This is All Saints Day in the Christian church, but if we are honest, even for those of us in the church, this time of year is mostly about Halloween, and this year October 31 became "Halloweekend!"

Our Halloween is a blend of many customs and cultures. Way before Christ, In Ireland and Scotland, a Celtic festival marked the end of the harvest season, the beginning of the darker winter months. They also believed that at this end of harvest season, the boundary between the living and the dead was especially *thin*, so that Spirits of the dead might return to visit. Oct. 31 became known as All Hallows Eve or Halloween, Wearing masks and disguises could confuse or ward off any spirits that might seek to do harm…Evil spirits might come out to do mischief or harm, but Good spirits ultimately win… There might be tricks, but treats are much more prevalent! Halloween is thus usually lighthearted and playful, but it does point to deeper realities of death and life, good and evil, and life after death.

Christians believe, as Jesus showed, that life goes on after death; Jesus told his followers that where he was going, they also would go, and he made many appearances in a resurrected or spiritual form. Death did not have the last word, so for Christians, Nov.1 became known as All Saints Day, and celebrating ongoing or resurrection life. For Paul, "saints" were not just martyrs, but all loved ones, and many today feel the ongoing presence of loved ones.

Yes, the seasons are changing, the harvest is over, days are getting darker earlier (setting clocks back doesn't help!). So,

similar to our message at Christmas and New Year, we remind ourselves of the “Light that shines in the darkness… and that the darkness cannot put it out!” (John 1). It is also reminiscent of Jesus telling Peter that the *gates of Hell* cannot prevail against his church. (Mt. 16) Notice that the image of *gates* is not one of the church defending itself, but of the church advancing against the powers of death and evil… and the gates there cannot withstand the church’s power for life, hope, goodness, justice, etc.

A time of darkness and light, images that can indeed represent a sort of battle between evil and good, despair, and hope, war and peace. Our closing hymn, For All the Saints, sung by probably every Christian church today, points to the necessary struggle of faith, the courage and the fight to keep promoting and living all that is good and right.

I am glad that Halloween in our culture, has become mostly a lighthearted time of dress up… and I’m not so thrilled about costumes that glorify bloody grisly things and emphasize killing and death. I think the early Christians were on to something by declaring the next day All Saints Day… the a day with a “triumph” song, when “hearts are brave and arms are strong.”

The promise of faith is always that the spirit of God is with us in this our earthly walk… a spirit of both courage and *Comfort.* God as Comfort… is so important, and often the prelude to courage. No one enters a race without preparation, No one is pure courage without having received encouragement. No one can face the never-ending struggles and warfare of this life without having experienced comfort and healing for ongoing

scrapes and bruises. Living in the comfort or “steadfast love” of God, chanted in faith over and over in the Psalms, is the essential grounding for facing a world so full of death and despair.

We have comfort from heavenly spirits… from the God of Psalm 23 (we will dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*), and from Jesus himself (many resurrection accounts where he appears and says he not afraid) and from experiences many of us have of loved ones that come to us in memories, dreams, feelings, and intuitions.

Looking specifically at Psalm 23, just a few points or reminders. First of all, the opening metaphor for God is a Lord who is like a shepherd. This is a word of comfort… for a shepherd not only guides but also protects the sheep, standing guard all night if need be to ward off predators. The shepherd leads them to places with food and rest, green pastures and still waters. But Psalm 23 is also a word of reality: There is danger, evil, and death in the world: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The comfort of the Shepherd’s presence leads to courage… courage to keep on moving, to fear no evil, for the Spirit of God is with us. “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all my days.” I love those two words: Goodness and Mercy, but let me shift briefly to the last phrase, “dwell in the house of the Lord.”

We know that the Bible has many levels of meaning, from literal to symbolic. To dwell in the house of the Lord can actually be both literal and symbolic. We remember the prophets decrying that people spent so much time working on their own houses that

they were neglecting “building God’s house!” In one sense, there was indeed reference to a building, a temple, a place of gathering. But when we remember the psalms that says “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord… I remember when we went there with glad shouts of praise and thanks”… it is clear that the importance of the temple is what the people are doing there! (Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people!) So the “house of the Lord” can mean literally the building, the temple or church, but especially it can mean the place where people gather to worship and share in beloved community.

To “dwell in the house of the Lord forever” can have a double meaning, one meaning is rather literal… that we go on forever in God’s spiritual house, heaven if you will. Whether there is a literal place is quite a mystery. But perhaps the deeper meaning is that Love never ends, that Goodness and mercy all the days of our lives never ends. Love, Goodness, and Mercy, start here and now, and “follow us” all the days of our lives. We practice here, in something we call the “house of the Lord,” which is really any house, any place, where there is Love, Goodness and Mercy. Let’s keep practicing!