I come to the Passion Narrative in the Gospel According to John with very mixed feelings. I am a Christian. That should come as no surprise to you. But what you may not know about me is that I am the wife of a Rabbi. I am also the daughter of a Jew, a man whose experience of anti-Semitism while serving his country as a very young man in World War II was so traumatic that he legally changed his name after the war, and never once spoke to me about the faith of his childhood. That's just a taste of the impact that anti-Semitism—or any kind of prejudice, for that matter—can have on a beloved child of God.

What is one of the most holy days of the year for Christians has all too often been one of the most terrifying days of the year for Jews. To understand this, consider the account of the Resurrection appearances that we hear on the Second Sunday of Easter. We hear that the disciples cowered in a locked room "for fear of the Jews."[1] Ironically, for centuries, Jews around the world have cowered in locked rooms on Good Friday, *for fear of the Christians*. Whipped up by hearing the Passion Gospel in John, Christians frequently inflicted all manner of violence on their Jewish neighbors. This misplaced desire for a scapegoat, someone to blame for Christ's willing death on a cross, has found expression in acts of physical, psychological, and spiritual abuse of Jews, leading to such sins

[1] John 20:19

as stereotyping, discrimination, mass expulsions, pogroms, and even genocide.

Although it may be tempting to just skip over the painful events of Good Friday and fast-forward to Easter joy, there can be no Resurrection without the Crucifixion; no Easter without Good Friday. And so this day offers a very real challenge: How do we honor our religious tradition without denigrating those who do not embrace that heritage, those who have been persecuted on the basis of the very text that we hold sacred? As Episcopalians in the Anglican tradition, we believe that both the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. This means that we need to take what they say seriously and thus cannot simply dismiss the troubling language in John's Passion Narrative as outdated or irrelevant. This also means that we don't approach Scripture as the inerrant Word of God that requires no interpretation. Context matters.

John's Gospel was written after the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem, a time of bitter conflict in the Jewish community between those who believed Jesus was the Messiah and those who did not. This was an intra-Jewish dispute--a family squabble, as it were. We must not read into this Gospel now what wasn't there at the time it was written. That is, we must not assume that there was some clear line separating Christians and Jews. To state the obvious, there weren't any "Christians" when Jesus lived on this earth—the religion now

called Christianity arose as a response to God's saving act in the Resurrection.

Much of the controversy surrounding John's Passion Narrative centers on the translation of a particular Greek phrase, *hoi Ioudaioi* (*hoy-ee-oo-DAH-oh-ee*). In some English translations (including both the King James and New Revised Standard Versions), that Greek phrase is rendered as "the Jews" each time it appears in the text. However, recent scholarship notes that the meaning of this phrase is actually more nuanced and depends on context.[2] Sometimes it refers to the people of Judea, part of ancient Palestine. Sometimes it refers to the local religious authorities (the synagogue leadership or a certain faction within that synagogue). Sometimes it refers to the Jerusalem Temple's religious leadership (the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees).

With Bishop Megan's permission, this year in our Good Friday evening service we are using an alternate translation of the 19th Chapter of John that reflects this nuance.[3] As you listened to the Gospel, you may have noticed the phrases "the Judeans" and "the Judean leaders" in several places. To be clear, you also heard the phrase "the Jews," but only when the context indicates that

[2] Marilyn J. Salmon, Preaching without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), pp. 110-111.

[3] Copies of the alternate translation as well as an alternate Good Friday Liturgy created by the Seminary of the Southwest can be found at https://www.epicenter.org/for-leaders/clergy-resources/good-friday-resources.

the reference is to the Jewish people and their religious customs.

Here are three other things to remember on Good Friday as we wrestle with this difficult text. First, John's account of the Crucifixion makes it clear that Jesus was a willing and providential victim. In John's version, no one else had control over the course of events (Jesus allowed himself to be arrested; Pilate wasn't able to obtain His release). Furthermore, Jesus foresaw all that was to happen and helped bring it about, in order to fulfill scripture.

Second, the Romans had final authority on all capital punishment verdicts in the Empire of which Palestine was a part at the time of Jesus. Crucifixion was a Roman punishment; the prescribed Jewish mode of capital punishment at that time was stoning (think of the fate of the first Deacon, Stephen). The Romans willingly executed Jesus because they feared that He would attempt to become a king. This posed a direct challenge to the political order of the Roman Empire, in which Caesar claimed to be the ultimate secular authority.

Finally, to condemn an entire people, across time and space, for the actions of a few individuals in a particular place at a particular time, is *unjust*. It flies in the face of what it means to be a Christian. In our Baptismal Covenant, we promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons," to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." (BCP p.

305) It is also *heretical*. Christians believe that Christ is the true Pascal Lamb; that He died once for all, and therefore there is no need for any other scapegoat, ever. To blame "the Jews" for Christ's death—to treat them as scapegoats—is in effect to re-crucify our Lord.

How does John's Passion Narrative speak to us today? In what ways do *we* scapegoat the Other? Here are a few possibilities to consider. How do we treat those whose race, religion, or ethnicity differs from ours? Those living unhoused? Those living with physical or mental health challenges? Those who identify as LGBTQIA+? Good Friday calls us to both acknowledge and repent the ways in which we too have crucified our Lord and continue to crucify Him by failing to love one another in all our diversity as He has loved us.

In a few minutes, we will pray the Solemn Collects for Good Friday. As we recite and meditate on these sacred texts, may we be especially mindful of the admonition to pray "for those who in the name of Christ have persecuted others, That God will open their hearts to the truth, and lead them to faith and obedience." (BCP p. 279) May we be open to the possibility that we too have persecuted others, knowingly and unknowingly, in the name of Christ. May God give us the willingness and ability to repent and atone for those sins. And may we pray for all those who have been persecuted in the name of Christ. **AMEN**