Plymouth Unitarian Church

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Steve’s Samhain Special

Opening video/music

The Winds of Winter by Ramin DJAWADI – YOUTUBE - 3.30 minutes

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone, both here in church and joining us online.

Today's service is a seasonal special.

With Halloween just around the corner, I'm sure you've noticed the signs everywhere.

From supermarket aisles and corner shops to television adverts and displays in stores such as TK MAXX, the season is impossible to miss.

Halloween has become a major commercial event and an important contributor to the economy each year.

And, as we all know, once Halloween is over, the Christmas season seems to arrive almost overnight.

Before long, we'll be surrounded by festive advertising and hearing the familiar strains of songs such as I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day wherever we go.

The horror awaits us!!

While Halloween and the older pagan festival of Samhain are closely connected, they are not quite the same thing.

Samhain was an ancient festival celebrated across the Celtic lands around 31 October and 1 November.

It marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter—a significant turning point in the year that was often regarded as the Celtic New Year.

A time of transition, reflection, and preparation for the darker months ahead.

Today's service will focus primarily on Samhain, while also exploring its relationship with Halloween and the traditions that have grown from it over the centuries.

Consider it a seasonal special, taking a closer look at both the ancient festival and its modern descendant.

This service was written by Steve who, as many of you know, is far more comfortable writing services than leading them!

As a result, today's reflections will be shared by members of the congregation.

The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, music, a period of reflection including candles of remembrance, and a number of short video clips.

The music played at the beginning of the service was from the television series Game of Thrones based on the novels by George R. R. Martin.

The tale of noble families battling for power and control of the Iron Throne in the land of Westeros.

The phrase Winter is Coming is the motto of House Stark and Steve thought this was an apt musical choice for the start of our service.

But first, as always, we begin with the lighting of our chalice, a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Opening Words

Our opening words are from the Hebrew Bible, or what we used to call the Old Testament.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 – we hear the first line.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

Our second opening words are from:

Genesis 8:22:

While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.

This is a promise that the natural cycles of the earth will continue uninterrupted until the end of time.

For many people in the Northern Hemisphere, this season can be a challenging one, often bringing feelings of gloom or apprehension.

The days are becoming shorter, the nights longer, and the weather colder.

These changes will continue until the winter solstice on 21 December.

The darker months can affect our wellbeing, influencing our mental health and, in turn, our physical health.

It is important to acknowledge these feelings while remembering that the changing seasons are part of a natural and reliable rhythm.

Yet, we have much to be grateful for.

We have just experienced a record-breaking British summer, perhaps the warmest and sunniest we will experience in our lifetimes.

After all, would we appreciate the warmth, light, and renewed life of spring and summer quite so much if we never experienced the cold, darkness, and stillness of autumn and winter?

The beauty of one season is often made more meaningful by the contrast of another.

Just as the seasons change, brighter days will come again.

Hymn One

Is Number 37 in the PURPLE hymn book; For the fruits of all creation.

Part A

The six recognised Celtic nations are Cornwall, Brittany, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland, and Wales.

Each has preserved a living Celtic language into the modern era: Cornish, Breton, Irish, Manx, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh.

Some scholars and cultural historians also identify the Spanish regions of Galicia and Asturias as having strong Celtic heritage, owing to archaeological evidence and enduring cultural traditions linked to ancient Celtic peoples.

However, they are not generally recognised as Celtic nations in the modern sense, as no surviving Celtic language remains native to either region.

Samhain, often translated from Irish as summer's end, was one of the most significant festivals in the ancient Celtic calendar.

Although known by various names across the Celtic world, the Irish term has become the most widely recognised.

Marking the end of the harvest season and the arrival of winter, Samhain signified the point at which the natural world passed into the darker half of the year.

More than a seasonal celebration, it was regarded as a liminal festival: a moment of transition when boundaries blurred.

According to Celtic tradition, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead was at its thinnest, allowing the supernatural and mortal realms to draw closer together.

Spirits, ancestors, and otherworldly beings could more easily cross into the mortal world, while the presence of the dead was felt more keenly among the living.

