

ISAIAH 1:1, 10-20 or GENESIS 15:1-6

PSALM 50:1-8, 22-23 or PSALM 33:12-22

HEBREWS 11:1-3, 8-16

LUKE 12:32-40

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 7, 2022; Year C

Jewish! Jewish! Jewish!

There has long been a joke circulated among various denominational types as they advocate for their preference, playfully arguing about which denomination Jesus would prefer, which church he would choose to attend should he suddenly be magically, miraculously, teleported back to earth. Star Trek image intended! Of course, every denominational apologist would vouch for his or her denominational affiliate. I mean would he not want to be a part of a United Church of Christ congregation like ours because we are us? After all, we are who we are! Surely, without a doubt, Jesus would join a church within our glorious, gracious denomination, making our special beloved faith community his local church home. After all, membership has its privileges! Frankly, it is all a moot conversation, a silly debate, because if Jesus were to return to earth he would without any doubt or hesitation, go directly to the local synagogue or Temple! Jesus was Jewish! He lived and died a Jew and amazingly a surprise to some, he never converted to Christianity, a sectarian Jewish offshoot that did not yet even exist at the time of his death. This radical and probably repulsive idea never having entered his mind! In fact, and this is a hard pill for some to swallow, Jesus never envisioned a new brand of faith, never conceived of such. Jesus never sought to establish the Christian Church, something he was quite naturally blissfully unaware, a mutation he knew not of, including all its sectarian derivatives, manifestations that came to be known as denominations, as well as the numerous inter or non-denominational facsimiles thereof, every

variation, every flavor, imaginable. This ecclesial concept as an offspring of Judaism was never, ever, on Jesus' radar! All the references we read in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts about building the Church were each one carefully, conveniently and intentionally, placed in the Gospel narratives by the framers of the early Church after it was unceremoniously born out of being rudely rejected, a reactionary disfellowshipping from sacramental Jewish life. In other words, after Jewish converts to the way of Jesus were kicked out, bounced out, of synagogue and/or temple life. Yes, it was all a ruse, a sweet perfume of revisionist history, propaganda created to boost fragile and injured egos and to justify the fledgling Church's newfound, unanticipated, and unexpected existence! Jesus would have been shocked, horrified, mortified, at the thought of what became of his humble role as a peasant reformer and his impact on the faith of his forebears, his forefathers and foremothers. The creation of the ecclesia in the first century would have been not just a surprise, but a shock to his system, yes, an unexpected disappointment he would have never predicted. And I am fully aware that these are radically hard words for virgin ears to hear, even if they carry profoundly substantive meaning for all of us who follow Jesus today.

I will never forget being a chaperone for a weeklong youth camp during my first ministry position as a youth minister. I will confess that I was the worst ever, totally not cut out for whatever magic it takes to be successful in that herding cats kind of job. On the first evening, one of my colleagues was leading the Bible Study for the group. I was a sophomore in college and really knew next to nothing about the Bible and really did not even know that I wanted to know much about the Bible. I was going to be a full time Christian educator once I graduated from seminary and would be more concerned with the various curricula that go into creating and maintaining a good Christian education program in a local missional church. We were instructed to locate Hebrews and whatever verses were of paramount importance in that

moment. Well, I had no clue where Hebrews was located and did not have the foggiest idea how to find it. All I could think, is that with a name like Hebrews, surely, certainly, this book of the Bible was in what we called at the time the Old Testament. Sounds reasonable to me, a logical deduction if I might say! It never dawned on me that this wonderful book seeking to connect the ancient faith of Israel with its new emerging, evolving, expression, the fledgling faith adaptation, whose adherents would eventually be called “Christian”, a moniker given them at Antioch. Up until that point they were simply known as “followers of the way,” and were still very much a sectarian part of Jewish sacramental life. Seeing my humiliated frustration, someone, I cannot remember who, probably one of the youth, reached over and pointed me in the right direction, showing me exactly, in what we then called the New Testament, where the Book of Hebrews was to be found. How embarrassing! Not having paid attention to such trivial matters in my own development, I skipped all the Sword Drill exercises that came with being a loyal Southern Baptist youth, I realized that I needed, at a bare minimum, to learn in a hurry where to find all the books of the Bible.

