

Forgive Us: Anit-Semitism

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[0 : 00] So, my name is Daniel. I'm one of the elders here at the table. I'm also part of our preaching team. And today I'm really excited to continue our Lenten series on Forgive Us.

So, we're in a time in the church calendar called Lent, which is typically a time set aside for repentance and for repair. I know those words sound kind of heavy, like when I think of repentance, I don't often think of something joyful.

I think of, like, heaviness and weight. And I want to encourage us to kind of recognize it as a joyful weight, as something that is spiritual work that leads us towards joy.

And this time we've been talking about the ways that the church has participated in oppression, caused harm in the world, and what it could look like for us to steal away from that, to use a term from hush harbors, to turn towards being a liberating church.

Additionally, one of our values here at the table is revolutionary justice. And we consider a starting point for that value to be the careful perception and naming of injustice.

[1 : 13] And that's part of why we've chosen to take time to talk about some specific historical topics. So far, we've talked about what repentance and repair can look like in our personal lives.

We've talked about Christian supremacy. We've talked about Christian Zionism. And today, we're going to be looking at another area that we're called to turn away from. Anti-Semitism.

Now, I've personally never heard a sermon on anti-Semitism in a church before. I've heard teachings and workshops in various other spaces, but I haven't heard a, what is a faithful response as a follower of Jesus look like to the historical sin of anti-Semitism.

It hasn't been a common topic in the churches that I've been part of. And I imagine that that might ring true for some of you as well. There is so much to say about this topic.

And my original sermon was over 30 pages long, which, if you know how long it takes to read 30 pages, you know that we'd still be here when our evening service starts.

[2 : 19] Now, I guarantee you, we're not going to be here that long. This version is shorter. I promise you that. But I want to be honest that I felt pretty nervous about the fact that I have to leave some things left unsaid.

And so what I'm doing here is I want to open up this conversation, trusting that we as a community are going to fill in the pieces, that we as a community will come back to this, and come back to this opening conversation about anti-Semitism.

The foundational question I'm trying to answer here is, as followers of Jesus, as members of a liberating church, how do we turn away from anti-Semitism?

And how do we, what is it that we're turning towards? I was faced directly with that question on August 12, 2017.

I walked into a friend's apartment for Havdala, which, for folks who might not be familiar, Havdala is a ritual, a ceremony that marks the end of the Sabbath. It's a time to reflect on rest, and get ready to enter the week again for the work ahead.

[3 : 36] My friend who was hosting it was part of a predominantly Jewish organizing collective that I had been a part of for about six months. I am not Jewish, and not everyone in this collective was Jewish, but it was predominantly centered around Jewish values and ideals.

And we had organized together throughout many of 2017's difficult moments, which, for all of our sakes, I won't recount, but I'm sure you can imagine some of what I referred to there.

We gathered in a somber mood, knowing that several hundred miles south of us in Charlottesville, Virginia, there was a large white nationalist gathering called Unite the Right.

One of the largest public convergences of white supremacists in years, there had been a broad coalition forming as a counter presence, hoping to create safety and protection for the residents of

Charlottesville, for its black, queer, migrant, and Jewish residents, many of whom had already received death threats.

As we gathered, we knew that we had very close friends who had traveled to Charlottesville that day as part of that broad, diverse coalition. And the fears of violence were validated the night before, August 11th, when a line of white nationalists marched through the University of Virginia, physically assaulting people and chanting, you will not replace us, which is a direct reference to something called the Great Replacement Theory, which essentially is a theory, a myth, that's anti-Semitic, that's racist, that Jews were aiming to replace, quote-unquote, good white Christian people by driving mass migration into the U.S. from the global south.

[5 : 30] And as we marked the end of Sabbath together, we held Charlottesville and all of our friends in our hearts. Knowing that the violence had escalated to the point that someone, Heather Heyer, had been killed at the gathering.

Unite the Right was a stark and painful example of how anti-Semitism is not a relic of the past, but alive here today with dangerous consequences.

Around a year later, I found myself in another room with the same people. The organizers behind the original Unite the Right were coming to D.C. for the creatively named Unite the Right 2.

Creativity is not a strength of the white nationalist movement, just to put that out there. And similarly to the previous year, a broad coalition full of diversity was planning a counter-response.

