

## Nightmare Before Changes



Preaching, like any other creative endeavor, finds inspiration in the preacher's everyday life. My own experiences are often what God uses to inspire in me a message worth delivering.

My little daughter, Eliza loves Halloween. She's only been alive for three of them, and I'm not sure that she even remembers those, so I'm not sure where that love comes from. But since she does, I introduced her to one of my favorite movies, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, a charmingly spooky stop-motion animated musical.

It's a good thing I like this movie because we've watched it approximately 7 billion times in the last few months. At this point, we will reach the heat death of the universe and Eliza will still be yelling, "Ween-ween Halloween!" at me until I pick up the remote and turn it on.

And since I am being exposed to this film so often, it is only a matter of time until I preach a sermon inspired by *The Nightmare Before Christmas*.  
That time is now.



If you're unfamiliar with the film, let me explain its plot in broad strokes. It's about a fellow named Jack Skellington, whom we'll throw up on the screen because there's no way my description of him will ever do him justice. Jack is the celebrated leader of a place called Halloween Town, where all year long, the witches and werewolves and so on that live there look forward to Halloween.

But Jack is finding himself disenchanted with Halloween. For him, it's the same thing every year — he longs for something different. It's this ennui that pushes him to wander farther and farther away from Halloween Town until he reaches a place he's never been — Christmas Town.



Christmas Town is as jolly as Halloween Town is spooky. Jack is overwhelmed by everything he sees — pure white snow, bright electric lights, cakes and pies, and kissing under the mistletoe. Christmas is everything Jack has been longing for and he can't wait to share it with Halloween Town.

But this is where things go off the rails.



The citizens of Halloween town have a lot of trouble understanding the appeal of Christmas. Even the concept of a Christmas present confuses them. They have a lot of questions. *Why does it have that ugly colorful paper around it? Is there a severed head in there? Does it explode when you open it?*

Eventually, Jack realizes he needs to adjust Christmas to meet their expectations. He tells them all about the cruel monster who rules Christmas Town, named Sandy Claws (emphasis on the claws).

So Jack leaves the meeting, satisfied that he has the town on his side, but realizing that he didn't really communicate the part of Christmas that really inspired him. He decides that to truly understand Christmas, he and the town have to do it themselves.

So they kidnap Santa and assure him not to worry because this year he has the night off.





As you may suspect, Jack's Christmas is a fiasco. He delivers gifts made by the town to the children of the world, but they're all horrifying — killer wreaths, snakes that swallow Christmas trees whole, and so on.



