

First Unitarian Church

April 7, 2019

Do any of you guys remember a news story from last August, about a challenge to the Arkansas state legislature? The challenge came from a group dedicated to the separation of church and state. They were upset that the Arkansas legislature has a big stone monument to the Ten Commandments out front, right there on government property. The group that challenged them argues that posting the Ten Commandments—and no references to any other religious traditions—on government property is religious favoritism. And that the state should stay out of the business of promoting one religion over another.

The way they challenged the Ten Commandments monument was to present a new monument that could be displayed right alongside it to help balance things out. The new monument is bronze statue of a humanlike figure with a goat head and horns. It is winged. It is seven feet tall. It has a pentacle behind it. It is named Baphomet [**Baph**-omet]. The group that did this is a religious organization called The Satanic Temple. And the statue includes the figures of two children, gazing up adoringly at Baphomet's face.

Well, you can imagine the protest that ensued by the good people of Arkansas. They were horrified.

And that was The Satanic Temple's point. The group's beliefs have nothing to do with Satan or Baphomet. The group describes itself as "a nontheistic religious organization determined to halt the dangerous encroachment of theocracy into American government." Their tenets include promoting freedom, such as religious freedom, working for justice, and encouraging empathy, among other things. They just have a... really disruptive... way of making their point. They don't *really* want Baphomet installed at that capital building. What they want is the separation of church and state. Hence, an approach so provocative it is more likely to get all religious symbols removed than to get their own symbol installed.

They've done other actions as well. In December, the Chicago Chapter of the group got a "Snaketivity" installed at the Illinois State Capitol Rotunda, right next to the Christmas tree and the Menorah.ⁱ And in Pensacola in 2016, a member of The Satanic Temple freaked a lot of people out when he gave an opening invocation at a City Council meeting.

The meetings always start with a prayer. But until 2016, the prayers were usually Christian, and from traditions the council felt comfortable with. Which, again, the Satanic Temple says is religious favoritism. When their guy took the mic wearing a black hooded robe, City councilors started shouting and reciting bible verses at him. He has done this kind of thing other times. Once when he calmly recited a polytheistic message during a school board meeting, it set off a reaction the Washington Post described as a "20-minute chaotic religious revival in which people screamed in tongues and tried to cast demons out" of him.ⁱⁱ

So... oh my gosh. So many feelings about this. Part of me wants to laugh at the creativity of it, at the completely valid point the group is making, and what seems like such an outsized

reaction. But the other part of me sees just how genuinely upset and scared those other people are. And I wonder at where the idea of Satan came from, and how it came to have so much power, and how people's reactions increase or decrease that power.

Now, since I just said "where did the *idea* of Satan come from" instead of "where did Satan come from," you can probably guess that I do not personally believe Satan is an actual being that exists. But I do believe that religious ideas do not come out of thin air. They reflect human experiences. Religious ideas reflect our relationships with each other and with the natural world, and with all of our gigantic questions about what the heck we are and why we exist. They are based on something real and true.

So I have one more question: What's true about Satan? (That would also have made a good sermon title).

Interestingly, in the Hebrew scriptures, Satan and other demonic beings rarely make an appearance. Angels appear a lot, but not demons.

And religious historian Elaine Pagels writes: "In the Hebrew Bible, as in mainstream Judaism to this day, Satan never appears as Western Christendom has come to know him, as the leader of an 'evil empire,' an army of hostile spirits who make war on God and humankind alike. On the contrary, he appears in the book of Numbers and in Job as one of God's obedient servants."ⁱⁱⁱ The role he serves is the role of adversary. Sometimes the outcome is a greater good. Sometimes the outcome seems not so good. But the adversary, the satan, is not a foreign adversary, not an outsider or other. He is one of God's own.

Ancient Israelites thought of themselves as a separate people in the eyes of God, different from other groups of people. Sometimes they used mythological imagery to characterize enemy nations; for example, when the prophet Isaiah warns that "the Lord, with his great hand will punish the Leviathan, the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea."^{iv} But when Israelite writers denounced fellow Jews, they did not use those same animalistic metaphors. Instead, they identified the enemy within their ranks with something called "the satan." And the satan was one of God's angels.

The story of Balaam [**Bay-lam**] in the Book of Numbers illustrates this. Balaam saddled his donkey and set off to do something God did not want him to do. So God sent one of the angels to act as Balaam's satan by standing in the road and blocking him. Balaam could not see the satan, but his donkey could. It startled her, so she turned aside and went off the road. Balaam hit her to try and make her go, but that only prompted her to push up against a wall, smashing his foot. He hit her again, and she laid down right there on the spot, still refusing. When he hit her a third time, the text says, "God opened the donkey's mouth." Yes, there is a talking donkey in the bible. And what she said was, basically, "What did I ever to do *you*?" And then God opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel—his satan—standing in their path. Balaam was terrified, and obeyed God after that.

