that they are with us in spirit as we continue our journey of faith. This too leaves some unanswered questions for me.

Still others have suggested that they surround us through the memories we have of their faithfulness. Coming from where I do, this seems the most probable to me. But the text doesn't say how. It just says, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and that we draw encouragement from them because they remained faithful to God in their own unique ways. For whatever its worth, I sometimes picture myself running a marathon in a stadium that is filled with those who have gone before – those who know what it is like to keep on keeping on - all cheering me on to keep up the race to the finish line. And yet how exactly that is true remains a mystery to me.

In any case, we can safely say it is the example of those who have gone before us that encourages us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, because in his case there is no doubt that he is watching us and cheering us on. Chapter 12:12 summarizes it this way.

***Therefore lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather healed.***

While I admit to mystery as to how it happens, the truth of these texts is clear: We can be strengthened in our journeys of faith by that great cloud of witnesses that have gone before. That is what much of the Bible is about. And I am sure that all of us can remember someone now dead who still speaks today – whose example still keeps on encouraging us. At least I can. The least we can do is remember them and draw life and strength from those memories.

### **A 2000-Year Story**

Now I would like to tell a long story in a few minutes. It is long because it begins with the New Testament church and ends at the Gospel Fellowship Church. It is the story of how the church through the ages remembered their dead and how Halloween got wrapped up in the process.

From various historical records, we know that the early church made a special point of remembering those who had been martyred for their faith. The first martyr was Stephen as recorded in Act chapter seven. But soon there were many more. At first the church tried to hold a memorial service for each martyr on the date and at the place where he or she was martyred. They felt it important to remember their faith and to draw encouragement from their example. In many regions of the world at that time it was a dangerous thing to be a Christian. It took guts to stand up and be counted. Also these memorial services reminded them of their own mortality. These special occasions helped them live their lives with their earthly end in view.

After some time, there were so many martyrs they could not keep up with separate memorial services for each one. It would mean many services each day of the year, which would be quite impractical. So a special day was announced to commemorate all those who had died for their faith. The exact date of these celebrations varied from region to region. For some it was the first Sunday after Pentecost. For others it was the first Sunday after Easter. For still other apparently it always came on May 13<sup>th</sup>. This pattern lasted for many centuries. It was kind of similar to “Remembrance Day” in our country in which we remember those who have fallen in battle. Only in this case they were remembering soldiers of the cross who had fallen in the battle for truth and faith in Christ.

As Christianity spread into northern Europe, it came into contact with various forms of paganism. Now paganism had its own set of beliefs and practices with regard to those who had departed from this world. One of its special celebrations, especially in Ireland, but in other regions as well, was the Celtic New Year, which fell on November 1. It was believed that on that one day of the year the spirits of the dead were released to roam the earth for 24 hours. While on earth they were searching for living bodies they could possess. If they were successful, they would be able to stay around and control the lives of those they possessed.

This was, of course, a fearful thought to those still living. So the customs that developed were designed to frighten these spirits away. Fires were put out in the homes to make

them cold and unwelcoming to the spirits. They dressed up in ghoulish costumes to confuse the spirits and marched through the streets banging pots and pans in an attempt to scare away the spirits. This was a fearsome day, and once it was over everyone breathed a sigh of relief, especially if they felt they had been successful in avoiding the spirits of the dead.

While many of these pagans became Christians, the fear of the spirits of the dead remained with some of them. Perhaps they thought that if they didn't support the pagan rituals maybe they would be possessed after all. So it was a confusing time. In about 835 AD the church came upon an idea to help combat the influence of these pagan fears and practices. Church leaders moved their day of commemorating the lives of saints who had died to coincide with the Pagan New Year, November 1.

It was a bold plan. By it the church hoped to replace the fearful pagan practices relating to departed loved ones with a Christian memorial service for those who had departed as martyrs. It was hoped that gradually the pagan practices would die out and be overtaken by the Christian celebrations. In England the day was known as "All Hallows Day" or "All Saints Day". So the evening before became known as All Hallow's Eve, in short "Halloween."

In hindsight, it is quite easy to see that the experiment was not totally successful. While the church openly commemorated the lives of the martyrs on November 1, the evening before that day, the evening of October 31, still held some of the fears of the pagan new year we have described earlier. Some new Christians still continued trying to scare spirits away after sunset on October 31<sup>st</sup>.

