

It was a spicy sermon signboard last week and this week, out there on the corner of Carlisle and Comanche. "Salem Witch Trials," "How to Cast a Spell," and then "Demons." And do you know, we have a three-sided signboard. It's old. It has these heavy plexiglass panels that have to be lifted and propped up by our volunteer sign changers, who then have to manually swap out the letters. It's physically challenging, and time consuming. There are a lot of letters, and in my name a lot of R's. That's why sometimes my name is spelled Herrera and other times Hererra.

I don't blame them.

A few weeks ago, we had to stop using one of the three sides because the panel's frame became bent, and it was dangerous to try to lift and prop. It could fall on the volunteer's head. Then, this week a second panel came unhinged. It literally fell off and won't go back on. So, we had to stop using that side too.

Is this some kind of intervention? Should I be worried? If the last side breaks, we won't get to promote our subversive UU sermon titles anymore. At least until we get a new sign. Now instead of saying demons demons demons, it just says demons.

Maybe it's a bad idea to say it three times fast.

Well, interestingly, the Greek word from which the word demons comes means a lot of different things, and mostly not what you'd expect.

Demon comes from δαίμων (daimon), which means, according to the Greek English lexicon: 1) a god or goddess, 2) fate, destiny, fortune good or bad, 3) one's genius, 4) a name given to the souls of men of the golden age who formed the connecting link between gods and men (I guess there's a story there).

Yep, I have a Greek English lexicon from back when I was in divinity school and was top of the class in biblical Greek. It was pretty dusty. I haven't translated the bible as much as I imagined I would back then.

A couple of years ago on the first date with the person who is now my partner, I noticed a Greek phrase tattooed just below her collarbone: *ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων* - a quote from the sixth century BCE philosopher Heraclitus that means "a person's character is their destiny." Or fate. Or divinity. Δαίμων- daimon.

She has a degree in philosophy and had pulled up in a muscle car. This tattoo was so daring and so nerdy.

I digress.

A god or goddess. Fate. Destiny. Genius. Intermediary. In the ancient Greek world that was about it. A daimon could be capricious. It might cause trouble. It might need to be appeased with a sacrifice of some kind. A daimon might also possess a person, causing havoc. But they weren't evil.

Today, an English dictionary definition of demon is likely to say something like, "Malevolent supernatural entities." And that contemporary Greek lexicon also includes a fifth meaning: an evil spirit, devil.

What changed? The historian Elaine Pagels (along with other bible scholars) points out that "while angels often appear in the Hebrew bible, Satan, along with other fallen angels or demonic beings, is virtually absent. But among certain first-century Jewish groups...including the followers of Jesus, the figure variously called Satan, Beelzebub, or Belial ... began to take on central importance."ⁱ

The gospel of Mark, which was written in the first century, barely mentions angels, but it describes Jesus's ministry as a struggle between God and demons. Mark 3:24 indicates that demons belong to Satan's kingdom.

Two of the other three gospels – Matthew and Luke—use Mark as their basis and expand on it. One thing that is important to note about Mark is that it was written in a context of war or the destruction resulting from war. People were polarized. The stakes were high. Good vs evil rhetoric made emotional and rhetorical sense. For Jesus' followers, he represented good, and his opponents represented evil. Both sides were Jewish back then. But when Jesus became Christ in the minds of his followers, and they became Christians instead of Jews, there began a very destructive trajectory of demonizing Jews. And heretics. And pagans. And. And. And.

In the Hebrew scriptures the idea of satan is different. The word translated as satan is an adversary, but not necessarily a bad one. It's a figure who blocks a path. If the path is a good one, being blocked is bad. But if the path is a bad one, being blocked might be a good thing. We want to be blocked from a bad path, right? So that word, satan, adversary, wasn't necessarily bad until first century writers started thinking of it differently.

In the Book of Numbers (the fourth book of the Hebrew Bible) we find the story of Balaam.ⁱⁱ Balaam saddled up his donkey and started down a path that God did not want for him. So "an angel of Lord took his stand in the road as Balaam's adversary [his satan]." When Balaam's donkey sees the angel there, she turns off to the side and Balaam strikes her with his stick. Then she turns to the other side, and he does it again. Finally, she lies down on the ground beneath him, and he strikes her once more. At that point, the text says, God opens the donkey's mouth, and the donkey says to Balaam, "What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?"

You forgot there is a talking donkey in the Bible. I know. I'm always surprised all over again, too.

