

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
October 31, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: 1 Kings 19:4-13
Psalm 27**

Sermon: From Spooky to Sacred

When I was young, I hated to go to the dentist. I know this is not an uncommon phobia. Actually our dentist was a really nice man. He had this lovely deep calming voice... Even though there were 5 kids in my family, he always remembered what grade we were in and really took an interest in us.

But that counted for nothing once you heard the sound of the drill... Every muscle in my body would clench to the point where I was practically levitating out of the chair. Tears would stream down my face, as the dentist said sadly: But I haven't even touched you yet.

Once I learned to read well enough, I noticed that there was a white sticker on the black metal of the lamp over the chair. It read something along the lines of "Deep breathing increases relaxation, and relaxation will make your dental work less painful." So even to this day, I credit the dentist with introducing me to meditation, the deep breathing, the intentional relaxation, the mental imagery of painless peace gradually becoming a reality – all that I learned in the dentist's chair... That is the technique I turn to when I am afraid.

What do you reach for when you are scared? A friend this summer told me about an app she has on her phone that plays soothing music and a calming voice. When she wakes up in the middle of the night, worried about whatever, she switches the app on and the voice's dulcet tones tell her she has nothing to fear... she is loved... she is okay just the way God made her...

Some people like physical things to hold on to: it isn't just children who have special blankets, stuffed animals, live pets, or music they reach for in times of fear or worry.

When I polled the congregation, I got a variety of responses: many of you use prayer or meditation techniques, many people have particular friends they call, or grab a partner's hand, or ask for a hug from a parent. One member of our congregation talked about writing a book of joy, a journal for the times when something delights or uplifts her. Then when she is fearful, she goes to the book and recalls all the good things that are part of her world. Another person wrote to me of lighting a particular candle that she was given by a very good friend. The friend has passed away, but that lit candle reminds her of those who are still with us in spirit, and who are a real support when times are hard.

Today is Hallowe'en – a festival of everything to be feared! Prepare yourself to see orange lights, kids in costumes, and spooky apparitions in the neighbourhoods around

you. It's a night when all things evil have their day: whether they be vampires and werewolves, phantom cheerleaders, warlocks or witches.

There are some Christian groups who believe that Hallowe'en is the work of the devil, and that good Christians shouldn't celebrate the day when demons and criminals are feted. You may have seen an article online which gave us the option of celebrating "Jesus-ween" instead of Halloween. It's meant to be an alternative to all the devils and ghosts and graves and lit pumpkins. Kids can dress up as their favourite saint or bible hero, or wear white to symbolize purity. Instead of locking your door and turning out your light to discourage trick or treaters you might greet them instead with a bible verse, or post cards of biblical sites.

Perhaps, what the Jesusweeners don't realize is that Halloween was originally a Christian festival.

It grew out of a combination of ancient Celtic spirituality, the New Year that started with the first frost and a bonfire held to remember the dead. In 800 AD the Pope chose the same timing November 1st for All Saints' Day. Then later on we added All Souls on November 2nd and it became the day when people remembered their own family members or friends who had died, perhaps less saintly "ordinary" souls so to speak.

So what we are left with is this 3 day cycle: Halloween, where you talk about or act out the things that scare you. It helps you get all the shadows and scary bits out of your system, to leave your past mistakes behind. The next morning you wake up to All Saints' Day when you celebrate the life of faith – God's grace which forgives every mistake, and the special people who have exemplified that faith in God. Finally on All Souls' Day you remember those you knew who died and passed into eternal life. We give thanks that our beloved friends are already enjoying the future peace to which we ourselves are headed.

Halloween is not the nemesis of our Holy feast days, instead it is the vigil that prepares us to greet the great cloud of witnesses, those who are with us, spiritually speaking, but often overlooked as the busy world rushes by. We name our fears, we greet those who met the same fear with faith and courage, and then we are reminded that WE ARE ALL BLESSED, with infinite, eternal love.

This is not the only 3 day cycle or tridu-um in the life of the church. It is almost halfway across the calendar to the other 3 day celebration. Good Friday – leading to the Saturday vigil – then concluding on Easter morning. Again a 3 day pattern leading from fear to faith.

Most of our holidays are just one day – but the Christian faith has these two triduumms. Perhaps it's to remind us that everything doesn't have to come all at once. In God's timeline, somethings are worth waiting for. Creation has its own seasons – times to hibernate or sleep, seasons to rest. But we keep on rushing past, filling our agendas, and feeling like a failure unless we are busy.

Last year I found myself waiting in a cubicle, waiting for the results of a mammogram to be reviewed. What I had seen on the screen had terrified me, because what was actually a very small tumour appeared huge. The reaction of staff, who were calm and reassuring, told that I was going to be there for a while, and convinced me that there was something serious that needed to be dealt with. I was afraid. Not so much of treatment or confronting death. I was afraid of letting people down – my children, my partner, my family of faith, my coworkers. It was a very uncomfortable wait.

I practiced my deep breathing, and I prayed. Then I started to think of all the women I knew who had experienced breast cancer before me: I thought of women who lived with cancer for years, and endured all kinds of treatment. I thought of their courage and their grace in the midst of their fear. I thought of women who had survived, and I thought of the women who lost their lives. But for both, I was reminded of how their life stories were fulfilled way beyond their illness. Their life was still continuing in the people they touched.

For all the saints' indeed. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses to hope, even in times of fear.

Elijah the prophet was going through a bad time. There many stories about Elijah, but today's is one of my favourites.

Because Elijah had once been a pretty bold and fearless prophet for Yahweh. Unfortunately the current king and queen had strayed away from God's teachings, instead worshipping idols and exploiting their power. Elijah spared no words criticizing them, and demonstrating that Yahweh's power was greater than any statue. That made the king and queen vow to destroy him.

And so Elijah ran away, as far as he could. He finally fell on his face and asked God to strike him dead because he just couldn't live with the fear any more.

God nurtured and provoked Elijah to a place of rest, a cave on Mount Horeb. And when Elijah was rested, God asked him "What are you doing, Elijah?" When Elijah had said what was troubling him, then God said "Come and stand at the mouth of the cave, because I am about to pass by." Great Elijah thought, now I am going to get the weapons I need to fight for truth!

There was a great wind, and Elijah thought maybe a God of great power would be found there, but God wasn't in the wind. Then there was an earthquake, but God wasn't there either. Finally a wildfire swept through the valley, but God was nowhere to be seen.

After all the fireworks, all the bells and whistles, there was a moment of sheer silence. More powerful than all the noise of hurricanes and earthquakes, more illuminating than a wild fire. In sheer silence Elijah encountered God's presence and his fear was healed.

Perhaps that sheer silence was full of deep breathing. And waiting. And the unseen support of a communion of saints – it was in the sheer silence that Elijah found courage to return to the work to which God had called him.

In a normal year, this is the week that we would be preparing for an our Hearts Remember service. We would be marking All Saints and All Souls with a beautiful candlelighting service to remember the loved ones, gone from our lives,

These loved ones remain a source of spiritual strength for us, though they cannot speak. They come to us in sheer silence – after storm and earth-shattering events. They come to us in sheer silence in the times when we feel like we have been through fire. They come to us in sheer silence, like God appearing to Elijah.

So today in its place we are going to light one candle in memory of all whom our hearts remember. We will celebrate the light of love and courage that helps us to face our fears. We remember it is Christ's light, and the darkness has never overcome it. Because Our Hearts Remember.