

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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It's been a banner season for people who believe in the devil. If you think a malevolent force lurks behind the scenes creating mayhem in our world, you have lots of evidence to cite.

Witness the Saudi slaughter of alleged al-Qaeda terrorists, along with Sheik Nimr al-Nimr, an antigovernment activist and advocate for Saudi Arabia's oppressed Shiite minority.

Witness the decision by troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad to starve the residents of Madaya, a village near Damascus, literally to death – hunger as a weapon of war.

Witness the mass sexual assaults outside the central train station in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve – a pernicious scourge that seems to be spreading.

Witness North Korea's test of a nuclear bomb – probably not a hydrogen bomb, but even so, with Kim Jong-un's finger on the trigger, everyone's uneasy.

Witness everyday atrocities committed against Palestinians in Gaza, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and gays in Uganda. And witness the everyday micro-aggressions committed against African-Americans in the US, Muslims in the West, and women everywhere.

Imagine the devil standing behind a wall of monitors in Satan Central, directing the fiendish handiwork of his minions. Imagine Rowan Atkinson playing the role, which he has done on occasion. Or imagine Jon Stuart imitating someone who could play the role, which he has done on many occasions as well. Beyond that, I won't name names. You can do that on your own.

Satan Central doesn't exist, of course, nor does the devil. Bad things happen in this world for two reasons: because they naturally happen, or because people choose to do them. When the earth quakes, which is what the earth naturally does, or when the Ebola virus spreads, which is what the Ebola virus naturally does, people suffer and sometimes die. Theologians call this natural evil, because it results from the impact upon human beings of nature doing what nature does. It's not bad for the earth that it quakes, nor is it bad for the Ebola virus that it spreads. It's just bad for us, which is why we refer to these events as evil.

When people choose to do bad things, on the other hand, it's because they have chosen to do them. Theologians call this moral evil, because it's the result not of natural necessity but of human choice. People don't need to be beaten, or blown up, or shot, or raped, or tortured as part of the natural course of events. These things happen because

people choose evil actions — actions that intentionally harm other creatures — over good ones.

The Australian band INXS makes this point in one of their popular anthems, titled “The Devil Inside.” The chorus of the song reads: “The devil inside, the devil inside, every single one of us, the devil inside.” After noting the violence human beings visit upon each other, the song adds: “It’s hard to believe we need a place called hell.”

If this is a banner season for people who believe that the devil is the prime cause of human suffering, it’s also a banner season for people who believe the opposite — that God’s goodness is the prime cause of human flourishing. As it happens, this is the season known in the Christian calendar as Epiphany, which refers to the moment when people recognized that God had appeared in human form. The term epiphany extends back to the ancient Greeks, and it indicates the appearance of a deity or a divine spirit.

Western Christian traditions usually refer to the Epiphany as the moment when three wise men from the East arrived to worship baby Jesus. Eastern Christians usually refer to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. In both cases, the recognition is the key — the recognition that a divine spirit has come to dwell within a human being.

The truth is that Goodness Central doesn’t exist anymore than Satan Central does. This means that divine goodness, like devilish evil, must live inside the human heart — if it lives anywhere at all: goodness inside.

The recognition that divine goodness dwells within each of us can be hard to acknowledge. In spiritual terms, the birth can be difficult because it fundamentally changes our perspective. Our epiphany awakens us to a new sense of mission and purpose. Our lives aren’t only about us anymore. Our inward focus turns outward.

The faith traditions of the world showcase this struggle. In the Jewish tradition, the prophet Moses escaped as a young man from Egypt, where the Hebrew people were being held captive. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Moses responded to God’s call — the epiphany came in the form of a burning bush — to return to Egypt. It’s not enough to save yourself, God said. You need to save your people as well.

In the Buddhist tradition, Siddhartha Gautama set aside his status as the king’s son, put on ragged clothes, and set out to discover the meaning of life. Inspired by a gift of rice porridge from a young girl, Siddhartha sat down under a bodhi tree, determined not to move until he had become enlightened. It took 49 days for him to realize that he already had everything he needed. Thus he became the Buddha, meaning “enlightened one.”

According to New Testament accounts, Jesus spent 40 days and nights in the desert, fasting and praying, before he committed himself to a ministry of preaching and teaching. During this time, he was tempted by the devil to abandon his calling.

