History of Halloween

It is old. The basic elements date from pagan or nature religions of the iron age. The cycle of the seasons, the wonders of life and death moved most cultures to celebrate after the bounty and work of harvest and before the fear of another cold winter. Turnips were carved with grotesque faces and candles were placed inside to scare away unfriendly spirits. Guising or dressing in costumes was a tradition in Scotland Ireland and much of Europe. Children would go door to door and offer to do a trick (recite a poem, tell a joke etc.) to receive a treat. The celebration changed over the centuries. It was not a Christian tradition but the church wisely aligned All Saints Day with the persistent and popular ancient tradition.

When Halloween first arrived in the New World it was quickly quashed by the disapproving Puritans. Once again it endured and took on New World characteristics. The pumpkin with the cheerful smile was first used at Thanksgiving but soon became the symbol of Halloween. Trick or treating as we know it became established in the 1950’s. Halloween was a children’s event.

Today Halloween is for all ages. Costumes are rented and sold for humans and pets. Iconic ghosts and witches walk the streets past decorated homes with all the terrifying stars of movies, games and TV shows like The Walking Dead and Breaking Bad. The event has changed but the ancient Wiccan belief that the 31st of October is when the wall between the spirit world and everyday world is thinnest still makes people walk a little faster in the fantasy look of their choice as they carry their bag of treats through the dark streets.