

This might get a tad uncomfortable, so grab onto your nuance and hold on tight. “The Jews” show up in the Gospel according to John about 70 times, but it’s not always clear who they are. Sometimes they’re just people. Sometimes they’re leaders. Sometimes they’re a faceless crowd. On three out of the last four Sundays, John’s Gospel shot barbs at the Jews. Today, too. And on Good Friday, the Sunday after Easter, and Pentecost, we’ll hear the phrase “for fear of the Jews.” That’s not the only thing the Gospel says, of course, but it’s a biggun’, especially as we turn our focus to the cross. When it comes to anti-Semitic language in the Gospel of John, y’all, that’s the stuff of PhD dissertations, so there’s gonna be some significant oversimplification here. Suffice it to say that using the Gospel of John to justify anti-Semitism is dishonest to the text, but people do it anyway.

I bring this up because anti-Semitism’s getting more traction. It’s atrocious, but it is rooted in a particular, un-nuanced reading of scripture. Take those dry bones in Ezekiel. Some argue that those bones were all dried up because Israel would eventually reject Jesus, and the reanimated valley full of the dead happened as a kind of foreshadowing. The end of the psalm makes it clear that Israel has sins that need God’s redeeming. And there’s all that “fear of the Jews” I just mentioned in John. In one, the Jews are stubborn; in another, they’re unfaithful; in another, they’re dangerous. It may be easy to slip into that kind of thinking, but it’s lazy. I don’t know why it’s so hard to distinguish between the modern state of Israel, modern Jewish people (religious and secular), the ancient states of Israel and Judea at various times in their existence, the individual named Israel (née Jacob), the offspring of the individual named Israel (née Jacob), leaders of the Jewish people, regular Jewish people, the Hebrew people, and the patriarchs and matriarchs that predated all of ‘em. Seriously, I don’t know why it’s so hard for so many, but the refusal to make those distinctions has led to the convenient, accessible, wrong-but-facile scapegoating of an entire group of people for thousands of years.

With all that said, we gotta talk about the modern state of Israel. To put it lightly, the state is not behaving well. That doesn’t mean the Pharisees or the crowds or the Jews are to blame for what’s happening. It means the state of Israel is to blame. The terrifying history of anti-Semitism and the continued scapegoating of the Jews cannot be ignored, of course. But also, Israel should not get a free pass, which is precisely what’s happened in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iran, to name a few. I’m not saying those places are better or more deserving of existence than Israel, but their citizens have the right to the freedom and safety granted to any other sovereign nation.

It gets trickier. Being called anti-Semitic is a terrible mark on one’s character, and some use the threat of the label to Israel’s advantage which leads to too many people of conscience remaining silent while Israel commits atrocities. Don’t hear this as me siding with Hamas or Hezbollah or Iran, by the way. There’s a lot of evil in this mess. It’s easier, faster to let nuance slip away: “if Israel’s always the good guys, then what they do is always justifiable, and if they’re always the bad guys, then what’s done to them is always justifiable.” We’re smarter than that. You’re smarter than that.

Now, there’s another layer to all this: the ability to critique Israel is as necessary as it is for any country, but also, the critique of Israel can slip into anti-Semitism real quick. We know this, but it isn’t always easy to see. In the current not-a-war with Iran, social media’s full of reports of actual and

fabricated incidents used for propaganda by every side. Of course it is. But the temptation to shift from critiquing Israel's atrocities to cheering on atrocities committed against Israel is grossly apparent in real time. On a video of an Iranian bomb hitting Tel Aviv, the comments cheered for the death of everyday Israelis. Maybe that's just picking sides in a war, but it bears the seeds of anti-Semitism. More comments piled on, gleefully cheering the suffering of Israel in a way that transcends nuance and leaps straight to great evil: the glee of watching Jews suffer. And in a tragic twist, how Israel responds has a way of breeding more anti-Semitism. Were Israel to fight back like other nations, that might not be the case, but every time the Israeli government commits another war crime, they provide more fodder (legitimate or not) for anti-Semites to blur the line between a government, a religion, and a people. And that puts normal Israelis (some of whom aren't even Jewish, mind you) on the receiving end of the suffering their perverse leaders reap for them. Combining the government's dishonest use of Judaism with the government's cruelty makes nuance harder to see. And that all makes Jews outside of Israel into targets, too.

For what it's worth, it's similar for Muslims. It's far too easy to convolute the tenets of the religion with the practices of governments. Is Iran an oppressive regime because of Islam or because of tyrants? You could just as easily ask if Israel's committing genocide because of Judaism or because of tyrants. From a very simplified place, it's the same question, and it's the same answer. Religions promoting love and community and peace (and all the Abrahamic religions do) are not the problem. Tyrants wielding the power of distorted religion are the problem. Would that the United States and Christianity were immune.

Over the course of Lent and into the weeks ahead, we've got to be careful with the way we hear and talk about and live out our scriptures. That's always true, but with tyrants wielding the stolen power of religion misused to justify hatred, this year we've gotta be extra careful. Whether we're raising Lazarus from the dead or burying the Messiah, we don't get to these places because the Jews are uniquely to be feared. We get to these places because our faith sprang up in a specific context, and to tell our story with integrity that context's gotta be included. Context matters, nuance matters, and when we tell our story full of ancient hopes and betrayals and miracles, we've gotta be aware of how all those ancient things show up in the fast of Lent and the feast of Easter, especially with Good Friday coming up. The point isn't hating any group. The point is loving God. How humanity ever managed to get those things twisted, I'll never understand.

In a way, it's why every prophet ever popped up, why Jesus popped up, why we need the yearly reminder of where we come from and what we're for. We try to get this whole faith thing right; but no matter how good we get at it, we will fall short or see some error wiggle its way in. So every year we get the seasonal reminder we need for humility not just before God but before other people, including people of other faiths. The motes in their eyes are so easy to call out while ignoring the absolute telephone poles in ours. The point for us is Jesus, and faith, and hope, and all those cuddly things we put on Easter cards. God's got other sheep in other sheepfolds, so to speak; don't worry about them. Love God and love your neighbor doesn't come with caveats, not even John's authors could scare those out of us. Love God and love your neighbor -- that's our purpose. Did ya catch what that purpose leaves out? Hatred directed at anyone. Call out evil, but love your neighbor, all your neighbors, Jewish, Muslim, Iranian, Israeli, or just Hamiltonian. Love 'em all. Call out evil, but love 'em all.