Now, in the midst of our planning, a member of the coalition said something to one of our Jewish organizers that was anti-Semitic. It was a kind of comment that often is called a microaggression.

[6 : 42] It was said in passing, after a meeting, in a one- to two-minute conversation. Now, the organizer in question here, who was accused of saying something anti-Semitic, insisted that they didn't mean anything by their statement.

And their friends insisted that they weren't the kind of person who would say things like that. After all, they were part of a coalition planning a direct rebuttal to open and overt anti-Semitism.

But at the same time, the organizers and my organizing collective insisted that, while they recognized that the intentions might not have been bad, that the comment was rooted in deep stereotypes about Jewish people and that it needed to be talked about and addressed.

In contrast to the explicit anti-Semitism of Unite the Right, the anti-Semitism that my friend experienced was a bit more subtle. And as we talk about anti-Semitism, I want us to hold space for both stories, recognizing that people of various backgrounds can engage in anti-Semitism and that is harmful in different ways.

Now, I promise I'm going to come back and tell you what came out of that story, but first, let's answer this foundational question. What is anti-Semitism? To be candid, I grew up knowing very little about Jewish people.

[8 : 11] I grew up on the West Coast, in Oregon, in an area that was primarily Protestant, primarily white, primarily Christian. Christian. To me, Jews were people who practiced Judaism and Judaism was what I read in the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians sometimes call the Old Testament.

That is an incredibly narrow perspective to put it generously to myself. Jewishness is something that, broadly speaking, can be considered an ethno-religion.

Essentially, what I mean by that is that people can be ethnically Jewish regardless of their religious practice or lack thereof. People can also be religiously Jewish regardless of their ethnicity or race.

Just to share three frameworks that I've personally found helpful on my journey of unlearning and dismantling anti-Semitism. There are Ashkenazi Jews, whose ancestors often lived in Central Eastern Europe, Mizrahi Jews, whose ancestors often lived in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, and Sephardic Jews, whose ancestors often lived in Portugal, Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East.

That's by no means an exhaustive list. If we had slides, you'd see a photo behind me of Sammy Davis, who is a black Jewish musician during the Civil Rights Movement.

[9 : 37] You'd see photos of Ethiopian Jews and Chinese Jews. So that is by no means an exhaustive list. With over 15 million Jews in the world and over 6 million in the U.S., there is so much diversity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion that I promise I'm going to say something that doesn't quite fit for some of those backgrounds.

But for the purpose of this, I'm going to work with a definition from some friends in New York, Jews for racial and economic justice. Their definition of anti-Semitism is this.

Originating in European Christianity, anti-Semitism is the form of ideological oppression that targets Jews. In Europe and in the United States, it has functioned to protect the prevailing economic system and the almost exclusively Christian ruling class.

It does this by diverting blame for hardship onto Jews. Like all oppressions, it has deep historical roots and uses exploitation, marginalization, discrimination, and violence as its tools.

Like all oppressions, the ideology contains elements of dehumanization and degradation via lies and stereotypes about Jews. things. I find this to be a really powerful and clear description and that highlights three elements I want to pull out of it.

[11 : 10] It talks about the economic system, which I'm going to talk about as economic exploitation. It talks about a almost exclusively Christian ruling class, which I'm going to talk about as power over other people.

and it talks about the tools that economic system and ruling class use, one of which is violence. Now, I don't think these broad themes of economic exploitation, power over, and violence as a tool are necessarily new to us here at the table.

I think many of us here have been wrestling with questions around what is our relationship to wealth? What is our relationship to power? how do we turn towards a non-violent gospel and way of life?

So I don't think that these three broad themes are necessarily new topics for us. We also see these themes show up repeatedly in scripture. Some of us here at the table have been reading through the gospels as part of Lent, and we see these themes clearly in places like Matthew 6.24, where Jesus says you can either serve mammon or you can serve God.

You can either serve wealth or God. We see them in the Beatitudes, where Jesus says blessed are the poor, the humble, the peacemakers. And in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, where after the blessings, Jesus goes on to say woe to the rich and woe to the powerful.

[12 : 41] So I tend to think of these three things as some of the pillars that typically uphold historical oppressions. I think when you look throughout history and scripture, you see economic exploitation, power over, and violence as a tool of control as broad themes that function differently in specific contexts but often uphold oppression.

