

Nov. 5, 2023  
All Saints Sunday, 10:00AM,  
ILCFLCZLC Pastor Tim Huber

*“Larvae Dei—The Masks of God”*

What’s the first thing you picture in your mind when you hear the word “**MASK**”? **Dr. Fauci’s** face touting a **N95 respirator**? A **stagecoach** bandit with a **neck bandana** yanked up over his nose? Jim Carrey’s **elastic edifice** in the 1994 movie, “**The Mask**”? Or maybe two of the most famous masks of **all time** on this morning’s **worship service** cover—**Thalia**, the muse of Greek **comedy**, and **Melpomene**, the muse of **tragedy**? Or how about the funny or even **scary** masks those trick-or-treaters **donned at your doorstep** a few evenings ago on **Halloween**? **Speaking** of which...did you know that today’s celebration of “**All Saints Sunday**” has an inextricable **connection** to Halloween? (But don’t expect any **candy** this morning!)

In the ancient **British Isles** and northern **France**, it was believed by the **Celtic** people who lived there, that **evil spirits** came out of **hiding** as **autumn** gave way to the cold darkness of **winter**, so from **Oct. 31st** through **November 2nd**, they observed a festival spelled “**Samhain**” (but pronounced “**SAW-win**”), practicing magic rituals to **ward off** these “**evil influences**”...by building **bonfires** to light up the long nights and frighten away the demonic **denizens of darkness**, and also giving away **treats** at their doors in a symbolic effort to appease the evil spirits and keep them from unleashing their wicked tricks upon humanity. The Celts also dressed in **costumes** and designed special **MASKS** to disguise their **humanity** in the hope that the evil spirits wouldn’t **recognize** them and would pass them **by**!

However, during the **6th and 7th centuries** after their **Druid priests** were driven out of the land and thousands of Celts became **Christians**, the church made the decision to try to “**co-opt**” or even “**consecrate**” the celebration of “**SAW-win**” rather than attempt to **eradicate** it! They reasoned that the festival was, after all, aimed at **resisting evil**—a purpose with which Christians **also** were sympathetic. And hey, didn’t St. Paul say in Eph. 5 that “*The times are evil, so let us ‘redeem’ the time?*” So, they linked **Samhain (SAW-win)** with the Christian celebration of **All Hallows’ Day** at the start of **November**—a time when the Church remembered and honored all the “**hallows**”—literally the “**holy ones**” or **saints** (God’s redeemed people who had served Christ faithfully on **earth** and whose souls had since gone on to **heaven**). Over the years, that day variously became known as **All Soul’s Day** or **All Saint’s Day**. But, in **time**, October **31st** became known as “**All Hallows’ EVENING**”—the **contraction** of which, of course, is “**Hallowe’en**”.

But many centuries **later**, on October 31, 1517, a young priest by the name of **Martin Luther** went to the door of what people called “the **Castle Church**” in Wittenberg, Germany—but whose **official** name was “*The Church of All SAINTS*”—and there nailed a document of 95 statements in which he questioned whether the Church's desire to embrace the practices and traditions of secular society had **backfired!** In sanctioning the celebration of **All Hallow's Eve** (Halloween), the church had hoped the pagan world would eventually be drawn from a preoccupation with **evil** to a greater fascination with the **good!** But an **inverse** phenomenon was occurring! Luther feared that the church **itself** was losing its focus on the character of **holiness** with its corruption from the Pope on down and its emphasis on mankind's **works** instead of God's underserved **grace!** The corrupt Church was becoming more and more perversely fascinated with the character of **EVIL!** And it wasn't the **FIRST** time, according today's appointed Epistle Lesson, **was it?**

When Jesus wrote to the Church at **Thyatira** at the end of the first century in His fourth and **longest** letter to the seven churches in Asia Minor, it was a **similar** problem that He sought to address. So much was **at stake**, too, because the work of God in and **through** that congregation had—up to that **point**—been so very **fruitful!** *“I know your deeds, says the Lord of the Church, the One Whose ‘eyes are like blazing fire,’ able to see behind every mask and costume to the reality of who we are (That last part is the additional “Huber translation”). “I see your love, your faith, and your enduring service,”* He says.

These are always “**the marks of a church**” in which Christ delights: a love that seeks the **lost**, a faith that pursues the **truth**, and a **servant-hearted hope** that endures even under pressure. These are marks of a **GREAT** congregation, because they're ultimately the qualities of our **LORD** of the Church **Himself!** And Jesus **reveled** in the reality that these attributes were only growing **more** authentic and abundant at Thyatira **every day**. He says, *“I know you are now doing **more** than you did at **first!**”*

**HOWEVER**, then comes v. 20. *“But I have this against you: You continue to tolerate that woman **Jezebel**, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching, she misleads My servants into **sexual immorality.**”* In other words that outward façade of **love** and **faith** and enduring **servanthood** masked a weak unwillingness to deal with an insidious **EVIL** being allowed to fester within the congregation...an evil threatening to undermine all of the spiritual achievements of this wonderful group of believers! Now, we're not told the **specifics**, but by **tolerating**, rather than **extirpating** this evil entity from their midst, all that love, faith, and servanthood was only becoming a false **MASK** to hide the seedy shadow of sexual immortality and idolatry going on **behind** it! How, then, could they be the **salt** and **light** Jesus wanted them to be **others** with **that** kind of skeleton still rattling in their closet?

