

WHAT ARE YOU AFRAID OF?

Oct. 31, 2021

Rev. Lori Fleming

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's Halloween! *[Congregation laughs]* What are you afraid of? Tonight there will be an evening of trick-or-treats. All the ghosts and goblins will be out in the neighborhood with their eerie shrieks and their flowing sheets. We may be terrified, or we may know it's just all in fun, right? It's make believe. Some fears are real! Some we make worse by worrying about them. On this scary day, what are you afraid of?

Where does a ghost go on vacation? *[Congregation titters]* Mali-boo. *[Congregation laughs and applauds]* Oh, thank you! There are more! *[Laughs with congregation]*

Why did the ghost go to the bar? For the boos! *[Congregation moans and laughs]*

Why did the policeman ticket the ghost on Halloween? He didn't have a haunting license. *[Congregation moans]* Yeah ... they didn't think that one was funny in the last service, either. *[Congregation laughs]*

Why did the ghost starch his sheet? He wanted to scare everyone stiff! *[Congregation moans and laughs]*

What does a panda ghost eat? Bam-boo! Right! They got that one in the last service, too! Very good!

Where does a ghost buy their food? At the ghostery store. *[Congregation moans]*

How do you know when a ghost is sad? They go, "Boo hoo!" *[Congregation titters]*

Here's the last one. *[Congregation applauds and laughs]* That wasn't a joke! *[Laughs]*

What makes trick-or-treating with twin witches so challenging? You never know which witch is witch! *[Congregation laughs and applauds]* Thank you! *[Laughs]* When did we start clapping for jokes? This is awesome! *[Laughs with congregation]*

So the history of Halloween is more than just candy and costumes and parties. The holiday actually started more than 2,000 years ago. It started as a pre-Christian Celtic festival. It was called "Samhain." And I may not be pronouncing that right; if you know the correct pronunciation, let me know.

Samhain means "summer's end." It was held around the first of November, and it marked the final day of the harvest. Many cultures around the world have a fall harvest festival, because it's part of being grateful for the food that they've grown all year long. It celebrated the crossing of spirits over into the other world. People in Ireland, in the United Kingdom and France would ward off ghosts by lighting sacrificial bonfires and putting on costumes. The fire would keep the ghosts away, and the costumes would be to disguise themselves so the ghosts wouldn't know who they were.

Trick-or-treating has existed since medieval times. In Scotland and Ireland, it was known as "guising." G-U-I-S-I-N-G. Young people dressed up and they went around and begged for food or money. Today the tradition has morphed into our Halloween activity, with children dressing up and begging for candy and saying "trick-or-treat."

One year, my husband -- who's a dentist -- threatened to give toothbrushes for Halloween.

[Congregation titters] That's scary! *[Congregation laughs]* I have visions of toilet paper and eggs. Fortunately, I talked him out of it.

Immigrants to the United States helped popularize the holiday. The Irish fled their country in the 1840s because of the potato famine, and they came to the United States, and they brought their Halloween traditions with them of getting dressed up and begging for food or money. And in the 1920s, Halloween started to get traction here as an official holiday.

The Irish also brought us Jack-O-Lanterns: you know, we carve out pumpkins. We call them Jack-O-Lanterns. As legend has it, an Irishman -- whose name was Stingy Jack -- tricked the devil. Unfortunately, he was therefore not allowed into either heaven or hell. So he spent his days roaming the earth carrying a lantern, and he went by the name of "Jack of the Lantern." That's where we get Jack-O-Lanterns.

During the 18th century -- now, I don't understand this one. Ladies who were interested in finding a husband would follow the Halloween ritual of throwing apple peels over their shoulder. **[Congregation laughs]** Now, any of you men who were single, would you follow a trail of apple peels? **[Congregation laughs]** I don't know; maybe they're hoping to get apple pie! Who knows? **[Laughs]**

Candy corn ... Okay, candy corn is marginal here. Some people love it; some people don't. Who likes candy corn? Thumbs up! Okay; we have a few. Thumbs down if you don't like it. Yeah; we have a few. Just don't put the bowl in front of my husband. It'll be gone in a minute ...

It was originally called "chicken feed." The Goelitz Confectionary Company sold boxes of it, and they put a rooster on the front of it. That was supposedly to appeal to America's agricultural roots. Today, the recipe has barely changed since the 1880s, and it's rated as one of the worst Halloween candies.

However, Skittles is the top-selling Halloween candy. **[Someone whoops]** Okay; we've got some Skittle lovers back there. Behind Skittles are M&Ms, Snickers and Reeses cups. This is from 11 years of sales data from candystore.com, and candy corn makes the top 10 list. Go figure!

Somebody told me the other day that they only buy the kind of candy they don't like; otherwise, they'll eat it before Halloween, and they'll have to go buy some more. So maybe that explains why Skittles is number one! **[Laughs]**

Did you know that, in New York City, they throw the biggest Halloween party in the world? It draws over two million spectators, and thousands of participants. The Greenwich Village puppeteer, Ralph Lee, created the parade. I don't even know they had a Halloween parade in New York!

