

The three days from October 31 to Nov. 2 is perhaps the most spiritually weighty time of the year across much of the world.

Samhain, Halloween, All Saints Day, All Souls Day, Dia de los Muerta all fall in those three days referred to as All Hallowtide. We Lutherans throw in Reformation, too, but we talked about that last week.

Let's start with Samhain. I actually preached on that a little bit 3 years ago, so if that stuck with you this won't be new. But Samhain is an ancient Celtic festival that begins at sunset on October 31 and goes until sunset November 1.

It's spelled s a m h a i n. In that characteristic way of the Gaelic language, the letters don't seem to correlate to the sounds we're familiar with so it's sawin.

Samhain was considered the end of summer and the beginning of winter. It was a celebration of the completed harvest and a preparation for the dark, cold half of the year. It was also believed by the Celts to be a time when the boundary between our world and what they called the otherworld was blurred. It was a time when it was believed that dead ancestors could cross that boundary more easily.

It was a recognition of death – winter's dying back would soon be upon them. Skeletons and skulls were common symbols. Jack o' Lanterns were carved as a beacon to guide the souls of the dead to the otherworld.

Virtually all of our Halloween traditions – pumpkins, apples, skeletons and possibly even trick or treating are solidly pagan with their origins in Samhain.

Samhain is about recognizing the reality of death, but it is also a celebration of the lives of those who have died.

There are still pagans who celebrate Samhain with bonfires and feasting.

Halloween probably evolved out of Samhain, but in some ways it was more about poking fun at death. It took on more spooky overtones than Samhain had. Purposely embracing horror remains a way for humans to feel some sense of control over the real monsters in our lives...including death.

It also is a day where the possibility of ghosts and spirits roaming the earth perhaps seems more real. Again a sort of blurring of the boundary between earth and the spirit world, although at least in America it has none of the religious significance the other holidays do.

November 1st to November 2 is Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead. It's a colorful Mexican holiday that features skulls and skull shaped candies, skeletons, and marigolds. It's a day to honor the dead and is much more about celebrating with them than being afraid or sad.

Families celebrate at the graves of loved ones and set up home altars in honor of their ancestors. It also is a time when one's dead ancestors could visit our world. Again, there's that blurring of the boundary between our world and the next.

Its origins are murky. Theories range from ancient indigenous origins to a more recent take on the Medieval European tradition of Danse Macabre – or dancing with death.

All Saints Day was originally a Catholic holiday established in the 7th Century. It was a day to honor the saints of the church. Originally it was celebrated in May. A century later it was moved to the same time as Samhain perhaps as the church's response to the pagan festival. All Souls Day was November 2. That was a day to honor all departed souls and seems to have specifically been a day of prayer for souls in purgatory.

With the Reformation, All Souls Day pretty much disappeared in the Protestant church because we don't believe in purgatory. But All Saints Day continues to be celebrated with our belief in the communion of saints. We remember loved ones who have died and joined the church triumphant in heaven.

We may not believe the spirits of departed loved ones roam the earth on All Saints Day. But we too have that sense of blurring the boundary between heaven and earth. In some churches, like Bethlehem, a half-circle altar rail for communion is where the living body of Christ gathers. The invisible other half of the circle represents the saints who have died but who commune with us still. The design is a reminder that the departed saints and their world are never far from us.

These spiritually weighty days are days that we are more aware than others that there is a whole other dimension of existence – a spiritual world that we often forget exists in the everyday crush of life.

While many people talk about going to heaven when we die, the Bible, and particularly the book of Revelation tells us that there's more to it than that.

Jesus' main message in Luke is that the kingdom of God has come near. It's in Christ that the kingdom of God – heaven – broke into our time and place. This world and that spiritual world coexist. All the holidays I mentioned are reminders of that.

But what the book of Revelation tells us is that in the end, heaven and earth are completely joined. The vision John received was that of a beautiful city – the New Jerusalem – coming down from heaven. And God and the lamb Jesus will rule over it. The boundary between heaven and earth isn't just blurred, it's eliminated.

A beautiful city with a river of life flowing through it...a tree with different fruits each month...a tree whose leaves bring healing. This to me is one of the most beautiful images in all of scripture.

Healing is such an important part of the kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry in Galilee is focused on teaching and announcing God's reign...and demonstrating that reign through healing and casting out demons. Each of those healings is a small slice of what the vision of Revelation promises for all of creation.

On this All Saints Sunday, we do remember those we've loved who have died. We recognize that the communion of saints is all around us. Some might feel a bit teary, because we do miss those who have died. Death is real.

But we also celebrate with that communion of saints – we celebrate their lives. We celebrate the final healing and eternal life that is promised in Christ. We rejoice that even now, God is working to join heaven and earth.

And we celebrate that we are on our way to that day when healing – healing for individuals, healing for communities, healing of the nations, and healing of all creation – will be our new reality.