So, let's take a look at how these three themes show up in anti-Semitism. One of the pillars of anti-Semitism is framing Jews as having exceptional wealth attained deviously or through taking advantage of other people.

Essentially, this pillar connects Jews to the economic exploitation within society. This framing is typically done in a way that allows people who truly control wealth within a society to avoid blame and to broadly direct the anger of the economically exploited towards Jewish people.

There is a long history behind this stereotype but this myth reached a dangerous peak in the early 1900s with the publication of something called The Prodigals of Zion which was a conspiratorial text completely fabricated that emerged from Russia initially and it depicted Jewish people as shadowy figures with access to lots of money who were pulling the strings behind the world's government.

The Prodigals of Zion spread across Europe in both its original form and in multiple different alterations including here in the U.S. where Henry Ford of the Ford Automotives directly disseminated a similar story.

[14 : 33] The Prodigals of Zion directly contributed to the rise of anti-Semitism pre-World War II using that myth of Jewish people having wealth at the expense of other people.

This myth operates in a few ways. First, it makes it hard for us to reckon with the way that Jewish people were actually excluded from economic systems as well. In the U.S., there are clear historical records showing times that Jews were part of restrictive racial housing covenants, meaning that if you were Jewish, there were homes you couldn't buy, neighborhoods you couldn't live in, and communities that you were excluded from.

This followed the pattern of communal exclusion that Jewish people experienced in Europe too. In some cases, Jews were taxed simply because they were Jewish.

Jewish. I want to go back to JFREJ, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, who summed this up well saying, when the workers in those countries, referring to European Christian nations, were angry about their exploitation, the most successful targets were often Jews rather than the elite political and economic actors who actually had power over the system and who were almost exclusively Christian.

The next pillar that upholds anti-Semitism is power over. In the U.S., this power over other people has often been expressed through white nationalism, this idea of white supremacy.

[16:17] So in brief, white nationalism is a viewpoint that is typically characterized by a trifecta of racism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia.

It's a type of power over other people on the basis of their race and ethnicity, among other elements, but it's one of the key ones. We often just call that white supremacy. White supremacy is sometimes explicit and overt, but it's also the air that we breathe in the U.S.

It is the cultural framework that functions as the backdrop to the world that we are living in. And that we are seeking to create a liberating church within. Now, I want to be clear about something that we sometimes miss when talking about white supremacy and white nationalism.

White nationalists are often explicit that they want a white Christian nation. It's white Christian nationalism. And if you want to learn more about that, come back here, same time, same place, next week, where Pastor Anthony will be talking about Christian nationalism a bit more.

But this white Christian nation that's sought after as anti-Semitism is one of the oppressions at its foundations. It can be easy to discount talking about white supremacy as a fringe element growing up in schools, seeing images of the KKK, thinking about it in that light can be easy to think about white supremacy only in that way.

[17:47] But I want to really urge us to understand the ways that power over other people is expressed both explicitly and subtly. The last pillar of anti-Semitism that we're going to look at is relying on violence as a tool to maintain control.

This pillar has often found its moral and its religious justification and the phrase that the Jews killed Jesus. It's a theologically sloppy statement with dangerous consequences.

But for much of the Middle Ages that sentiment was publicly declared from pulpits and part of European cultural consciousness. One way that this was expressed coincides with the exact moment that we're building up to in Lent.

as Lent comes to an end for coming up on Holy Week, on Good Friday, on Easter, in many Christian churches, not all, but a decent amount, the passages read on Good Friday come from the Gospel of John.

Throughout John's Gospel, we see an emphasis by the author describing a plot by the Jews to kill Jesus. Now, taken out of its original context of a letter or a collection of letters and viewpoints written a long time ago in a different context than Europe and then put into a European context, these verses reinforced pre-existing anti-Semitism, sometimes leading to upticks in violence against Jewish communities during Holy Week and Good Friday.

[19:39] That's a hard thing to reckon with, that the time that we're relating up to a time that is meant to be about resurrection often was bad news for Jewish communities. The fancy word for this is deicide, where Jews were accused of having killed God.

Matthew 27, 25 is also a very common verse referenced here, where the crowd at Jesus' crucifixion cries out, let his blood be on us and on our children.