Halloween is the second largest commercial holiday, second only to Christmas in the United States. We sell \$9 billion -- with a "B" -- of Halloween merchandise. That's a lot of candy! Wow!

Remember when you were a little kid, and you couldn't wait for Halloween? For all of that candy? And you got dressed up? You go and grab a pillowcase and take it out and collect all the candy with it? Well, today's kids have special little pumpkin things they put their candy in; my grandson has one.

When I was a kid, there were four of us in less than five years. We were really close; I'm the oldest. And we'd take our pillowcases and go out, and then we'd come home and we'd sit around the kitchen table. And we'd dump all our "loot" out, and we'd trade each other for the ones that we liked or didn't like. That was pretty much fun!

One year, one of my sons wore his Spiderman pajamas for Halloween; that was a great costume, because I didn't have to buy anything! I already had it. And he loved it! He had fun. Well, a couple of weeks ago, I went to Florida to visit my son, and my grandsons. And my three-and-half-year-old grandson comes -- as soon as we got there -- comes running out of the house, and he's got a Spiderman outfit on. Now, this is not Spiderman pajamas, my friends; this has got muscles built into it. I mean, he's got a little thing that goes over his head, and it's got Spiderman eyes. And he goes, "Whooooosh," shooting the spider web at us. We acted terrified, of course; it was so cute.

So, for Halloween, there are scary masks, like a witch's mask: you know, like with a big nose and a wart on it. Or maybe a werewolf mask with lots of hair all over it. I remember one year, when a Richard Nixon mask was being sold. **[Congregation laughs]** You might remember that, too! So masks are really scary. Well, that was before we had to wear masks every day. **[Laughs]**

Today parents go to the Spirit Halloween store to buy their costumes. That must be where the \$9 billion is going! When I was growing up, I made my own costumes out of whatever we had at hand, right? One year, I wanted to be a fairy. And so my mother took a lace curtain off the rod, and she ran a shoelace through the casing, and she draped it around me like a cape. And she got some old cardboard; she painted it white and put some glitter on it. I thought I was really cool as a fairy! **[Congregation laughs]**

And ghost stories! Oh, we love to be scared with ghost stories, don't we? We tell the same ones over again, year after year after year. We love to pretend to be scared, especially when we're in a controlled environment. Feeling that tension as the story starts to build ... Waiting for the ghost or Freddy Krueger -- or whoever it is -- to jump out at us and scare us. And we scream! And then we laugh, because we know it's all in fun. It makes us feel alive! We know it isn't real. We know we're safe. But we enjoy feeling being scared ... as if life during a pandemic isn't scary enough!

We have Halloween horror houses. Have any of you ever been to any of those? Yeah ... I haven't been to them, but I've been to the Haunted House at Disney! You know, where there's ghosts flying all around, and there's squealing and shrieking and chains rattling and the headless butler is there with his head on the platter, you know.

Yeah, we love to be scared when we know nothing bad will happen. And what about -- they've had a whole month of horror movies. Have you watched any of those? *Beetlejuice*. *Psycho*. *The Exorcist*. *Silence of the Lambs*. *House on Haunted Hill*. *The Nightmare on Elm Street*. And for the little ones, *The Great Pumpkin* with Charlie Brown and *Casper, the Friendly Ghost*, just to name a few.

I'm sure that you have your favorites, and they scare the wits out of you. But we watch them over and over again, right? We like to be scared! And we know where those scary parts are; we sit there in anticipation, waiting. And we get scared over and over again; each time we scream, and then we laugh, because we know it isn't real.

Last weekend there was even a list in the newspaper of scary Halloween songs. I'd never heard of most of them.

And what about those special recipes for your Halloween party? You can go online and look up Halloween recipes. There were these cookies that were made to look like fingers! They were all gnarly, and they had an almond for the finger nail. And they had raspberry jam on them to look like blood. Phhhhh! And then they had this beautiful cake, and it had roaches and spiders on it. **[Laughs with congregation]** They made popcorn, and they put those little edible googly eyes in it; it looked like a bowl of brains. They took ice cubes and they froze gummy worms in them. And they did some things with gummy worms I can't even tell you in church. **[Laughs with congregation]**

So what terrifies you enough to keep you up at night? What's your greatest fear? Having a car accident on the way to church? Having the doctor give you that diagnosis that no one wants to hear? Those are scary things! The death of a friend or family member. Losing everything you've worked so hard for. Being alone. Each and every one of those things can terrify us. And they're all possible! They happen to people all the time! To us or to people we know.

These fears may be lurking in the back of our mind. We may not even be aware that they're there. But when something happens, it triggers that fear, and we react in a way that we normally wouldn't, because we have that fear in us that we aren't even aware of.

We might get some bad news, and immediately go home and hide under the bed, not wanting to face it. We might suddenly have a big bill for a car repair, and that triggers our fear of losing everything. And then we react by being angry to the next person that we talk to, even if the situation doesn't warrant it, and they don't deserve it. And then we ask ourselves: What made me overreact like that? And we realize we have a deep-seeded fear within our souls we need to heal.