One other story helps me launch today’s sermon and it also takes me back to my Southern Baptist days, a little more advanced than this nightmare scenario that took place at youth camp. In 1981, the late pastor eventually turned evangelist Bailey Smith shocked the conscience of the Southern Baptist Convention by declaring before a crowd gathered to hear President Ronald Reagan, that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.” It seemed as if the whole world heard it in an instant! The backlash and outcry were palpable, with moderate, progressive, liberal Baptists from all across the country writing letters and making other tangible and demonstrative protests condemning this horrifically ignorantly viewpoint based on narrowly defined musings befitting bigoted bias, prejudicial piety, and stereotypical stupidity. Smith’s unsolicited and unwarranted elitist

opinion had no basis in fact or intelligent engagement whatsoever. I bring these images to light today because there is a desperate need among Christians of good will, that would hopefully be all of us, to rediscover, or perhaps discover for the first time, the richness of our Jewish heritage, to embrace the theological Judaic underpinnings that formed the foundation, the cornerstone of our faith, the moorings that gave us solid footing and rooted us in the ancient faith of all our forebears. **Simply put, Jews are our brothers and sisters in faith! Full stop! Of course, in all honesty and candor, everybody else in search of the ultimate reality of God-presence is also blessed as a fellow seeker, a fellow sibling. The relationship between Christianity and Judaism constitutes an inseparable membrane, hardwired in so many tangible ways, cohesively enmeshed in an embryonic connectivity that, all things being considered, should have kept our two faith traditions in close relationship, a proximity among peers, but sadly has failed to do so, with antisemitism becoming the norm among many whose anger, hostility, and blatant ignorance regarding Jews and Judaism has led to atrocities manifest with the worst imaginable outcomes, horrific consequences born of distrust and suspicion, the Holocaust being the most notable but not the only horror in history as we have painfully witnessed and vicariously experienced.** This pervasively perpetuating myth is sadly, clearly, reinforced in the biblical narrative, especially in John's Gospel in the Passion texts. Succinctly put, the inane idea is that the Jews killed Jesus, that they were primarily responsible for his death, that they colluded with, were co-conspirators with, the powers and principalities of Roman imperialism, Pilate serving as Herod's lackey only going with the flow to keep the peace. This fallaciously mythological history, though biblically motivated, continues to drive irrational reactionary violence against a people who have no axe to grind against Christian people of good will.

At the time of the writing of the Book of Hebrews, early Christians were struggling to barely get a foothold, much less a stronghold,

caught between two worlds, Rome and Israel, neither of which embraced the now deceased Jesus' merry band of followers, but regrettably both extremities, these diametrically opposed polarities, exhibited in the kind of hostility that always accompanies fear. Insecurity breeds contempt and is irrationally manifest when anxieties and insecurities and outright mistrust, suspicion, and paranoia, threaten systemic world orders. It is the kind of negatively unproductive stuff often based in gossip, in rumor and innuendo. The occasion for the Book of Hebrews was indeed the great persecution of the early Church that had begun, probably under the Roman Emperor Domitian!¹ For a while, Jews and Christians coexisted and comingled, maintaining a certain detente if not getting along rather well, worshipping together in the synagogues and at temple, those who followed Jesus simply understood to be embracing a sectarian adaptation, a new variant, of Judaism, but still a loyal but quirky part of the family. No problem! But as time passed quickly, the theological differences being articulated by these early Christians prohibited the two suddenly distinct groups from staying together, peacefully or not. The Jews had found a way to pacify Rome, to get along with Roman occupational dominance, keeping the peace by staying out of trouble, not rocking the societal boat, winking and nodding as they went, giving tacit approval of the Caesar and Roman imperialism. Christianity in its hardline form and unwavering stance, threatened that fragile and faux civility because committed Christians would never under even the most threatening of circumstances dare swear allegiance to, to bow and scrape in servitude to Caesar, something the Jews had learned to passively acquiesce, benignly or politely so. Jesus' followers would rather die than condescend, to compromise, and many began dying as martyrs, their general story woven throughout the emerging Christian scriptures. Sadly, Christians were literally caught in the crossfire, stretched between two competing and yet colluding factions, yes,

¹H. T. Andrews, "Hebrews," in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. Frederick Carl Eiselen, Edwin Lewis, and David G. Downey (New York and Nashville: The Abingdon Press, 1929), 1295.

trying to survive in the midst of what amounted to a proverbial “no man’s land.” It was an impossible feat, trying to maintain peace amidst a peaceless society, hoping to remain in good stead within the bounds of Judaism which gave them birth, and the psychotic Caesar worship—think North Korean “Dear Leader” nonsense—that was required by the confines of an inflexible Roman imperialism. Caught in these polarities, the fragile system emerging and evolving as Christianity was only now beginning to take shape, to materialize, within the loose organizational rubrics of early Christian believers. There was simply no way to withstand the strain. Now believed to be heretics, apostate, in terms of traditional, what we now call orthodox Judaism, Jesus’ followers were burned at the stake, fed to lions, entertainment at the hands of well-toned and experienced gladiators, the lot of Jesus’ followers was often met with a cruelly ill-fated end.