The only other talking animal in the Hebrew Bible is the serpent in the Garden of Eden. We've come to associate the serpent with Satan, but in fact there is no such association in the scripture. The serpent is a trickster, and again, an insider. An inhabitant of the garden that God made.

You know, when I read the story of Balaam, I couldn't help but think again of that Baphomet statue and the ten commandments monument.

Christianity has never been at its best when it is combined with state power. Ever since the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire in the 4th century, the history of the church has been marred by episodes of oppression, abuse, and murder; times in which the church persecuted non-Christians, and even Christians who disagreed with doctrines of a church that was, with each passing generation, more out of touch with the humble story of Jesus. Christianity was invoked to support legal slavery, and the holocaust. In recent years, harm continues to be inflicted in the name of Christianity, with abuse cover ups, and laws harmful to gay and transgender people, and blocking access to basic reproductive healthcare.

Then, here are some Christians trying to assert their commandments right in front of the state legislature, to make it very explicit that Christianity comes first, and what happens? A Satan appears in the path.

The book of Job also has a satan playing a central role, but in this case, satan does not appear directly to the human character, Job. Instead, satan appears to God, or—at least—is in conversation with god. In the book of Job, God praises a man, Job, for being righteous and loving God. But Satan says, sure, Job loves you now while things are going well for him, but what if things weren't so easy for him? Would he be so godly then? Soon God has arranged for Job's livestock to be stolen and his servants killed, just to see. It gets worse from there, as Satan toys with God's confidence.

So Satan appears in the Hebrew bible—or what Christians often call the Old Testament—but not very often. Overall, Satan does not play a very big role.

It wasn't until the first century, when the followers of Jesus began telling the story of his life and mission and forming the first churches around his teachings, that Satan—also called Beelzebub or Belial—begins to figure more prominently. Even then, it's mostly in a behind the scenes kind of way. The action is playing out between humans. Mostly.

The Gospel of Mark, which is considered the oldest of the four gospels in today's Bible, begins with Jesus going into the wilderness for forty days, during which the text says he was repeatedly tempted by Satan.

Later, when the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, they took up this same story. It becomes a frame, within which the rest of Jesus's story will be told. A frame in which the story of Jesus is a story about a great cosmic struggle between God and Satan.

Elaine Pagels points out that this frame may have become necessary in order to make sense of Jesus' death. The gospels were all written many years after he had been executed, and they were written during a time of war. When Jesus was killed, his followers were forced to try to make sense of it. If he was God's messiah, how could this have happened? The answer was that his death was just one part of an ongoing battle between God and the forces of evil, or Satan. The frame sets that battle up. It becomes the subtext for everything that happens in the Jesus stories.

Interestingly, although the Romans are occupiers and oppressors in the times the gospels were written down, the gospel writers rarely associate the Romans with those satanic forces. Instead, the gospels focus on their fellow Jews. Remember, early followers of Jesus still considered themselves Jewish, as Jesus was.

There are a couple of things that might explain this. One, with the Romans still actively occupying and oppressing, it would have been dangerous for the gospel writers to call them out in these their writings. But also, the identification of Satan with the intimate enemy—the enemy who is within one’s own group—is a continuation of the way Satan was identified in the Hebrew bible. It is a continuation of tradition.

Only in later texts that were written after the gospels, texts like the Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, does Satan begin to be associated with non-Jews. That coincides with a change in the identity of Jesus followers. At first, they had all been Jewish. But over time, non-Jews (or gentiles) were converted, too.

When Christians were a small minority within Judaism, speaking out against the establishment, they saw fellow Jews as their enemies. When Christianity spread to become more than a sect of Judaism, now a new religion that included gentiles as well, other gentiles became its enemies, too. These enemies were the Romans, who were pagans. So Christians began to see pagans as instruments of Satan.

(Meanwhile, the pagans were in fact persecuting the Christians, and severely. The Christians only worshiped one God, while the Romans worshipped many. This made the Christians atheists in the eyes of Romans. The Romans worried that this new atheism would incur the gods’ wrath).

In the Letter to the Ephesians, which is attributed to Paul, the author (who was a student of Paul) writes that “Christians are not contending against mere human beings. Our contest is not against flesh and blood human beings but against powers, against principalities, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places.”^v

This is really, really different than the Satan of the Hebrew Bible, who is an insider, essentially an obedient—if also challenging—angel of God. Now Satan becomes the enemy of God, and is associated with anyone who persecutes Christians—especially Jews—and, eventually, anyone who stands in the way of Christianity.