Folklore often describes a mysterious mist or fog appearing as the veil between the human world and the Otherworld grew thin, creating a symbolic gateway between the realms of the living and the dead.

This imagery has, of course, been widely adopted by Hollywood, where it has become a familiar feature of countless horror films and supernatural thrillers.

Bonfires, feasting, offerings, and disguises all formed an important part of Samhain celebrations and the rituals associated with protection and renewal.

Fires were lit to ward off harmful influences, while offerings were left to honour ancestors and appease supernatural beings believed to be abroad during this liminal time.

The custom of wearing costumes or disguises is thought to have originated from the belief that malevolent spirits walked the earth during Samhain.

By concealing their identities or dressing as supernatural beings themselves, people hoped to confuse these spirits and avoid unwanted attention.

Samhain was also a time of homecoming and community, not unlike Thanksgiving in North America or Christmas in many parts of the world today.

Families and friends gathered to share stories, celebrate the year's harvest, and strengthen social bonds before the onset of winter.

In medieval Ireland, local kings and chieftains hosted grand feasts in their royal halls, with celebrations often lasting for a week before and after Samhain.

Tables were laden with food and drink, providing a rare period of abundance and merriment. For many, it was an opportunity to enjoy one last moment of plenty before the hardships and scarcity of winter began to take hold.

Rather like that payday splurge, when money seems endless, before the month ends and you're surviving on out-of-date Cup-a-Soups from the back of the cupboard.

It was a feast that stood on the threshold of the year's darkest season, a final celebration before the onset of months marked by darkness, cold, hunger, confinement, and disease.

Winter was, and in many respects still is, one of the most challenging times of the year. For our ancestors, survival was far from guaranteed.

As stores of food dwindled, communities entered what later became known as the hunger gap: a difficult period stretching from late winter into early spring, when supplies from the previous harvest were nearly exhausted and fresh produce remained scarce.

Hunger, malnutrition, and disease were common realities, particularly as weakened immune systems left people more vulnerable to illness.

It is therefore unsurprising that winter became associated with death. The shortening days, the decline of vegetation, and the apparent dormancy of the natural world all reinforced this perception.

Yet against this backdrop, the festivities of Samhain took on a deeper significance, offering warmth, companionship, and reassurance before the hardships of the winter months ahead.

Alongside feasting and celebration, Samhain was marked by the lighting of great communal bonfires.

These fires held both symbolic and practical significance, representing protection, purification, and the renewal of the community.

In many folk traditions, household hearth fires were extinguished and then ceremonially rekindled from the communal Samhain fire, linking each home to the shared life of the community as it entered the winter season.

Samhain was also a time for remembering and honouring the dead. Food and drink were often left outside homes or set aside at the table for deceased relatives, ancestors, or supernatural visitors believed to roam the earth while the veil between worlds was at its thinnest.

To modern readers, this custom may seem unusual, yet similar traditions can be found in many cultures and religions.

In Judaism, for example, a special goblet known as Elijah's Cup is filled with wine and left untouched during the Passover Seder, symbolically welcoming the prophet Elijah should he choose to visit.

Likewise, the familiar Christmas tradition of leaving food and drink for Santa Claus and his reindeer reflects the enduring human impulse to extend hospitality to unseen guests.

These customs, separated by centuries and cultures, share a common theme: the belief that on certain special occasions, the boundary between the ordinary world and something beyond it becomes a little less certain, and that offering a place at the table is a gesture of welcome, remembrance, and hope.

Divination was also a prominent feature of Samhain celebrations, perhaps reflecting the widespread belief that supernatural forces were especially active at this time of year.

With the boundary between the human world and the Otherworld believed to be at its thinnest, Samhain was considered a particularly auspicious moment for seeking glimpses of the future.

Through a variety of customs and rituals, people sought answers to questions of marriage, fortune, prosperity, and even death.

The spirits of the Otherworld were believed to possess knowledge hidden from ordinary mortals, making Samhain a powerful occasion for prophecy and divination.

In neighbouring Cornwall, the festival was traditionally known, and is still celebrated today, as ALLANTIDE, a feast associated with St Allen.

Rich in folklore and local custom, ALLANTIDE marks the arrival of winter while celebrating the eternal cycle of life, death, and renewal.

