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Texts: Matthew 14: 22-27; Hebrews 11 and 12 (Selected Passages)

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The Specters that Haunt Us (and the Spirits that Heal)

A specter is haunting the United States. Or perhaps, specters, along with ghouls, goblins, skeletons, vampires, monsters, homicidal killers, and the undead. This coming Thursday, Lyme Street will be crowded with kids and adults alike outfitted with costumes of all kinds. It's about the only time during the year that Lyme Street is crowded, and I have to admit, I kind of like it. I like the costumes and the play. I love the creativity. I appreciate that people are out in public, mingling and talking, something that happens far too infrequently now. And I like the ritual dimension of it all. We're a ritually starved culture, by and large, and I appreciate that Halloween has taken on a certain ritual function within our society. This Thursday, you'll likely see me wandering around Lyme Street, talking to people I haven't seen in a while. Or maybe handing out candy. Or maybe, once I've hit a saturation point, you won't see me at all, and I'll be hiding somewhere in the back of the parsonage, where the lights won't be noticed.

But I've come to wonder if there's something more to all of these specters we'll be seeing on Thursday, and that we've been seeing in yards and shops. A recent article in *The New York Times* notes that American spending around Halloween has skyrocketed over the past 20 years or so. Here are some numbers: Americans will likely spend around \$11.6 billion on Halloween this year, up from \$3.3 billion in 2005. That's something like a 300% increase in 20 years. \$3.5 billion will be spent on candy alone this year, with the rest going to decorations and costumes. Averaging it all out, it means that every single American will spend a little over \$100 this year on the holiday.

But that's not all. Another article, this one in *The Washington Post*, has noted that horror films are the fastest growing genre in Hollywood, and that it's the most reliable genre in terms of box office receipts. Over the past ten years, horror films have doubled their market share, now accounting for roughly 10% of Hollywood's revenues. It's not all schlock either. Some of the most creative and sophisticated films of the past decade have been horror movies, like *Get Out* and *The Babadook*, and *A Quiet Place*. We can wonder why comedies have not seen a similar spike in audience interest. We can wonder the same about action films, musicals, romantic comedies, westerns, adult dramas, or even superhero films. Horror, more than anything else, is firing the public imagination right now. Why?

There are other fascinating developments as well. In publishing, for example. One source has documented how, in the past 25 years, the use of words like witch, demon, vampire, and werewolf have soared in published literature. But we've also seen a spike in film scenes where iconic landmarks are pulverized.

One recent Friday night, for example, I watched a video that had spliced together all the scenes from all the films where the Eiffel Tower was destroyed. After that, I watched another one that did the same thing with the Statue of Liberty. When all the scenes are stitched together like that, you begin to wonder what strange compulsion, or what dark fantasy, is at work in all those images.

A lot of the films and novels using supernatural elements are quite good, and Halloween night promises to be great fun. But taken in the aggregate, I think these trends may be telling us

something about the fears and anxieties that we're living with. Is it an accident that the rise in popularity of Halloween, and the explosion of horror as a genre, have happened when they have, not in the 60's, or 70's, or 80's, but in the first quarter of the 21st century? It's worth absorbing what those years have brought us: 9/11, Abu Ghraib, and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The financial crisis of 2008. School shootings, a refugee crisis, and the rise of the far right, both here and abroad. A global pandemic, an attempted coup, the invasion of Ukraine, the decimation of Gaza, and wildfires, hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. Rising rates of inequality, and a clergy sex abuse scandal, or, more to the point, thousands of them. Add to it all the sense of loneliness and isolation that so many people are now feeling. Add to it the precariousness of our labor, the rise of the gig economy, and the stripping of many of the securities that people were once able to count on. Add to it all the ways we've been asked to confront the racism and sexism that have structured our world, sometimes horrifically. Further still, add to it the rise of far right politics around the world, but especially in this country. Take all of it in, and you begin to wonder if horror might be an entirely rational response to the world as we know it. There are indeed many specters haunting our world today, and horror, as a genre, may be one of the ways we've learned to cope.

Perhaps we need other ways too. It's striking to me that the very same period that has given us an explosion of interest in Halloween and horror has also been the one where many Americans have stopped attending churches, or synagogues or mosques. I've come to think that our traditions may have important wisdom to offer us as we grapple with the deep unquiet within and around us.

Our two Scripture passages this morning may be of particular help. They're both, in a way, concerned with ghosts and with spirits. They're both haunted by specters. But they're populated by ghosts that strengthen rather than terrify, that heal rather than harm.

Take the story from the Gospel of Matthew, where the disciples mistake Jesus for a ghost. In a way, it's a kind of horror story, but it's one that is intended to calm the anxieties of those who are reading it. The wind that buffets the disciples, the waves that batter their boat - these are features of the story best read symbolically. They refer to events that happened earlier in the chapter, when Herod, the local political tough, has John the Baptist arrested, and then, on a whim, beheaded. It's the start of an authoritarian crackdown in ancient Palestine. John had been publicly critical of Herod, and so Herod had him silenced. Jesus, of course, was John's cousin, and had been baptized by him, and so he moved within John's general orbit, even as he was steadily attracting his own followers. And so John's execution served as a warning to Jesus and his disciples: keep doing what you're doing, and this is what you'll get. Those are the winds blowing against the disciples in that fragile little boat. Those are the chaotic waves threatening to engulf them. In such an anxious state, it's no wonder that their minds turn toward ghosts. They're every bit as haunted as we are - and probably more so.