What this means is that conflict on earth between Christians and others had now been raised to cosmic dimensions in the minds of Christians. And the people Christians considered “others” just kept growing and growing—outward as well as inward. In the 1500’s, Martin Luther—the founder of Protestantism—said that anyone who maintained allegiance to the Roman Catholic church, any Jews who did not accept Jesus as messiah, anyone who participated in the Peasant’s War against landowning aristocrats, and any Protestants who were not Lutheran were all “agents of Satan.”

If you think that all who oppose you or differ from you are agents of Satan, you are going to deal with them in a really different way than if you see them as regular people like you. It’s

a choice to see people that way. It's a choice that requires ignoring the time Jesus said to love your enemy, and to pray for them, and the time he said blessed are the peacemakers.

...

I want to return to one of my opening questions: What is true about Satan?

In the 1942, in the midst of WWII, to which this history is very much connected, the writer and lay theologian C.S. Lewis—who you probably know as the author of the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—wrote a clever book. It is called the *Screwtape Letters*. It consists of a series of letters from a senior demon named Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood.

Screwtape is mentoring Wormwood on how to ensure the damnation of Wormwood's "patient," who is a young man. In the book's preface, Lewis says he chose those names because they sounded kind of gross or discomforting. And he says he does not personally believe in a being called Satan. But he believed in something like demonic forces; destructive forces wreaking havoc within humankind.

Wormwood does not seem to be an embodied being—the book never says anything about him having a body. Rather, he shows up as thoughts that the young man might have, and which lead him in the wrong direction. In one letter, Screwtape advises Wormwood to pay attention to the young man's fraught relationship with his mother, and to "press his advantage" over him. You can't stop the young man from praying for his mother, he says, but you can make sure he always prays for the state of her soul, and not for her rheumatism. That way, Screwtape tells Wormwood,

his attention will be kept on what he regards as her sins, by which, with a little guidance from you, he can be induced to mean any of her actions which are inconvenient or irritating to himself. Thus, you can keep rubbing the wounds of the day a little sorer even while he is on his knees [in prayer] ... and you will find it very entertaining.^{vi}

He also encourages Wormwood to make sure the young man takes a consumeristic approach to churches, looking for one that will not offend or challenge him. And that when the young man prays, he should expect to experience a very special religious feeling, rather than doing it as a humble everyday practice—that way he'll be sure to feel disappointed.

It's all very clever.

Interestingly, in the Book of Job, Satan functions in a similar way. The conversation between Satan and God sounds as though it could be taking place inside one mind. With the adversary's voice finding God's own weaknesses and self-doubts.

What does the adversary in our minds today say?

Maybe it whispers judgmental things, like "Look at how unattractive that person is," (or too tall, or too short, or too fat, or too thin, or whatever) all the while knowing that when we judge others, the result is that we ourselves live in fear that we are unlovable.

Maybe the adversary whispers cynical thoughts, like “everything is rigged,” so that we don’t participate or raise our hands to lead.

Or, “You earned this,” and the adversary does not acknowledge systems that surround people with advantage, and others with disadvantage. I recently heard one minister describe white supremacy culture as a “demonic possession.”

The adversary says things like, “Well, what are we supposed to do, have open borders?” or “There’s no room.” So that we ignore the mothers and fathers and children who are at our country’s doorstep and in its border prisons and hotels and shelters already, and who cannot live—who *cannot live*—without the kindness of strangers. They are humiliated, hungry, exhausted, and scared.

I met them. They are just like us.

And the adversary says, “You can’t fix it. You can’t change anything.” And makes us believe that if we cannot “win,” then we may as well quit, as though it were about being a hero, instead of being a helper. As though it were not true that we our saved by our own compassion, as well as that of others.

But we are saved by compassion. And by loving our enemies. And we are saved from lives of meaninglessness, alienation, and despair by the decision to believe that what we do matters.

And we are saved not by destructivity, but by creativity.

[Service closes with the creative work of Andrew Fearnside, Liturgical Artist in Residence, who has been painting throughout the service.]

ⁱ Stack, Liam. “Satan Is in the Illinois Capitol. Because It’s the Holidays!” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 Dec. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/us/satan-statue-illinois-capitol.html.

ⁱⁱ Holley, Peter. “Why a Satanic Temple Member Wants to Perform Rituals before a City Council in the Bible Belt.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 20 July 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/07/20/why-a-satanic-temple-member-wants-to-perform-rituals-before-a-city-council-in-the-bible-belt/?utm_term=.95b15367fddb.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pagels, Elaine. *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics*. Vintage Books: New York, 1995. (39)

^{iv} 27:1

^v 6:12

^{vi} Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*. Time Inc: New York, 1961. (8) *The letters were first published in another version in the 1940’s.*