By the way, the use of the name “**Jezebel**” here was possibly just representative of a timeless **archetype** of temptation among God's Old Testament people (as well as the reason no sane parent would ever name their infant daughter “**Jezebel**” today!) The original Jezebel was a Phoenician princess who married a weak-kneed Jewish king named **Ahab** who ruled the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the middle 800's B.C. And although her name literally meant “chaste” or “pure” (**HA!**), she soon had Ahab building a Temple to the fertility goddess **Astarte** in the capital city of Samaria. Then Jezebel brought in 850 prophets of her cult of wanton sex and violence and began the systematic slaughter of virtually all the prophets of **Israel's** God (with the exception of **Elijah** who escaped), plunging God's people into moral chaos and darkness.

And now, the Lord of the Church was concerned that this same sort of moral slide was facing the believers at **Thyatira!** Some self-styled “**prophetess**” was exerting a perverting influence over the Christians there and drawing them into practices that were dulling their moral **conscience** and distorting their **Christian** character. And—evidently not willing to “rock the boat”—the Thyatiran Christians there may have believed that their love, faith, and servant attitude were strong enough that they didn't need to be all that **concerned** about expelling Jezebel from their midst!

Today, we saints like to shake our heads at the unholy “Jezebels” (both men **and** women) leading people astray in the streets of our **SECULAR** culture. But just like that proverbial “**camel's nose in the tent**” analogy, in which the critter **slowly** eases its nose farther and farther **INSIDE** until it's taken over the entire **TENT**, we've been slow to face the fact that we, like the church in Thyatira, have gradually lost some of our holiness to **TOLERATION** and **RATIONALIZATION**, by putting out the **welcome mat** to ideas and practices that have robbed God's saints of their holiness...and certainly, their spiritual credibility! Sadly, it often begins with pastors and congregations who begin to espouse the statement, “*Well, the Bible only **CONTAINS** God's Word rather than **IS** God's Word.*” That then becomes an open invitation for those homeless camels and Jezebels to “come on in”! And soon, the two-humped camel of **toleration** and **rationalization** finds itself a new tent to destroy.

Like the church confronting **Samhain (SAW-win)** long ago, we do have a temptation to accommodate ourselves to the ways of the world, naively thinking that **WE** can change **it**, while all too often, **IT** ends up changing **US!** We've forgotten that to be **salt** and **light** as Jesus calls us to be in Matthew 5—means to be wearing the mask of **holiness**...the face of the **saints**—and to be willing to literally, “set ourselves apart” to a distinctive **calling** that often require us to think, speak, and live **differently** than what the many other voices of this world might commend. From the day of our baptism—when our sainthood **BEGAN** in God's Forever Family—the Holy

Spirit made us aware that there would be some things we'd never be allowed to **HIDE** behind a mask of **compromise**. **INSTEAD**, God says to His redeemed saints, "**Forget Jezebel and fix your eyes elsewhere...on *Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things...And the peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.***"

Maybe our secular neighbors find it strangely "medieval" of us that we actually **do** believe the old stories of a "*world with devils filled.*" But we **also** believe the words Martin Luther taught us to sing: "*The prince of darkness **grim**; we tremble not for **him**; his rage we can endure, for lo! his **doom** is **sure**; one little word shall fell him.*" Literally, **to hell** with the Devil! Let's remember the good news that the foot on the old serpent's head has **nail prints** on it! We may look back at those ancient Celts with their silly costumes and devilish **masks** intended to "fool the demons", but spiritual warfare is as real today as it was back then...maybe more so in California! However, it's a battle worth fighting for **ALL** the saints—and one with an assured victory that's already been won for us on Easter morning.

Remember how the author of the Book of Hebrews gives us his famous "Hall of Fame" list in Hebrews 11? It's a religious roster filled with **flawed** but ultimately **faithful** Old Testament patriarchs who clung to God's promises and whose souls now reside in heaven. Well, that same author immediately picks up at the beginning of the **NEXT** chapter, Hebrews 12, with what that **means** for you and me who've been privileged to be called "**SAINTS**" solely because of **CHRIST'S** holy life and certainly not our **OWN**.

He says, "*Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, so let us **also** lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder 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.*"

Meanwhile, until that great day comes when God gathers the saints on earth to join the saints **ABOVE**, I think we **DO** need to take time to have an "All Saints Sunday" just to remind us Christ-followers we don't need to wait to be called "God's saints" even now if we've been redeemed and forgiven by the blood of the Lamb. You do **NOT** have to have led an exemplary life or performed at least one miracle or be **DEAD** to be called a "saint" in God's eyes! **AND** there's no special **MASK** with "**SAINT**" stamped across the front of it that you have to wear to be labeled one of God's "hallowed ones". Why? Because each of God's saints already is "**God's Mask**"! Yes. It's true! **EACH** of us redeemed followers of God **IS** His **MASK** in this world! God's mask isn't something we **WEAR**; it's something we **ARE**! Let me explain.

The Latin word “**larva**” (pl. “**larvae**”) literally means “**mask**”. In 1768 Carl Linnaeus was the first to employ the term to describe a phase in the development of an organism that “masks” its **mature** form, like a caterpillar “masks” a butterfly. But Martin Luther used the Latin term “**Larvae Dei**” over 200 years **earlier** to describe God’s **saints** as “**The MASKS of GOD**”.

And so, just as God’s Word read in a **Bible** or common **water** in a Baptismal font or in the simple bread and wine of Holy Communion, so also **GOD** unmasks Himself through the daily lives of His followers to others who see a vision of Christ Himself **IN** us and **THROUGH** us. Through what you and I do and say, God reveals His desire to find the **lost**, to heal the **sick**, to bind up the **broken**, and to invite men and women **everywhere** into His Forever Family. Through **US**, He makes Himself present in factories and schoolrooms and offices and clinics. And when simple, faithful Christians like us—His saints—share the Word of the **gospel**, God reveals something **more**: He reveals the truth about **sin**, but also His astonishing answer for it...**His Son, Jesus Christ**.

In **His** precious Name, Amen.