Festivities traditionally included feasting, games, gift-giving, and forms of divination that echoed older Celtic beliefs.

In the Cornish language, the season is known as Kalan Gwav, meaning the first day of winter.

Like Samhain in Ireland, it marks a turning point in the year, when the warmth and abundance of summer finally give way to the darker months ahead.

One of the most charming customs involved the Allen Apple.

Young women would place one beneath their pillow in the hope of dreaming of the person they were destined to marry.

These large, glossy red apples were carefully polished and exchanged among family and friends as tokens of good luck and prosperity.

In folklore, apples were more than simply seasonal fruit. They were often regarded as symbols of the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms, linking the everyday world with the mysteries of the Otherworld.

A widespread belief held that an apple buried beneath the light of the Samhain moon would provide nourishment and healing for the souls of the dead as they wandered the earth on this mystical night.

Such traditions reflected the deep respect accorded to ancestors and the enduring bond between the living and the departed.

In Anglo-Saxon England, this season was known as Blood Month, a time when livestock that could not be sustained through the winter were slaughtered for meat, hides, and other necessities.

It was a practical response to the harsh realities of the coming cold, ensuring communities had the resources needed to survive the dark months ahead.

According to tradition, the bones of the slaughtered animals were cast into communal fires, creating what became known as bone-fires, a term often cited as the origin of the modern word bonfire.

Blood, death, darkness, cold, wandering spirits, and the ever-present awareness of mortality were all woven into the fabric of this season. Against such a backdrop, it is easy to see how modern Halloween has inherited many of these themes, transforming ancient rituals, fears, and beliefs into the celebration that continues to captivate the imagination today.

In summary, Samhain marked the end of the harvest season and the beginning of winter.

It was at once an agricultural observance, a social gathering, and a deeply spiritual occasion, bringing communities together to celebrate, remember the dead, and prepare for the challenges of the colder months ahead.

VIDEO clip

We are pleased to share a short video clip featuring Brenda Wootton, the celebrated Cornish folk singer, poet, and passionate ambassador for Cornwall's rich traditions and cultural heritage.

Born in 1928 and passing in 1994, Brenda remains one of Cornwall's most cherished musical icons, affectionately known as The First Lady of Cornish Song.

In this clip, she reflects on the fascinating tradition of the Allan Apples, offering a captivating insight into an important part of Cornwall's folk customs and history.

The Cornish Tradition of ALLANTIDE - Brenda Wootton (Cornwall The Land I Love 1981) – 1.27 minutes on YOUTUBE.

Reading

Before we go into the second part of our service, we have a short reading for you.

A reading by John Harley, a Unitarian minister

As we slowly tread towards winter, let us learn how to befriend darkness.

May we find our way in the night and welcome the shapes we see.

Let us honour the voices of our ancestors, and the faces of friends lost through death or conflict.

May we hear their whispers of wisdom, of laughter and of love.

May their courage to live life fully provide energy for our dance on the edge of fear.

Part B

Interlude and silence

In the second part of our service, we invite you to take part in some Samhain traditions as an opportunity for personal reflection and prayer.

At the front of the church, you will find a number of apples.

Please feel free to take one now or after the service.

My apologies to those joining us online and unable to share in this part of the tradition.

If you wish, take your apple home and place it under your pillow tonight as part of the custom.

We also have candles of remembrance available. You are warmly invited to light a candle in memory of a loved one or someone who holds a special place in your heart.

I appreciate that some of you enjoy sharing your thoughts in a little more detail but unfortunately, time does not allow for personal reflections to be shared from the pulpit today.

Therefore, we ask that you simply light your candle, take an apple if you wish, and then return quietly to your seat.

If anyone on Zoom wants a candle lit for someone, then please leave a message in the chat.

This will be followed by a three-minute seasonal video, providing an opportunity for personal reflection, quiet contemplation, or prayer.

Relaxing Autumn Foliage & Falling Leaves – 3-minute nature meditation.

YOUTUBE 3.01 minutes.

Hymn 2

Our second hymn is a Thanksgiving hymn that Steve discovered on YouTube called Come, Ye Thankful People, Come.