In some cases there was even a blending of these two practices into something which was neither apples nor oranges. When we lived in Bolivia in the mid-seventies, I asked a local Catholic campesino why they dressed up the graves of the dead which were marked with a cross and had big feasts on All Hallow's Eve. What he told me could just as well have come from a Celtic pagan 1500 years earlier except for a few interesting Christian twists.

He told me that beginning at sunset of October 31, the spirits of the dead were released to roam the earth. These spirits were mischievous and you never knew what they would do to you unless you pleased them. So they cleaned and decorated the graves of the dead to please the spirits. Then after preparing a large feast for the spirits they all went to hide. After a while they would return to the table, assuming that the spirits had feasted on the flavors in the food and had been satisfied. Then they would eat the leftovers. I found it almost comical at the time. But they were serious.

But before we become too critical of what the church tried to do by replacing pagan festivals with Christian ones, we should be reminded that the date for Christmas, for example, is the date of a pagan festival which the church tried to change into a Christian one by celebrating the birth of Christ on that day. And we will readily admit that our celebration of Christmas today is also tainted at least by non-Christian practices, at least some times.

During the time of the Reformation, Luther thought the whole thing was so mixed up that he decided to do away with the whole thing altogether. He argued, and quite rightly so, that the church had by that time given new and illegitimate powers to these saints who were being commemorated. They could plead one's case before God or lend one some of their extra merit before God. So, no more pagan festivals and no more commemoration of saints. Nicht mehr! No more!

But after a while he found out that his people needed a way to remember and honor their departed loved ones. That this is a need true to human nature. So he instituted TotenSontag, or Day of the Dead to be celebrated on the Sunday before Advent. It celebrated not only the martyrs but all departed loved ones in the church.

Following his example various Protestant groups began remembering their dead on this day. I remember hearing a powerful message on tape, preached by Rev. Isaac P. Friesen of Rosthern, Saskatchewan on TotenSontag. I was really moved by it. He was one of the revivalists whose preaching gave rise to the EMMC in 1936. I wish I could have heard him in person.

So what about today? The Evangelical church of today places very little emphasis on remembering those who have gone before. I think this is due partly to the effect of modernism that tells us to just look ahead. It is the same modernism that has robbed us of many of the appropriate ways of mourning we used to have. It is the modernism that can't really look death in the face – that just wants to turn and run the other way. To pretend that death is not real.

I think this is not right. Our text in the book of Hebrews exhorts us to remember those who have gone before us. To draw strength from their example. The other thing forgetting about our dead has done is that it has totally abandoned Halloween to the ghosts and goblins of pre-Christian paganism. It would be similar to saying that we will not celebrate Christ's birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> anymore, but keep up the holiday anyway even if it is not Christian.

So in this present vacuum, with the church having abandoned any serious attempt to celebrate "All Hallows Day," or "Day of the Dead" at this time of the year, there is really no Christian alternative except to invite kids to a dress up for a fun night to counter other Halloween practices. But that seems to be such a defensive posture. Anything but Halloween, we say. But that does not give positive guidance to our people.

### **Concluding Suggestions**

I am wondering if it is time for an evangelical/anabaptist alternative to Halloween as our society celebrates it. It might look quite different than the All Saints Day of the early church, or the Day of the Dead celebrations started by Luther. And it might not work any better than it did in other generations.

But would it not be helpful if we designated, say the first Sunday of November, as an annual celebration of the lives of those who have gone on before us? This would give us a logical alternative focus at this time of the year to Halloween as practiced in our society at large. It would return us to the biblical notion we have talked about today, based on Hebrews chapters ten to twelve, that it is right and proper to remember our dead and to draw strength from their example. Or must we do as one person told me emphatically when I tried to talk about the memory of a departed loved one: “Hey, we are born to die. She died and that’s that! Forget it and move on.” That left me deeply unsatisfied. Not to allow me to remember and commemorate her life, it felt like to me, would leave me cheated and unfaithful.

These are just ideas I have been thinking and praying earnestly about. Perhaps my vision will not catch on for other years, and in other churches. But for this one special Sunday I want to invite you to remember specifically those who have left us recently. To remember them, thank God for them, and draw strength from their memory where you can.

I would invite you to stand in silent prayer. I will read the names of those who have passed away from our midst in the past year or two. I will also leave a time for you to fill in other names. In the silence between the names, remember, thank God, and be strengthened.

**Janice Peters, Susan Wiebe, Kathryn Penner, Henry Goertzen, Susan Friesen.**

Now fill in the name of a loved one not from our congregation.

**Prayer:** Lord, we remember those who have gone before us. May their example strengthen and encourage us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus today.

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