

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Please rise in body or in spirit for our responsive Psalm reading, which is number 40 in your black psalter.

I waited patiently for you, O God. He stoops to me and heard my cry.

Congregation:

You lifted me up from a desolate pit, out of mire and clay. He set my feet upon a high cliff, and made my feet firm.

Elizabeth Propst:

You put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

Congregation:

Many shall see and stand in awe, and put their trust in you.

Elizabeth Propst:

In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure. You have given me ears to hear you.

Congregation:

Burnt offering and sin offering, you do not require. And so I said, "Behold, I come."

Elizabeth Propst:

In the role of the book it is written concerning me, I love to do your will, oh, my God, your law is deep in my heart.

Congregation:

I proclaim righteousness in the great congregation. Behold, I have not restrained my lips, and that, O God, you know.

Elizabeth Propst:

Your righteousness, have I not hidden in my heart. I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance. I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation.

Congregation:

You are the only one. Do not withhold your compassion for me. Let your love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.

Elizabeth Propst:

Our reading this morning is from the 10th chapter of the letter to the Hebrews beginning at the first verse. "Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered since the worshippers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, He said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me, and burnt offerings and sin offerings, you have taken no pleasure. Thus I said, see God, I have come to do your will. Oh, God. In the scroll of the book, it is written of me.'

When He said above you have neither desired nor taken pleasure and sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings which are offered according to the law. Then he added, 'See I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the first in order to establish the second, and it is by God's will that we have been sanctified to the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all." Here ends the lesson. So if you don't think you've got much of that, don't feel bad. The letter to the Hebrews which is assigned by the church lectionary as a reading this morning is famously dense and something of an anomalous text within the New Testament, both its author and the audience for which it was originally intended are unknown. But what you might have heard in this passage is a central part of the history of this text, which is that it has been received as an essentially anti-Jewish text as promoting the theological idea of radical supersessionism.

The idea that with the coming of Christ, God had abandoned the Jewish people and the Jewish faith, and that Jewish ritual after the coming of Christ was at best archaic, at worst heretical. A lot of contemporary scholars think that this probably isn't what the author of the letter to the Hebrews originally meant to say. There's a lot of nuance, theological and historical context to consider, but history indicates to us that when Christians are given a choice between grappling with the nuances of theological ambiguity and finding simple reasons to kill people who seem different from us and take all of their stuff, nuance very rarely comes out on top. And thus the letter to the Hebrews has been a central justification that Christians have turned to throughout our long and vicious history of anti-Jewish violence.

One of the classes that most shaped my worldview that I took during college was a tiny, tiny medieval literature class, the most humanities class to ever humanity. Just three students and our professor. Reading the literature during the medieval periods that expresses the depth of the violence and the hatred that has characterized the Christian relationship with Judaism, or more accurately the Christian relationship with its own construction of Judaism. One of the ideas from this class that we studied that most stuck with me was a belief during the medieval period in what was called the blood libel, the idea that Jewish ritual demanded the ritual sacrifice of humans, particularly Christian children, and so often throughout the medieval period, first in England and then across the continent, when a child was killed and the murderer was unknown, death was always blamed on the local Jewish community. Sometimes, there were trials. In other towns, mobs of Christians worked into a frenzy, would simply wipe out their town's entire Jewish population.

This week, as I was thinking about the letter to the Hebrews, by coincidence, I was also doing the first week of readings for a course on Christianity and the Holocaust. We were reading the context of Christian antisemitism as it projected into the modern period, reading scholars who argue convincingly I think, and deeply necessarily that while the surface-level rationalizations of antisemitism throughout the 19th and 20th centuries might've shifted from a of religious superiority to a secular narrative of racial superiority, the emotional imaginative force at the heart of antisemitism has always been the

construction of Judaism for which Christianity is responsible. We can see a short, sharp line between the binary implied in the letter to the Hebrews, that Judaism is trapped in the past and trapped in sin, while Christians are made innocent and move into the future, to this medieval idea that the Jewish faith is pathologically jealous of Christian innocence and Christian futurity to the extent that they have to murder Christian children.

To the justifications proposed during the Shoah for its violence, that it was a necessary consequence of modern progress necessary to protect a race that was somehow nobler, more innocent. I really struggled this week to read the letter to the Hebrews and receive it as scripture. I struggled to see in its lines where God might be waiting. And I tried to get into the passage itself. I read commentaries and I went back to the creek and I read the historical scholarship that thinks about this text's original context and I tried to think about sanctification or the will of God, sacrifice. But in the end, I struggled and finally found it impossible, at least this week, to see past the last 2000 years of this text's historical context, the way that it has been used to justify bodies broken and bloodshed in the name of Christ. How should we encounter God in this text? How can we still read it as scripture? Like any good English major, I don't have many ideas myself, but I do have some poetry I can quote at you.

Some lines from T.S. Eliot, "You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, or inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid." If the letter to the Hebrews no longer seems to resonate as a theological instruction manual, and if we don't want to consign it to history as a historical artifact, I think we could at least still approach this text in the words of Eliot as a place where prayer is more than valid, as an altar, perhaps, as a place where our prayers for forgiveness, for humility, for the strength to give up power when it comes at the cost of the vulnerable can be heard. Perhaps it can remain a place to perform the very rituals that the letter to the Hebrews tells us are no longer necessary, a place year after year to make remembrance of our sin, year after year, a place to kneel and make of our broken hearts, an offering to God. Will you join me in a moment of silent prayer?

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. Please join in our closing hymn, number 41.

Christ has no hands in this world but yours, no voice but yours, so may our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love, today and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.