Written by Henry Alford in 1844, it is one of the best-loved harvest hymns and is often sung at harvest festival services throughout Britain.

Although today's service is not specifically a harvest celebration, the themes of thankfulness, God's provision, and gratitude fit well with what we are reflecting on together.

Please remain seated for this hymn. The words will be displayed on the screen, so do feel free to sing along if you wish.

YOUTUBE – Autumn Afternoon Version – 3.15 minutes

Part C

The final part of this seasonal service explores the transformation of Samhain into the modern celebration of Halloween, and examines why many Christians remain cautious about, or opposed to, its observance.

Halloween developed from a blend of ancient Samhain traditions, Christian observances, and later folk customs.

Many of the traditions associated with Halloween today have their roots in Samhain, including the wearing of disguises or costumes, the lighting of fires and lanterns, and beliefs surrounding the presence of spirits.

It was also a time traditionally associated with divination and fortune-telling, as people sought insight into the future during a period believed to be rich in supernatural activity.

You may notice that the traditional colours of Halloween, black and orange, also echo themes found in Samhain.

Black symbolises the end of summer and the darker half of the year, while orange represents the autumn harvest and the abundance of the season.

As Christianity spread throughout Europe, efforts were made to replace pagan festivals with Christian commemorations.

In the 7th century, Pope Boniface IV established the Feast of All Martyrs or All-Saints’ Day in 609 CE.

This feast was later moved to 1 November, bringing it into closer alignment with the traditional timing of Samhain.

The evening before the feast became known as All Hallows' Eve, which over time was shortened to Halloween.

The Protestant Reformation largely rejected both All-Saints' Day and All Hallows' Eve, viewing many associated practices as lacking a clear biblical foundation.

Today, Halloween is perhaps most closely associated with the United States of America, but this was not always the case.

The earliest settlers in New England included the Puritans, who were strongly opposed to Halloween.

They saw it as an unwelcome mixture of medieval Catholic traditions and ancient pagan customs, and some regarded its observance as an abomination.

The Puritans rejected practices that they believed had no basis in Scripture.

They were particularly critical of the Catholic doctrines of purgatory and prayers for the dead, both of which were closely connected to All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day observances.

Puritan society also held a deep belief in the reality of evil and the active presence of the Devil.

Many believed that Satan sought to corrupt souls and that witchcraft posed a genuine threat to the community.

This mindset contributed to events such as the Salem witch trials of 1692, one of the most infamous episodes in early American history.

For many generations, Halloween remained relatively unknown or was actively discouraged in parts of the USA.

However, this changed dramatically during the nineteenth century.

The arrival of large numbers of Irish immigrants fleeing the Great Famine (1845-1852) brought with them many of the customs and traditions associated with Samhain and Irish Halloween celebrations. Over time, these traditions spread throughout the USA and evolved into the Halloween festivities that are widely celebrated today.

Halloween, as many of our older members of the congregation will remember, was often not widely celebrated during their childhood.

Steve recently asked his mother, now 83 years old, whether she celebrated Halloween when growing up in Aberdeenshire. Her answer was no.

The occasion that attracted far more attention was Guy Fawkes Night, marked by sparklers, modest firework displays, and a carved turnip lantern, known in Scotland as a NEEP lantern.

The form of Halloween that we recognise today, with widespread trick-or-treating, elaborate costumes, commercial decorations, and extensive media promotion, is largely a phenomenon of the late twentieth century. It has grown significantly in popularity and scale over recent decades, evolving into one of the largest seasonal celebrations in the Western world.

Why do some Christians dislike paganism and oppose Halloween?

Since the 1960s and 1970s, two very different movements have often found themselves at opposite sides of debates surrounding Halloween and pagan traditions.

The first is the growth of neo-paganism, which emerged alongside the counterculture movement of the 1960s and a growing interest in alternative spirituality.

This included movements such as Wicca, goddess-centred spirituality, Celtic reconstructionism, and renewed interest in indigenous and folk traditions.

Many of these groups sought inspiration from pre-Christian beliefs, myths, and customs, viewing them as a connection to nature, ancestry, and ancient wisdom.

The second movement is the Religious Right.