And so on. No matter the faith tradition, epiphany requires struggle. We can’t take up a larger mission without sacrificing at least some of our self-centered aims. Epiphany comes when we recognize that to save ourselves, we have to save others as well.

At their best, faith traditions give us a way to recognize the divine goodness within and make it our own. The pagan tradition, for example, uses initiation rituals to reenact the epiphany. The rituals recall a recognition that came much earlier to each initiate personally. Our morning reading, taken from “Charge of the Goddess” by Doreen Valiente, makes this point: “Seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without.”

Epiphany comes when we recognize that we are the divine in human form. It comes when we realize it’s time to stop brooding in the desert, or worrying under a tree, or hiding in the wilderness. It comes when we decide to be a force for good in our lives and our world. Burning bushes and bodhi trees aside, an epiphany can come simply and quietly. But when it does, it changes everything.

This past New Year’s Eve, the *New York Times* published a Modern Love column by the lawyer and writer Susan Gelles titled, “Single, and Surrounded by a Wall of Men.” She tells how she spent her 20s as a would-be musician, then went to law school and graduated with \$100,000 in debt. After five years of working all hours at a big law firm to pay off her loans, she found herself at a publishing house. She was 37 years old and single.

She had always despised the singles dating scene. Nonetheless, she decided she had no choice but to attend a singles mixer. It was a disaster. She vowed never to go to another singles event again.

She emailed news of her resolve to a former law firm colleague named Daniel, who had long shared her view of the singles scene. Surprisingly, Daniel advised her to give the singles mixer another chance. Eventually, she did.

During the open mingling part of the evening, she chatted briefly and awkwardly with a few men, and then she fled to the bathroom, where she barricaded herself in a stall. She had had enough. She waited until she figured the mingling session was over, and then she went out to see if anyone had put her ID number into the computer, indicating interest in a further conversation and maybe a date.

Alas, upon returning to the meeting room, she found that the mingling session wasn’t over after all. She ended up talking to another lawyer, a man named Richard, who told her he liked opera. She asked, “What period do you like most, or what composer?”

“I like Puccini,” he replied.

“I remember listening to ‘Tosca’ once, years ago,” she responded. “It was so overblown.”

After a long and uncomfortable silence, he said, “‘Tosca’ is my favorite opera.”

Later, she ended up being computer-matched with Richard, and they decided to have dinner the following week at an Italian restaurant. They discussed their initial encounter at the singles mixer. Richard insisted that she had been hard for him to get to. “You were surrounded by a wall of men,” he said. “I had to get through a wall of men.”

“There was no wall of men,” she replied. “I was hiding in the bathroom.”

He continued to insist that there was a wall of men. She continued to insist that she was hiding in the bathroom.

A week later, they went to the Metropolitan Opera and saw “Tosca.” Two years later, they married. More than a decade later, they are the parents of 10-year-old boys. She ends her column with these words:

When I ask myself how I managed to get so lucky, I think: Because my life in music didn’t work out. Because I went to an expensive law school even though I had no money. Because I needed a well-paying job. Because the law firm assigned me Daniel as an officemate. Because Daniel sent me that email reminder.

But most crucial, I think, is that I stopped hiding in the bathroom before it was too late.

On the cusp of this New Year, I don’t know where you are hiding. I don’t know how you are avoiding the divine call to embody goodness in this world — to show love to someone who is lonely, to speak truth to someone who’s in denial, to create beauty in a place of ugliness, to pursue justice in a place of unfairness, to risk adventure in a place of fearfulness, to make peace in a place of conflict.

My guess is that you’re not hiding in the wilderness or the desert. You’re probably not hiding under a bodhi tree. And you may not be hiding in the bathroom.

But if you’re like me and everyone else I know, there’s a part of your life where you’re hiding, waiting for the moment to pass when you could step forward. You’re trying to play it safe, reduce the risk of failure, and direct attention elsewhere. Wherever you’re trying to hide, and whatever you’re trying to avoid, it’s time to stop.

This is the season of epiphany, when divine goodness fills us and flows through us. Let it fill you with goodness inside. Let it flow through you. You will become the person you are meant to be. You will become the person the world needs you to be. Make this a banner season for all that is good. Stop hiding — before it’s too late.