Out of expediency, survival necessity, employing skillful negotiations and feigned promises, the Jews survived in this authoritarian, dictatorial, and nationalistic and Roman imperialistic, civic landscape. Eventually and no doubt inevitably, the Jews seemed compelled by circumstances, forced by prevailing winds and ominously circling signs, to summarily throw away some of their brothers and sisters, tossing the growing Christian community and its growing movement under the proverbial bus, making them a scapegoat, family and friends hung out to dry, for the civil unrest that would soon climax with the second fall of Jerusalem and its temple in 70CE. It reminds me of Hank Williams Jr.’s song “Family Tradition,” with the repeated refrain, “I guess I went and broke their family tradition!” Yes, this event was a major defining point informing, impacting, and influencing many of the Jewish flavored and infused writings that form what we now call the Christian scriptures, though, in the interest of full disclosure, the Book of Hebrews was written a few short years prior to this massive destruction. At the martyrdom of Polycarp for example, it is reported that the Jews were “especially zealous in

gathering wood for the fire. . .”² As Floyd V. Filson notes in his book, *A New Testament History: The Story of the Emerging Church*, “such evidence indicates that down to the middle of the second century, clashes occurred between the Jews and the Christians. In that period the Christians could not defend themselves by legal means or by force, but the Jews at times could persecute the Christians or stir up official or (g)entile” i.e., Roman “hostility toward them. This action was not merely a power struggle or an expression of jealousy. From the outset the claim of Jesus Christ put before the Jews a basic choice. They could accept’ the outlandish claim that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, Savior and Lord “and become followers of Jesus, or they could react with horror and indignation against him and his followers who gave him a more than human role.”³ And that last phrase about giving “him a more than human role” is your key! There’s your sign! When the early Church began to understand Jesus as part divine, a hybrid being consisting of an odd combination of both humanity and divinity, they would have found that to be abhorrent, an aberration, freakish, an oddball freak of nature, the very idea that Jesus was to be equated with God incarnate, a deity, all bets were off with traditional Jews mortified, completely offended, finding this anathema abhorrent and completely unacceptable. As long as Jesus stayed in his lane as a humble Jewish rabbi and nothing more, all was well! H. T. Andrews notes, “it was never an easy thing in the first century to reconcile Christianity with the old Jewish faith. To the mind of the Jews, it was a fundamental belief that the O. T. contained the final revelation of God and that in the Law of Moses God had made known completely (God’s) will and purpose. If that is so, what need is there of any further revelation? Does not Christianity become superfluous? What room is left for Jesus Christ?”⁴ Again, as long as he was Jesus, the man from

²Floyd V. Filson, *A New Testament History: The Story of the Emerging Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 330-331.

³Ibid., 331.

⁴Andrews, “Hebrews,” 1295.

Nazareth, a real human being devoid of magical, mystical, miraculous powers, everything was fine and dandy, but add “Christ” and not so much! The schism was painful and permanent with lingering bad feelings on both sides. The die was cast for an unfortunate future between the great tradition of Israel’s religious persuasion and the up and comer, upstart, Christianity that would take the world by storm, becoming the accepted norm, first in the Roman Empire and then beyond all a result of Emperor Constantine’s conversion in 325CE.

Into these crucible moments and unthinkable dynamics, into the vortex of this rapidly moving time exacerbated by a toxic laden stressful situation with seemingly no way out of the dilemma, unfortunately with no apparent resolution available, came the unknown writer of the Book of Hebrews, in my estimation, doing the best that could be done, perhaps somehow coming to the rescue, writing under trying and the absolute direst, the worst, of stressful circumstances. As a matter-of-fact sidebar, the Book of Hebrews almost failed to be voted in, accepted as part of the New Testament canon because of its debatable and thus suspect authorship! Even so, that being acknowledged, the Book of Hebrews is the most Jewish composition we have in the Christian scriptures. As one writer muses, “The Epistle to the Hebrews therefore is the first attempt to create a philosophy,” thus theology, “of the Christian religion.”⁵ A subtle, subliminal, but provocative goal in the narrative seems to be the impossible attempt to connect the symbiotic relationship of two religions that had split and had become dangerously adversarial and even sworn enemies in their newly established permanent schism. I must take issue, however, with the conclusion in Hebrews that Jesus represented the perfect High Priest, the perfect sacrifice, an image that gave rise to the heretical fallacy known as Substitutionary Atonement, a grievous act that turned God into a child abuser and murderer. Not a

⁵Ibid., 1296.