Over the generations, the idea of demons has continued to evolve.

I once heard a religious historian say that the history of God is the history of humankind's perception of itself. I think it was Karen Armstrong, in an interview. She wrote the book *A History of God*, in which she traces the idea of God as it develops in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the stories about God, written down by humans, God is concerned with humans. The stories are about God's perception of us. But since they are written by humans, they are – if you think about it-- humankind's perception of ourselves.

I think something similar could be said about demons. That by being about the things they are about: fate, destiny, things that block our paths, and even evil, they are actually about our own relationship with those things, as humans.

They are about kinds of things that can block our good paths. External things: the demons of systemic oppression, climate destruction, etc.

And internal things: our own beliefs, frameworks, and the stories we tell ourselves. Our unhealed trauma. Our pain and the seduction of anger. Our impatience and the seduction of numbness. Black and white thinking.

What tends to be true is that the wiser we grow, the wiser we are spiritually, the more we realize the importance of allowing ourselves to experience complex feelings and to hold truths that can be in tension with one another.

Last Saturday, Rabbi Sharon Brous gave a sermon at Ikar, the post-denominational synagogue in Los Angeles where she serves as Senior Rabbi. It had been one week since the terrorist attack in Israel. She has also done a lot of public speaking beyond the synagogue.ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Brous is a well-known progressive activist. She has been a vocal critic of the increasingly extreme Israeli government and of the occupation, as are many, many Israelis. (They have been protesting in masses in the streets for months. Remember?) Like many Israelis—and many UUs— she has been concerned about the suffering of Palestinian people.

October 7th on Simchat Torah, a celebratory high holiday in Judaism, first came the massacre and the profound grief and shock at seeing babies, children, grandmothers, holocaust survivors and altogether 1400 people in Israel violated and murdered and 200 abducted with no possibility of escape in sight: the largest single day massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. And then came the pain of others' response to the attack. She said,

This week I read statements from longtime allies that shock the conscience—some so implausible that I had to reread them multiple times to make sure they weren't farce or satire... In these statements, was not only a failure to condemn the atrocities against innocents, but proud support for Hamas. This week we entered the upside-down world,

when a retrograde, totalitarian, misogynistic terror regime became, for the time-being, the hero of the left. How could it be?

To justify barbarity *in the service of decolonization and the liberation of Palestine* requires more than an ideological commitment to Palestinian freedom. It demands mental and emotional contortions that render a person fundamentally unable to see the humanity of a Jew. It requires a deeply internalized association with Jews and power—the Jew as oppressor, the Jew as victimizer—so much so that even a horrific terror attack, even teenagers and elders being carted naked through Gaza, does not evoke a gasp of horror or a tear. ^{iv}

What I want to lift up in this moment is that Jewish UUs and our Jewish neighbors here in Albuquerque are also suffering greatly and are finding themselves devastatingly isolated. Longtime allies, right here in our community, remaining silent in the face of their profound grief. In case you think I'm about to demonize anyone: no. That's not what this sermon is about and it's not what Rabbi Brous' sermon was about.

In a few weeks, Bob and I are going to preach together about Israel and Gaza. About the humanity of Israelis and the humanity of Palestinians and about how our UU faith can guide us in understanding what is happening on a historical, moral, and humanitarian level. Today is not about all of that. It is about what Rabbi Brous said next.

She urged her congregation to turn to each other, to notice those who have reached out, and “to promise that this feeling of isolation and loneliness, the yearning for solidarity, will remind us of the sacred responsibility to step closer, rather than hide, equivocate and retreat ourselves when another people is suffering.”

Although they have been excluded by the narrow scope of others moral concern, she said, they must not narrow the scope of their own concern.

Ἡθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων.

That's an important message for everyone. On the good path, we must be alert for the presence of the adversary, that fault, that inferior way of thinking, which would lead us astray. Whether that is the path of liberation for our own people or another people or both, or whether it is a more personal path. And we must remember to turn toward one another, toward each other's humanity, in times of peace and especially in times of war.

ⁱ Pagels, Elaine. “The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics.” Vintage Books: New York, 1995.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 22:22-30.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/16/1206083192/israel-gaza-hamas-rabbi-imam-palestinians-jews>

^{iv} Brous, Sharon. “We've Lost So Much. Let's Not Lose Our Damn Minds.” Ikar. 14 Oct. 2023.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFLvLETvP1A>