

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church  
October 31, 2021 Pentecost 23/Proper 26/Year C  
Texts -- Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; [1 Samuel 28: 5-25]; Mark 12:28-34

If you are someone who looks ahead in the lectionary to see what we'll hear in church on Sunday, you know that the story we heard a moment ago about Saul and the medium was not the one given to be read as the second reading for today. That one was Hebrews 9: 11-14. I think you'll agree that the so-called "Story of The Witch of Endor" is far more unusual. It's never assigned in the Sunday lectionary. (Some would say, for good reason!) So, I took an extremely rare liberty in part to have a little fun, given that today is Halloween. I even thought about coming to church in costume, but then I figured – I always come to church in costume!

Many Christians have never heard this story before, and when they first hear it, they can't believe it's in the Bible. But there it is. Many others are embarrassed by it and try to explain it away in all sorts of ways. Still others draw some fairly far-fetched conclusions from it. For example, there are some who have used this story as a proof-text against women's leadership in the church. I'm not quite sure how that argument works, given that the medium in the story is obviously extremely competent at what she does. But perhaps that's the point; she's got the power to reveal a painful truth that the man whose power is slipping away does not want to hear.

Let's admit that our story today is indeed a strange one. I suppose it's an appropriate day to tell it, given that Halloween is itself a day of strangeness – what with its ghosts and witches and zombies.

Context, as always, is important. Saul, you'll remember, was the first King of Israel. And he led a tortured life. The narrator earlier in Samuel tells us that the "spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him." It's that shift that sets Saul on a path toward self-destruction. He becomes unstable and erratic. Today we might say he displays signs of some sort of mental illness.

Regardless, he takes the young David into his home and treats him as if he were another son. David, the one who later would become the iconic King, plays the lyre for Saul in order to calm him down. But ultimately nothing can soothe Saul's aching soul. He becomes paranoid about the motivations and designs of the increasingly popular David, and eventually makes several attempts on his life.

David barely escapes from Saul's home with his life, relying on Saul's son, Jonathan, to keep him apprised of what Saul is up to. Saul becomes more and more erratic and obsessed with David, and goes out on several expeditions to seek him out and dispose of him once and for all. He's clearly desperate and deranged, and has completely lost control of his people, his situation, and his life. It's in the middle of that desperate, deranged state that Saul seeks out a medium, a necromancer, a soothsayer, someone who conjures up the spirits of the dead. Saul takes this desperate step to try to find some guidance from the only one in his past who has given him any help at all: the now-deceased Samuel. Significantly, Saul does this even after he had given an edict to clear the land of witches and wizards. But he's desperate. So as a last resort, he violates even his own law.

Some Christians dismiss the medium in the story as somehow demonic. Those are the same folks who won't let their kids read the Harry Potter books and who in some areas of the country will be walking around today protesting against Halloween. But the medium is not demonic. She's just doing her job. And she apparently is quite good at it. In fact, although she

is rightly afraid of Saul, she nevertheless satisfies his request for a séance and awakens Samuel from the dead.

Samuel emerges somewhat annoyed from his peaceful slumber in the underworld – well, wouldn't you be annoyed, too? – and he reluctantly communicates with Saul. He tells Saul in no uncertain terms that it's over for him. Not only is his failed reign about to end, but so is his tortured life about to end. Sure enough, Saul will shortly be severely wounded in battle, and will end up killing himself by intentionally falling on his sword. Saul is able to see all this because the medium, "The Witch of Endor," stood in the breach between the living and the dead and enabled him to witness his terrible fate. Saul has been remembered ever since as perhaps the most tragic character in the Bible. No better script for a Halloween movie could be written.

I suspect most of us don't believe in necromancy, the practice of calling up the spirits of the dead in order to know what's in store for us down the road. And if the story is any indicator, it's probably not a good idea to try it. Yet it's true that there's a perennial fascination with this kind of thing that makes otherwise reasonable people susceptible to all sorts of circus charlatans. Recall that spiritualism became especially popular in this country in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in New England, and a lot of otherwise smart people got swindled out of their money by charlatans exploiting their desperation.

But back to the story of the "Witch of Endor." Here it is, in Scripture. What do we make of it?

Perhaps this strange story might serve as a reminder to us of how challenging it is not so much to see our future, but to see our past and its connection to the present. What will enable *us* to see not only the paths of self-destruction we sometimes take, but also the potential paths of goodness, life, and wholeness we might take? Perhaps Saul did suffer from a kind of mental illness that rendered him without real control over his actions. On the other hand, maybe he just let fear get the best of him. Maybe he let fear determine the decisions he made and the actions he took. Perhaps his fear caused him to lose all perspective and, as a result, ultimately cost him his life.

The day of Halloween continues to live on in our culture in part, I think, because it gives us a way constructively to channel our fears, most of which originate not out there, but in here. That's always been the case. Rather than project our inner fears out onto real people, Halloween allows us to project them onto the ghouls and ghosts and goblins and witches that our imaginations create. That's not a bad thing at all, as long as we know wherein those monsters originate. It turns out that Halloween may ultimately be healthy to our psyche. Or to put it another way, Halloween may be good for our souls.

Which leads me to this next unlikely statement. Maybe one of our problems as a culture is not that we take Halloween too seriously, but rather not seriously enough.

We are incited every day to see all sorts of scary monsters out there. They're just wearing different masks than those typically worn on Halloween. An unstable world economy, terrorists, dangerous people sneaking across our border, insurrectionists, the loss of something called "the American Dream" – all of these are the targets of as much fear as goblins behind a gravestone.

So, one question our story invites us to ask is this: Are we going to live in fear, running around like the deranged King Saul trying to scare off or even kill the invading monsters? Or are we going to insist on restoring some sane, truthful discourse that might allow us to see ourselves more clearly?

Trick or treat.