good look despite its biblical underpinnings! The need to “one up” Judaism we could have all done without! By the way, for those keeping score, a “Hebrew was a conservative type of Jew who maintained the use of the Hebrew tongue, used a Hebrew Bible, and carried out strictly the injunctions of the Jewish law even though he might be living in a foreign land.”⁶

This anonymous writer composes from the perspective of someone intimately knowledgeable about the history of the children of Israel even as this writer was aware of the expanding conversion of Gentiles due to the evangelistic missionary enterprises of Paul and his proteges far beyond the confines, the trappings of the protectively insular circle of Judaism to the Hellenistic world, representing the very ends of the earth as it was once naively understood by the ancients. Basically, in essence the writer was educating Greeks about all things Jewish! It is obvious that this writer longed for continuity, grieving the schism that by all intents and purposes was transpiring in real time. It was important to maintain even the slightest semblance of relationship. And so, much like Peter in his famous sermon at the first Pentecost after Jesus’ death, against the backdrop of the manifestation of the Spirit mysteriously, magically and miraculously, sent on all Jewish participants gathered, the creative and imaginative writer of Hebrews tells the story of the salvation history of Israel, beginning with the father of the faithful, and I would argue, the father of biblical hospitality, his story by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18 describing the cultural phenomenon of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, not only as a defining event, but in greatest detail. Abraham as the great patriarch is rightfully honored as a prophetic progenitor of three of the world’s major religious faiths. As the quintessential nomadic herder, Abraham was and is clearly a precursor to contemporary Bedouin culture which down through the centuries codified hospitality as a unique

⁶Ibid., 1298.

phenomenon born in the Near East. Unbeknownst to him, Abraham would one day stand at the intersection of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Folks, it has taken more than 2000 years for some of us in Christendom's vast array of seemingly almost endless expressions of our multifaceted faith to finally figure out what we should have always known or at least somewhat suspected, that we desperately need our Jewish brothers and sisters, siblings in faithfulness who, though somewhat by accident, at least by default, birthed us and by an inseparably linked close knit kinship firmly helped shape our own tradition and theology. Sometimes it seems as if we do not know what to do with our Jewish forebears, how to engage them, how to be in authentic, genuine dialogue and relationship. It is long past high time for a better and necessary understanding, a deeper appreciation, a stronger relationship, born of the roots that are ours to behold and share, to celebrate and enjoy as heirs of the Abrahamic faith that spawned our faith and should continue to nurture our being and doing as we faithfully live and move and have our being. The difference is one of being complete versus incomplete, connected versus disconnected, integrated versus segregated. The difference is palpable, damaging and dangerous, often leading to suspicion, mistrust, and outright hostility. One of the beautiful byproducts of reengaging and reestablishing at least a modicum, at some level, some kind, of baseline cohesive connectivity as direct descendants of Israel's covenantal promise, yes, as heirs, through Abraham and his myriad offspring of tribes and nations, is that we are just now learning to read the Christian scriptures through Jewish lenses, through Jewish eyes. After all, while these writings were written to Gentiles as much as to Jews, they are Jewish documents. It is in their collective DNA! It is amazing that this absolutely basic, and yes, necessary caveat has been missing from so much of our study and biblical scholarship for most of our brief, our young, 2000-year history. The late John Shelby

Spong, often dissed by more serious or erudite scholars, was one of the first to take note of this angle and take this case beyond a surface and often lost theory. In his commentaries of Matthew and John he clearly shows the connectivity between Jesus' ministry as the new and improved Moses and the bridge galvanizing the relationship of the early Church to traditional Judaism. Yes, there will be studies coming your way to flesh this out in detail! Teaser alert! Once we unlock this important, impactful, key, there is no confusion left to the imagination, the evidence clear as a bell. Even though many of the epistles were written to Gentiles in what was a radically different approach than what was practiced in Judaism, i.e., conversion through demonstrative evangelistic missionary means, these narratives were written by Jewish authors whose background therefore was Jewish. Only in understanding the nuance of Jewish writing, the communal and cultural ideologies that are often hidden but clearly lurking in these ancient texts brimming with informative contextual and cultural material, can we even begin to understand the purpose and content of these writings. The first thing we learn is that ancient Jewish writers did not get hung up on literalism and did not write literal history, from a literal perspective, and thus their works are generally categorized as "narrative" or "salvation" history, yes, full of embellishment and exaggeration. With that understanding, all the stories of the Christian scriptures take on new meaning and surprisingly and perhaps more importantly, less meaning, literalism nothing more than a dead-end street to better interpretation and fuller and richer understanding. It really is that simple!