And then Jesus comes to them, walking upon the water. I've said this often, but water often functions as a symbol of chaos in the Bible. To walk upon the water, biblically speaking, is to walk upon the chaos and turbulence, without being submerged in it. It is to stand upon the storms of life, be they political or personal, without drowning. Listen again to those words that Jesus speaks to his besieged friends: "Take heart. It's me. Don't be afraid." What those words do not mean is that the wind and the waves aren't real. What they do not mean is that nothing bad will happen to you because Jesus loves you. What they do mean is that, like Jesus, it's possible to ride the wind, to walk upon the waters, without going under. Which is to say, it's possible to exist in the storm with your dignity and your hope, your humanity and your courage

intact. It's possible, even amidst enormous headwinds, to affirm the worth of human lives, especially the extremely vulnerable, in a mendacious time. "Don't be afraid" means you don't have to lose your bearings, lose your soul, lose yourself. For Jesus and his disciples, it meant you must not give up on your mission, your ministry, to care for the poor, to seek release of the captives, and to let the oppressed go free.

Say this was a ghostly presence seeking to find us right now. What might those words mean for us, today? Say, for example, the far right succeeds in imposing its agenda here, but also elsewhere around the world. Say, just for the sake of argument, that all the authoritarian premonitions of the past weeks, months, years, come true, despite our best efforts, something that would surely be a horror story for a good many people, but most especially immigrants. Perhaps it means, come what may, that *we* can retain our moral bearings. Perhaps it means, come what may, that *we* can remain true to our deepest convictions. Perhaps it means that *we* can hold onto our agency, and struggle for the common good, and labor for the protection of the vulnerable in our midst. Above all, the story suggests that, in a way we cannot fully comprehend, this ghostly figure, Jesus, will seek us out, will come to find us in the midst of whatever storms we face, giving us the courage to ride the waves that beset us. I don't know about you, but this is a ghost, a specter, that I wish to be haunted by. Don't be afraid, that ghost continues to say.

Our second Scripture passage is also about spirits and specters, hauntings and visitations. Without naming everyone by name, the book of Hebrews provides a litany of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding communities of faith and conscience. It's comprised of prophets, teachers, martyrs and other biblical figures, as well as examples that were probably contemporary to the writer of that book. It's become a passage that exemplifies All Saints Sunday better than any other, for it shows how the living might gain confidence from the dead - from the faithful specters of the past that haunt our lives in the best of all possible ways.

Five years ago, members of our congregation learned something about the lived reality of this passage when we visited the Benedictine Sisters of Guadalupe in Cuernavaca, Mexico, during Day of the Dead celebrations. It was an extraordinary experience for all of us, and it may be time to do it again. On the evening of November 1st, we visited the homes of those who had lost a loved one during the previous year. They had created elaborate, almost baroque altars of memory to those they lost, complete with food, clothing, pictures, flowers, candles and all sorts of other decorations. They invited us in, and served us food and drink while we admired their altars. The following morning, we then went to a cemetery, where a mass for the dead was offered, after which families had picnics around the burial sites of their mothers or fathers, their grandparents or spouses, sometimes even their children. And there was a way in which you could feel the presence of all of those dear people, both gone but also not gone. It was as though the membrane separating the living and the dead had grown thin, and we could sense one another through that membrane. It felt neither spooky nor weird to me. In fact, it felt uplifting and joyful. I thought of the many people, known and unknown, who had shaped me and shown me love across the years. Grandparents and great grandparents, aunts and uncles, but also intellectual and spiritual and moral exemplars that live as a part of the communion of saints, my communion of saints - they were all somehow near, and it felt profoundly reassuring.

That's something of what we've attempted to capture here today. But I also happen to think such a vision, such a metaphysic, really, is precisely what we could use right now in our world. Perhaps, amidst the very real disturbances around us - the wind and the waves of our time - we can imagine the membrane between the living and dead growing somehow thin. And

perhaps we can spend time imagining the wisdom keepers of our lives gathering close, to encourage and support us in this hour. Who are your wisdom keepers? Who are the ones you would, or perhaps that you do, call upon for help?

We'll each have a different gathering of saints, but here are a few who of may be use to our community: David Good, who helped us to discern where in the world the Gospel calls us to be; Travis Harden, who demonstrated the heartbeat of the world for us, a beating heart that we strain to hear; Gustavo Gutierrez, a liberation theologian who died this week, who reminded the world that Jesus loved the poor above all; Toni Morrison, herself haunted by specters, who deserves to be read as one of our foremost theologians; Dante, who teaches us how to journey toward God through the catastrophes of history; Emily Dickinson, whose words live in the very walls of this place; and countless others who have sat in these pews, and who have offered something of themselves to this community. Let us feel them all drawing near. Let us feel them all guiding and encouraging us. Let us sense them all telling us, "Don't be afraid. Be of good courage. For we are with you."

A great many specters are haunting the United States this season. There are those that are, for many of us anyway, very clearly malign. There are those that are playful - they'll be out on Thursday night. But there are others, closer to our hearts, that continue to inform and encourage us in the troughs of history. There are those who continue to support and guide us in confusing and overwhelming situations. There are those who come to us across the waters, speaking into our fears, telling us not to be afraid. These are the saints who form our great cloud of witnesses. Just look at them all down there on our altar. Amidst whatever else you may be feeling in this season, take them in, and be of good courage.