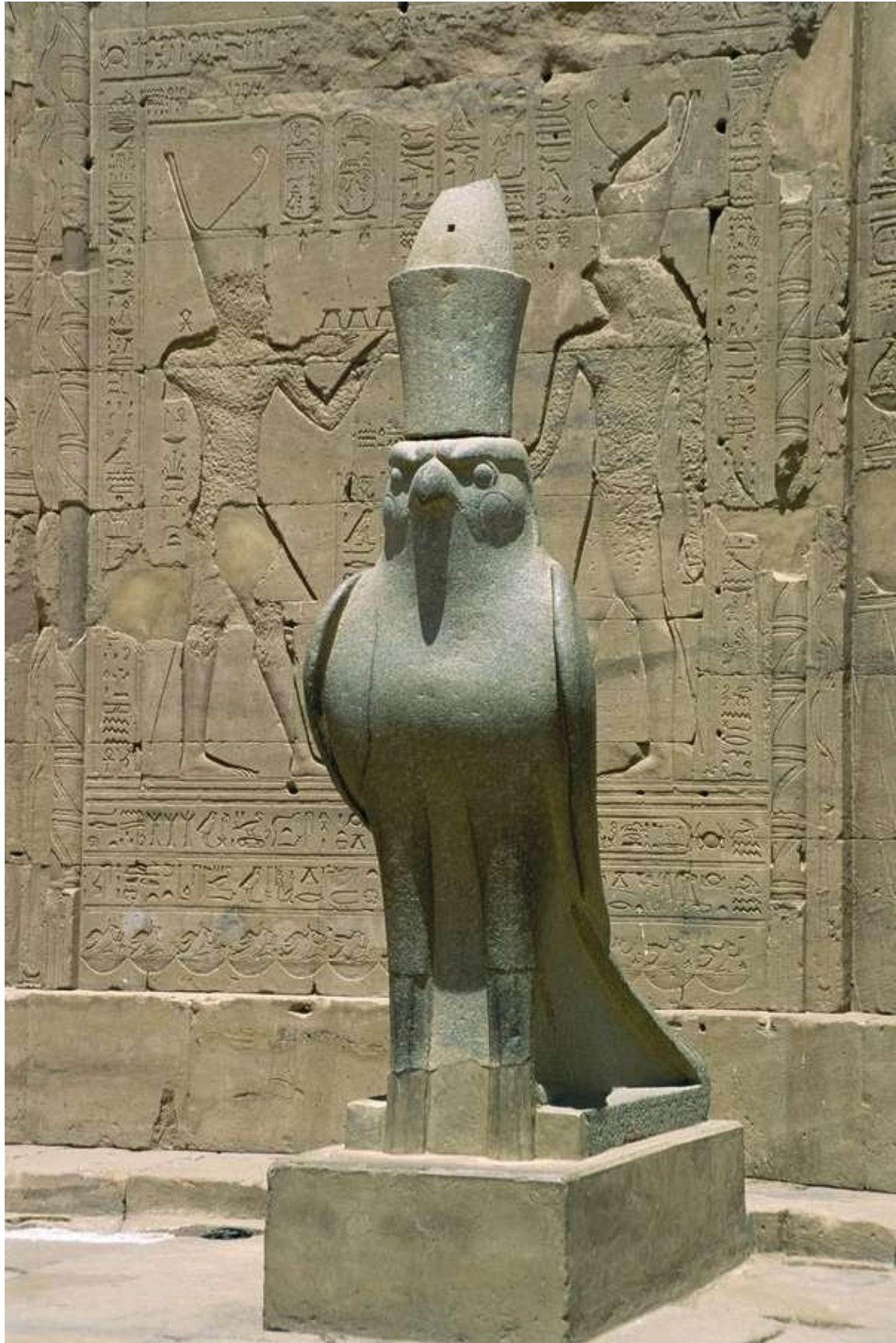
The kids who were anxiously awaiting a visit from Santa are terrified.

It's important to note that Halloween Town is truly *trying* to do Christmas right. They're just so familiar with Halloween that it's all they know how to do. What it boils down to is that they tried to change without grasping the full significance of the change and why they were making it.

The same sort of thing happens to the the Nation of Israel shortly after being freed from slavery in Egypt. Think about it: they've been living in Egypt for 400 years. That's about as longer than our nation's entire history. In that time, they've been living in an Egyptian culture and practicing Egyptian religion. Then all of a sudden, this Moses guy comes along and says they've got their own, long lost religion!

It's a huge change for them! And instead of acclimating to that change in the comforts of their homes in Egypt, they're stuck out in the desert. And it's all because of this new God that's actually an old God that none of them remembers. This new God has prepared them for a big change — the plagues God sent were just as much to convince them that God's power is bigger than Egypt's power, as they were to intimidate Egypt — and yet, their imaginations are not yet big enough for the change God has in mind.

But at this moment they're away from their only home they'd ever known. And they're feeling like they need something familiar and comfortable. Moses is away, so they go to the second in command, Aaron, and say, *This new God is great but, like, where are They? We need something we can see.*



Egyptian religion, like most ancient religions, utilized idols—physical representations of the gods they worshiped. It’s actually a nifty bit of religious technology. It takes a spiritual truth you believe in and gives it a form that you can see and touch, making it more concrete in your mind.

But this God who brought them out of Egypt was different. This God, being an ultimate reality, didn’t like having a hunk of stone standing in their place.

Moses understands this about God, but Moses isn’t here right now. So they say, *Aaron, we need something we can see, like we’ve always had.*

Aaron says, *Great idea! Let’s make the best idol ever for our new, amazing God!*

So they collected every bit of gold they had, melted it down (don’t ask me where they found smelting equipment in the desert), and made a golden calf to represent God. Meanwhile, Moses is on the mountain receiving the Law, one of which is, “You shall not make for yourself an idol...”

Many tellings of this story assume that Israel’s calf was a totally different god, that they had abandoned the Lord for a god they made themselves. I don’t think that’s how the actual text reads though. They seem to be making an idol to facilitate the worship of the God who brought them out of Egypt. So they’re still on board with Moses’s big change. But they’ve reverted to the old *way* of doing things. Just like the citizens of Halloween Town, they’re committed to the change, but they’re having difficulty putting their old ways to rest.