Franklin Roosevelt wrote -- and you'll recognize part of this -- *"So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that there is only one thing we have to fear, and that is fear itself."* You've heard that before. He goes on; he says, *"... nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."*

Now, obviously, he said that during the war. For us in our lives today, what nameless, unjustified terror is causing us to retreat rather than advancing and moving forward in our lives? What terror is causing us to hide under our bed instead of being brave and facing it?

Our fears paralyze us, and they hold us back from facing what is. Our fears keep us from dealing with what is in a logical, rational way, causing us to experience terror so deep we become immobilized. We become powerless.

Many of the things we fear never come to pass. We're making them up in our mind. We're worrying about them; I call worry negative prayer. Yet, we're building them up until they have power over us, and they will never ever happen! Giving them our power paralyzes us, keeps us from moving forward ... from doing the things we really want to do in our lives.

I went back to college to get my degree at age 49, because -- in order to go to seminary and become a minister -- I had to have a bachelor's degree. And I didn't have one. And I was terrified! I didn't remember how to write an essay, much less a term paper. And the thought of competing against 18- and 19-year-olds who had just gotten out of high school ... I just didn't think that I could do it.

And then I discovered I had to take a math placement test. Well, I put it off; I started making it bigger in my mind than it was. And I said to one of my classmates, *"Do you know of a book that I can get to study for my math placement test?"* And she laughed at me and she said, *"You're missing the point."* She said, *"You take the test so they can tell you what kind of classes you need to take."* I'm like, *"Oh! Okay; I get it!"* [Laughs] I was so afraid I wasn't even thinking rationally!

So I scored a 78 on the arithmetic part. Okay; that's a C. I scored 48 on the algebra part; frankly, I don't use algebra every day! [Laughs] But ... And then I had to take three math classes that I had to pay for -- that I had to sit through -- that didn't count toward my college degree, before I could take ones that did count. But I didn't let my fear stop me; I took that test and I took all those classes.

On the first day -- on my way to school on that very first day -- I sang a Mark Wells song. It goes, *"I feel the fear and do it anyway."* I feel the fear and do it anyway! It gave me the courage to get in my car and drive to the community college and get my behind in that seat. And what I learned about going to college was: I didn't really go there to go to ministerial school. I went there for me, because I learned so much about myself. And overcoming my fear was one of the greatest things I ever did.

But what happens when there's an unexpected and unwelcome challenge in our life? Something more serious? Something that shatters our security and our world view? Something that upsets our emotional well-being? What do we do when we're faced with these unexpected and unwanted challenges? It's hard to remember sometimes that the all-protecting power of God is as near as our next thought.

Charles Fillmore, co-founder of Unity, writes, *"Fear is the paralyzer of mental action. It weakens both mind and body. Fear throws dust in our eyes so we can't see, and hides the mighty spiritual forces that are always with us. Blessed are those who deny ignorance and fear and affirm the presence and power of Spirit. Fear is cast out by perfect love; to know divine love is to be selfless. And to be selfless is to be without fear. The God-conscious person is filled with quietness and confidence, because God can do everything -- not to us but through us -- when we say, 'No' to fear and 'Yes' to faith. The more we trust God, the more our confidence will grow."*

No matter what's happening in the outer world ... No matter when other people are running around like chickens with their heads cut off ... No matter what's going on in the news ... You can turn that off, my

friends! As we practice being immersed in the presence and power of the Living God, we'll have more confidence than we know what to do with. The more we'll be able to let our fears go, and let God take care of it. God is our rock! God is our source! And the more that we spend time in prayer and meditation -- which brings us closer to God -- the more we'll be in touch with the love and wisdom of God: protecting us wherever we go and whatever we do.

Marianne Williamson -- in her book, *A Return to Love* -- says it this way: "*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are more powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone! And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same thing. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*"

Just like putting on a Halloween costume and pretending to be someone or something we aren't, sometimes we forget we are the beloved children of God! Who are we to be afraid because we feel inadequate? Everybody feels inadequate sometimes. How do we allow ourselves to let the light shine within us without being proud or boastful? Hiding our talents and playing small so others won't feel insecure does not serve the world! Using our God-given gifts and talents may just be the example that our friends and our families need so they have the courage to face their own fears, and let their own lights shine.

We are here to glorify God for ourselves and for each other. We are not here to play small, hiding what's the best about us. We're here to shine our lights into the darkness of fear and doubt. We're here to be brilliant, gorgeous and use our talents in fabulous ways.

God don't make junk! That may not be correct English, but it's true! God don't make junk! God created us in the image and likeness of Spirit: perfect, true, capable. No matter what is happening in our lives today, we are here to choose to be liberated from our own fears. To become less fearful. To become fearless, knowing that -- when we become fearless -- those around us can also become fearless. And then we can move out of the darkness of doubt and fear into the light as we can manifest God's glory here on earth.

And so, my friends, on this Halloween day, I ask you one more time: What are you afraid of? Thank you!
[Congregation applauds]

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