Predominantly made up of evangelical and conservative Christians, this movement grew significantly during the late twentieth century and became an influential political force.

It played an important role in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and continues to exert considerable influence within American politics.

For many evangelical and Pentecostal Christians, paganism raises concerns because it can involve spiritual beliefs and practices that they believe are incompatible with Christianity.

Some view Halloween as a celebration that normalises or glorifies themes of death, witchcraft, the occult, and supernatural forces that Christians are taught to avoid.

As a result, they regard Halloween not as harmless fun but as part of a wider spiritual struggle between good and evil.

However, Christian attitudes towards Halloween vary considerably. Many Christians celebrate Halloween as a secular cultural event involving costumes, community gatherings, and children collecting sweets, while others avoid it altogether because of its historical associations with pagan and occult traditions.

Certain Christian groups, including Jehovah's Witnesses and some Seventh-day Adventists, generally do not celebrate Halloween, believing that its origins and themes are inconsistent with their religious beliefs.

More broadly, Christianity has often been cautious of paganism because the earliest Christians sought to distinguish their faith from the polytheistic religions of the Roman world.

The worship of multiple gods, spiritual intermediaries, and the use of divination or magic were seen as incompatible with belief in one God. This tension between Christian and pagan traditions has shaped religious debates for nearly two thousand years and continues to influence attitudes towards celebrations such as Halloween today.

Halloween costumes and decorations often draw upon themes of ghosts, witches, monsters, magic, and other supernatural imagery. Some Christians are uncomfortable with these themes, believing they can trivialise or even celebrate spiritual ideas that conflict with traditional Christian teachings.

Halloween is also a festival that particularly appeals to children and young people.

For some Christian parents, this raises concerns about the messages being communicated through costumes, decorations, and popular culture.

Trick-or-treating, for example, involves children accepting sweets from complete strangers, which is generally contrary to the safety advice we would normally encourage them to follow.

As a result, some regard Halloween as incompatible with their faith. The strongest critics have even labelled it The Devil's Day or a celebration that glorifies darkness rather than light.

In response, many churches, particularly within Baptist, Pentecostal, and other evangelical traditions, organise alternative events for children and families.

These may include Harvest Festivals, Light Parties, or Reformation Day celebrations, commemorating Martin Luther's publication of the Ninety-Five Theses on 31 October 1517.

Yet much of the debate surrounding Halloween can be understood as part of a wider cultural and religious disagreement.

Some Christians associate paganism, Wicca, and other alternative spiritualities with occult practices, whilst followers of those traditions often reject such characterisations and strongly distinguish their beliefs from Satanism.

Modern Halloween is also deeply shaped by popular culture and commercialism.

It has become a major season for horror entertainment, with cinemas screening classic films such as Halloween, Beetlejuice, and Friday the 13th, alongside new releases aimed at Halloween audiences.

Costume retailers, theme parks, confectionery companies, and entertainment brands all contribute to what has become a significant commercial event.

In many ways, Halloween has followed a path similar to Christmas and Easter.

What began as religious and cultural observances have increasingly become major consumer events generating billions in revenue each year.

Whether viewed as a survival of ancient Samhain traditions, a Christian holy eve, a family celebration, a commercial enterprise, or a source of

spiritual concern, Halloween continues to evolve and adapt to each generation.

Perhaps its most remarkable feature is its ability to continually reinvent itself while retaining echoes of its ancient past.

Thank you for listening.

Hymn Three

Is Number 147 in the PURPLE hymn book; Spirit of Earth, Root, Stone, and Tree.

Closing words

We have two lots of closing words. The first is from an Instagram post that Steve found online.

Don't let the world steal your sense of wonder. There is still magic, even in times of darkness.

The second was written by Unitarian martyr Norbert CAPEK who lived from 1870 to 1942 and died in the Dachau concentration camp.

Life is yours, in you I prosper. Seed will come to fruit, I know.

Trust that after winter's snowfall. Walls will melt and truth will flow.

Closing music

Our closing music is a Halloween themed piece called:

EYE OF NEWT – Music for Halloween Night by George Streicher
YOUTUBE – 2.35 minutes

Chalice is extinguished

Notices

Tea and Coffee