It’s the difference between an **adaptive challenge** and a **technical problem**. A technical problem is a problem that has a specific solution. It can be easy or hard, but either way, if you take the right steps, you’ll fix it. For example, if our sanctuary roof was too cave in, that would be a hard problem to solve. But we’d know exactly what to do, and if we didn’t, we could find out. We could hire a



contractor, we might need to raise some money, but as long as we followed the steps, we'd have a good-as-new roof.

But an adaptive challenge is a problem that requires us to change ourselves. You can't just "fix it." To fix it, you have to *become* something *new*. We are living through the perfect example. Covid-19 is perhaps the greatest adaptive challenge our country has ever faced. Each of us have had to change because of Covid. We've had to become people who never leave the house without a mask. We've had to become people who don't hug or shake hands, and who walk around like we're inside a huge, invisible bubble. We've had to find new ways to stay sane, without the social support of friends and loved ones. And American citizens have had varying degrees of success at changing, haven't we? Even people at the very top of our government have found themselves unable to adapt in successful ways.

I was recently challenged by [1st Congregational's](#) Personnel Committee to give our church a direction. To let everyone know where we are going and how we will get there. I realized that what they were asking for was a vision. I also realized that I have a vision for what this church could be in the 21st Century, and that I am so excited to articulate that vision. So I came up with a new Vision Statement and asked our Executive Council for their support, which they have given. Our new vision is: *That 1st Congregational would be authentically known by those outside our walls to be a place where open-minded people can **Be, Belong, and Become.***

That's a lot to unpack, so today I just want to focus on the idea of change. Our latest newsletter details the finer points of this Vision, but I'm also going to devote the next several weeks to teaching that Vision in a way that we can all understand and get behind.

As I've prepared to do that, I've felt a lot like Jack Skellington. Jack knows, deep in his bones, that Christmas is special. He knows in his heart how beautiful and important Christmas is, but he fails to communicate that to Halloween Town. I have a desire to share something new and beautiful with you, but I'm scared that I might give you the wrong idea. Maybe in my zeal to make you understand what I can see and feel what I feel, I will show you something different than what God has actually put on my heart to share. How do I avoid that?

The end of *Nightmare Before Christmas*, I think, has a clue. Once Santa is freed and able to use his Santa magic to bring real presents to all the good children, he flies above Halloween Town causing snow and Christmas joy to fall upon the citizens.



Suddenly, all the monsters experience the same delight and wonder that Jack was filled with. They lay in the snow and make snow angels, they throw snowballs, they catch snowflakes on their tongues. They finally “get” what Jack got from Christmas Land. Because sometimes the only way to get something is to experience it.

So I'm dedicating the next several Sundays to giving us a taste of the future, of the wonderful things God has in store for our church. I ask two things of you as we set out on this expedition together: One, I ask for your patience, as I try to describe something that not even I am sure of. Just like Jack, I've been inspired by this Vision, but I don't know it fully. I'm still just a citizen of Halloween Town, trying to understand Christmas the best I can. It's like something I can see but not touch, and I'll need your help to fully flesh it out.

Second, I ask you to open up your imaginations and really try to live in the Vision I'll present to you. Not to see it for what it isn't — because it won't be anything we're used to. Chances are it will be less like an old, comfy shoe that has formed itself into the perfect cradle for your foot, and more like a brand new pair of roller skates. It's going to feel *very* unsteady. We might have to look pretty stupid for a while, and we might just fall on our collective butt. But I urge you to get out onto the rink and try it. Because once we get the hang of it, we'll be moving like we've never moved before.

It's not going to be easy to change, because no change ever is. Change is never easy because change always involves the death of what we've done before, to make room for the new way. We'll want to hang on to the old. There will be times when we'll need to remind ourselves: We're not doing Halloween, we're doing Christmas. We are built for Halloween, we do Halloween better than anybody, we so *want* to do Halloween, but we're doing Christmas now. And we will have to change ourselves to meet that challenge.

And we can't do Christmas without Santa Claus. The good news is that God doesn't set us up to fail. When God gives a Vision, God also gives us the capacity to change ourselves to fit that vision. Christ makes all things new, us included. And God will drop the newness on us like a beautiful shower of snowflakes.