One of the reasons I felt the need to preach on a topic that in some ways seems more fitting, more adept, in a classroom setting, is that antisemitism, with its outright hatred and hostility toward Jews and their sacred places of worship, is once again rearing its ugly head and seems like it is headed for an all-time high. The mass murder at The Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was a canary in the

proverbial coal mine, a tip of the iceberg, a sadistic indicator, letting us know that this societal scourge was metastasizing and becoming radically mainstream. If you are not aware, the theory driving this irrational evil is the nonsensical but pervasively demonic thing called “replacement theory,” the idea that Jews are manipulating a conspiracy to mix all the races of the world in order to achieve a superior race and world dominance. I heard this kind of crap as a child in my house, it simply did not have such a sophisticated scholarly name, even a name at all. You will notice, interestingly enough, that many commercials today show mixed-race couples. Those who espouse “replacement theory” swear that this is a part of a defiantly and deviously demonic conspiracy, yes deviant in its subterfuge, indoctrination Kool-Aid fueling subversive programming designed to desensitize white Americans and Europeans into deluding themselves into thinking that this behavior is okay, that it is acceptable, admirable, even advocated. They believe that these commercials, as is all of Hollywood, and many movers and shakers within the federal government, is being fed, fueled, and funded by the Jews! As people who follow Jesus and believe in his welcoming and inclusively loving, gracious, peaceful and merciful, ways, we must, as part of our hospitable beliefs and actions, must name this heresy, this devilish insidiousness, for exactly what it is. We must be the ones to call it out when we see and hear it, to be a witness, declaring an alternative testimony. We must stand in the gap, building bridges, coalitions that affirm our affinity for our Jewish neighbors wherever they may be. When we do so, we make Jesus proud! The late Joseph Campbell, who wrote an epic work called *The Power of Myth* helps us recognize how stories, both ancient and contemporary, link together the fractured human race. Story is the way we discover that we are more alike than we are different from one another.

In his 1971 publication *Myths to Live By*, the late Joseph Campbell explores and then reflects on commonalities among the mythologies of the world’s many civilizations. Why does our story, our myth,

matter? It is because it helps to shape us, to help us form and understand our identity, our unique and particular ethos. To know our story is to know ourselves! We cannot really and truly know ourselves without knowing the story out of which we came to be. This is true for both individuals, communities, and cultures, all tribes and clans. The Book of Hebrews was written during a time when the young, fledgling, Church was struggling with its identity, the result of its sudden, unexpected, and unanticipated independence from what constituted its “Mother Church!” The irony, or not so much, is that we are still struggling with those dynamics, still coming to grips with who we are being as we go about our doing. Just as in “divers” times and places, throughout history and the centuries that have swiftly blown across the ages, the writer of Hebrews realized that in order to see clearly the dawn of a new day, a new way forward in hopes of a bright and prosperous future, that his contemporaries must first find ways to honor, respect, and learn from the many multifaceted twists and turns, the crisscrossing multi-forked roads they had traveled. It is for this reason that it is paramount that we maintain a strong connection with the faith tradition, the heritage, a rich legacy and precious heirloom that gave us birth and wings and continues to be ours to behold. The Judeo-Christian scriptures remind us that we are part and parcel of something that transcends time, past, present, and yes, the future. In recognizing those tried and tested truths in their various expressions we are then able to open ourselves to the eternal truths that continue to be revealed, the continuing revelation of the still speaking Spirit, in all our holy texts, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures alike. This stuff should not even be up for debate but should be a very real part of who we claim to be as followers of the man from Nazareth, Jewish, Jewish, Jewish, in every conceivable way imaginable. Intuitively, deep down in our spirit, we should know this! Yes, we know this to be true! After all, Jesus was a humble Jewish carpenter by birth and remained so throughout his much too brief life, dying as a rather effective Jewish rabbi I might add! Carpenter turned

Rabbi, not a bad career change! Thank you to the writer of the Book of Hebrews for giving us a much needed and not so subtle reminder!

I close with some poetic thoughts from Carol Amour (April 21, 2020), shared with me by the *Braiding Sweetgrass* group. It is so fitting to this sermonic journey as we discuss the continuity or lack thereof of relationship with our Jewish contemporaries and constituency. Amour waxes eloquent,

***It is difficult to tell where you end, and I begin.
More difficult to say what is yours, what mine.
What is up, what down.
Who is right, who wrong.
Perhaps this is the time
to let go of any need to be right,
Know it all, have the last word.
Perhaps this is the time
for us, not me.***

May this inviting and inclusive, welcoming and hospitable attitude beautifully articulated in prose be so for all God's children and for always!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and longs for all of us to be one, no matter our faithful expression, no matter how we get there. Amen and amen.