This is a dangerous view and is by no means gone. Deicide has been part of church doctrine for centuries and both Catholic and Protestant leaders often encouraged anti-Semitism and violence against Jewish communities.

One of many examples of this was Martin Luther and his terribly named essay, On the Jews and Their Lies, where he callously called for people to set fire to their synagogues or schools.

His viewpoints were not isolated. Many other leaders within the Protestant Reformation held that same view. Within the Catholic Church, it took until 1965 at the Second Vatican Council, where they rightfully made a statement saying that they no longer held deicide as a doctrine.

[21:08] We see that violence as a tool of control was often wielded as part of power over, as part of economic exploitation with the church's blessing. These are heavy topics.

things. These are not things that, as we think about, naturally bring up feelings of joy and peace. And as someone who is also fairly anxious most of the time, does not call my anxiety.

These pillars don't make me be like, great, my anxiety is gone, I can dismantle anti-Semitism. So I want to just take a quick minute to recenter us and remind us that this is spiritual work.

Understanding how those pillars work is not just head knowledge, a term that I often heard used to describe more historical approaches to understanding my faith.

It's not just historical information. I'm not up here just giving a workshop. This is a key part of the spiritual work that goes into repentance and repair.

[22 : 21] Just like in my personal life, when I cause harm, I try to follow a pattern of naming, owning, and repairing that harm with the goal of restored relationship.

And I say the same thing applying here. Naming and owning before we can move to repairing. So, as we turn away from anti-Semitism, understanding some of the pillars that uphold it, what are we invited to turn towards?

How do we become a liberating church when it comes to anti-Semitism? I think that we find a possible answer for this in Isaiah 11, 3-9.

If you have Bibles on your phone or hard copy Bibles, I don't know, that sounds weird to say, but you know what I mean. Our digital world is weird, y'all. Turn to Isaiah 11, 3-9.

In this passage, we see, I'm going to start kind of halfway through it. He will not judge by what he sees with his ears, with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears.

[23 : 38] But with righteousness, he will make judgments for the needy. With justice, he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth.

With the breath of his lips, he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt, and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put his hand into the viper's nest.

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

As some contexts, much of Isaiah was written thinking about the Babylonian conquest, an event, and the history of the Hebrew people that was marked by occupation and by displacement.

[24 : 52] Sometimes, interpreted as being prophetically about Jesus, this passage would have originally been delivered to a community that was experiencing oppression, that found themselves facing economic exploitation, power over, and violence as a tool of control.

people. And in the midst of that context, in the midst of them experiencing those forms of oppression, we see in the second half of this passage a vision of something that can be described as shalom, which is a Hebrew term sometimes translated as peace, but that carries deeper meanings around fullness, completeness, wholeness of life.

Randy Woodley, who is a Cherokee theologian, describes this passage as a way towards harmony, a vision of the original interdependent goodness that creators saw after forming the earth and all that was in it.

Now, with this picture in mind, let's think back to how anti-Semitism gives cover to the wealthy and the powerful, how it makes a real judgment of societal oppression and an exploitation difficult for us to do, how it relies on violence and scapegoating.

In contrast, in Isaiah, we see a stunning picture where God herself is a judge, acting on behalf of all of the poor and the oppressed, where instead of the expected violence we might see between cows and bears, humans and cobras, we see them eating together, playing together, where all the earth knows the beauty and goodness of creator God and lives in non-violent harmony with each other.

[26 : 49] This is collective liberation, extending to all peoples and all creation. liberation. Now, in the context of turning away from anti-Semitism, this beautiful picture of collective liberation calls us to turn towards something that I'm going to refer to as safety through solidarity.

Now, safety through solidarity is not a term that I came up with. If you Google it, you'll find a book by its name, you'll find some really beautiful art that also kind of shows what that looks like. But instead of creating safety for some by scapegoating others, instead of creating safety for some by holding power over others, instead of creating safety through violence, Isaiah points us to find safety through solidarity, through naming systems of oppression and turning towards each other.

And in light of that wholeness, completeness, fullness of shalom, I question if any form of safety that relies on systemic oppression is actually safety.

Bell Hooks gives us a contemporary picture of what this safety through solidarity could look like in her essay, Keeping a Legacy of Shared Struggle. Hooks, recounting her childhood in North Carolina, writes, growing up in the segregated South, the fundamental lesson that I was taught via

the Black Baptist Church was that Jews, all of the world, had suffered exploitation and oppression, that we identified with them and took their struggle to be our own because of shared experience. It was deeply embedded in our consciousness as Southern Blacks that we had to oppose anti-Semitism always. Now, in this Lenten season, I think that, broadly speaking, safety through solidarity could look like being clear and honest about the ways that anti-Semitism has functioned to keep power, to maintain power, to use power over others.

[29 : 05] More specifically, I think this could look like having honest conversations about class and wealth in our community, so that we are less susceptible to scapegoating. I think it could look like examining the ways that power over can appear in certain interpretation of scripture and in words like Judeo- Christian, a term that was first documented by an Irish missionary using that term to try and convert Jews.

It's a power over term. It could look like taking non-violent direct action as part of a diverse coalition to protest white supremacy.

But I think that at the core of it, safety through solidarity begins with forgive us. I want to return to that second story that I started this sermon with because I think it gives us a picture of why it is worth doing the spiritual work of understanding these pillars.

words. The response to the boringly named Unite the Rights To ended up being a beautiful display of safety through solidarity. There were several conversations held with the organizer in question, and it was a transformational moment for them and for many others as well.

One of my favorite memories of my time here in D.C., standing at Lafayette Square, it's a D.C. August, I am soaked in sweat, exhausted, watching a dance party led by black queer organizers, looking down the street towards Freedom Plaza and saying, marching up 8th Street, a massive march led by Jewish and queer organizers.

[30 : 52] organizers. That was safety through solidarity. That was why we need to name, own, and repair to get returned to the joy of collective liberation.

As I come towards the end of this sermon, as we imagine what it looks like to turn away from my testimony, activism, there are some things I do feel like I need to touch on that are relevant to this current moment.

First, this is an election year. And similar to what we've seen in many election years in the past, anti-Semitic groups have started becoming more publicly visible with their views.

They never went away, to be clear. But election years often lead to an increase in public anti-Semitism. And so when I say safety through solidarity, I want us to really think about this year. What does that look like given the year we have ahead of us as a community? Second, we've been talking about anti-Semitism for 32 minutes, and I have yet to bring up or mention the modern state of Israel.

[32 : 22] And that is an intentional choice. I have purposely chosen to explore a turning away from anti-Semitism that does not include turning towards Christian Zionism.

Now, I think that there certainly can be a need to have nuanced conversations around anti-Semitism in Israel. But Christian Zionism is not a fruitful starting point for those.

I think safety through solidarity could be. Lastly, I can't ignore that I'm giving this sermon 156 days after October 7th, when Hamas killed around 1,200 Israelis, took over 250 hostages.

And the day before Ramadan is expected to begin. A day where the Israeli military has suggested they might invade Rafa, a city in southern Gaza filled to the brim with over 1.5 million displaced people.

To be clear about where I am personally coming from, I do believe that the nation-state of Israel is committing a genocide in Gaza. They have killed over 30,000 people, including over 13,000 children, displaced over 2 million people, and engaged in other acts of anti-Semitic violence.

[33 : 45] Sorry, other acts of systemic violence, like withholding food and humanitarian aid. And I don't think it's anti-Semitic to criticize Israel. I think any country that did any of those actions, I think would have a responsibility to say something about it.

Like countless others around the world, I've been organizing and working with Palestinians, with Jewish people, people of so many different backgrounds, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, calling for a release of all the hostages, both Israeli and Palestinian, and mourning every death.

And in my organizing, I am keenly aware that there are some using this moment as a way to amplify their anti-Semitism and want to be abundantly clear that there is no room for anti-Semitism in

movements for collective liberation.

Safety through solidarity can mean fighting anti-Semitism and genocide. I want to bring us to a close here by sharing an excerpt from a poem by Aurora Levens Morales, a Puerto Rican Jewish author whose work has often inspired me.

One of her poems called Red Sea is about her reflections on the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. In her reimagination of that story, following her own commitments to collective liberation, Morales says, this time, we're tied at the ankles.

[35 : 27] We cannot cross until we carry each other. All of us refugees, all of us prophets. No more taking turns on history's wheel, trying to collect old debts no one can pay.

The sea will not open that way. This time, it's all of us going on.