# Jesus’ Death in John’s Gospel: A Good Friday Service Exploring Antisemitism

*This worship service was created by several members of the United Church’s Countering Antisemitism Working Group: Amy Haynes, Miriam Spies, and Michelle Voss. The sermon was written by Frances Kitson, who is a member of the working group. She has also provided* [*a video, “Good Friday Sermon on John, chapters 18-19.”*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3cCphk-wVs)

## Note to Include in Your Bulletin

Today we are telling the story of Jesus’ death through the account of John. The Gospel of John was written at a time when the early Christian community, which was Jewish, was distinguishing itself from the rest of the Jewish community. John’s gospel unfortunately refers to the established Jewish community with the blanket term “the Jews” and paints them in negative terms. These have been interpreted as anti-Jewish and used to justify antisemitism, including today’s reading.

[A] strict distinction between anti-Judaism and antisemitism is difficult to make.… “Anti-Judaism”…is the negative stereotyping of Jews and Jewish beliefs. It is still current in Christian thinking and teaching and found in many approaches to the New Testament. It includes the idea of supersessionism, which says that the Jews were rejected by God and replaced by the church. It singles out some Jewish leaders as the killers of Jesus. ([*Bearing Faithful Witness,*](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/interfaith-relations/countering-antisemitism) p. 75)

We have a responsibility to be aware of anti-Jewish tendencies in our worship and our thinking so that we don’t contribute to prejudices, biases, and violence against our Jewish neighbours.

We invite you to worship this day, recognizing that narratives accusing the Jewish people of killing Jesus have harmed, and continue to harm, relationships with Jewish neighbours and hide Jesus’ own Jewishness.

## Opening Chorus

VU 148 Jesus, Remember Me

## Call to Worship

Come and worship this good day.  
Come and sit with the pain.  
Come and sit with the grief.  
Come and sit with the love.  
All mingled together on this good day.  
God be with you. **And also, with you.**

## Hymn

VU 136 O Come and Mourn with Me Awhile

## Prayer of Confession

**Gracious God,  
This day is weighted not only by our pain at the cross, but by the pain our flawed interpretations of scripture have caused others.  
We confess that the words used to tell your story of sorrow and love still** **hold the echoes of the accusations against the Jewish people.  
We confess that we carry the impulse to blame an entire people for a death perpetuated by political leaders.  
We confess that fear and misunderstandings on this day hide the love you have for your world, the love so clearly offered, even in death.  
Help us remain with Jesus this day, sharing in his love, grief, and trust.  
Stop us from projecting anger and blame onto others, actions that only separate us from your love.  
Stay with us through this pain so that we stay with Jesus until Easter morning breaks again.  
It is in his name we pray, Amen.**

## Assurance of Pardon

Beloved people of God, remember it is Jesus on the cross who extends forgiveness and offers sinners and outcasts a place in the kindom, echoing the forgiveness and grace he lived throughout his ministry. From this grace, may we live, and may we continue to repair harm committed to Jewish communities as we seek just relationships. Amen.

## Hymn

VU 147 What Wondrous Love

## Children’s Time

Theme: Placing blame

You might start with a story about being blamed for something you didn’t do, or when you blamed someone else knowing they did not hurt anyone. Or ask them for an example. How did that feel for you/do you know how the other person felt? How did that change your relationship with (*classmate, friend, sibling*)?

Sometimes, when we have feelings that we don’t like (pain or sadness), we blame someone else for making us feel that way. Sometimes it’s easier to be angry at another person or group than feel the pain of what has happened.

As a community, Christians have done this, blaming a whole group of people, the Jewish people, for Jesus’ death, when they did not cause his death. We cause more hurt and pain, harming relationships, instead of sitting with our own hurt and pain. And when we pay attention to those tough feelings, we notice how God is with us, crying with us, and holding us in love.

Or sometimes it’s easier to follow along with a group even if we’re not sure it’s right.

It takes a lot of bravery to do the right thing when the group—especially if it’s our friends—is doing something that doesn’t feel right. (Could ask what has helped them be brave in the past?) Sometimes, it helps us be brave if we imagine how we want to feel about ourselves tomorrow. Sometimes our tomorrow self can help our today self be brave, because our tomorrow self wants to feel good about what we did today.

Another option: Has someone ever read you a story you know really well, but they change some of it? How did that make you feel? Sometimes this has happened with the Bible, and the stories are changed. (Add in something about how this has ended up being hurtful to Jewish people.)

Another option: the game of telephone—how this changes meaning and intention.

## Scripture

John 18:1‒27

## Embodied Response

### Option 1

Lead a chant in the style of Taizé. Try without music! (MV 70; MV 86; MV 170; verses 1‒2 of MV 73 repeated, then choose 4‒5 for the next break in scripture reading)

### Option 2

A leader can offer a meditation of breath, body awareness, and silence. Choose your own, or follow the example provided.

### Option 2 Example

1. Start by becoming aware of the points of contact between your body and the pew/chair. Notice the weight of your arms and hands resting in your lap. Then shift your awareness to your breathing. You don’t have to change your breath in any way—just let your body breathe itself. Notice how without effort you are breathed by Life itself. (*silence*)
2. Bring your attention to your upper back. Notice the muscles expanding on the in-breath and contracting on the out-breath. Keep your focus here for a minute. (*silence*)
3. Allow the words of the scripture to land in your body. Where do they go? What do they touch? What is their shape and weight? Keep breathing…keep being breathed. Notice how the words of scripture are taking up space in your body. Are you letting them land? Is there a barrier? Pay attention. Notice. Be curious without judgment. Notice that you are safe here, being breathed. (*silence*)
4. Now, while still holding the back in your awareness, also focus on your belly rising and falling. Zoom right in to the contact between your skin and clothing. What’s that like? You might notice warmth, coolness, friction, softness, or perhaps nothing much at all, which is perfectly fine. (*silence*)
5. Trusting that the silence holds our deepest longings, our prayers we cannot speak, let us enter into silence with our God near to us. (*silence*)
6. Scripture continues being read.

## Scripture

John 18:28—19:16

## Hymn

VU 132 Bitter Was the Night

## Response

Option: An anthem may be placed here.

Or another embodied activity as above. Repeat the chosen option again, or choose another to ground into this next part of the scripture reading.

## Scripture

John 19:17‒42

## Sermon

(*Read John 18—19. A video, “*[*Good Friday Sermon on John, chapters 18-19*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3cCphk-wVs)*,” of Frances Kitson delivering this sermon is available.*)

Believe it or not, a Good Friday sermon is usually easy to tackle—at least, it’s easier than Easter Sunday. The themes of Good Friday—betrayal, anguish, grief, terror, failure—are” well known to us. They can be easier to believe in than the hope and impossible new life of Easter Sunday.

But this passage from John’s gospel is not at all easy, and it’s not because of John’s theology. It’s because of John’s language.

It’s because John, *far* more than Matthew, Mark, and Luke *combined*, mentions a group of people whose name, in English, gets translated as “the Jews.” And we, unlike John’s first hearers, live in a world in which Jewish people have, over the last 2,000 years, been excluded, expelled, harassed, attacked, and killed in the name of the one who goes to the cross. We still live in this world.

John’s text bears a weight that it was never meant to bear. Historically, it was often the reading of these two very chapters that caused Jewish communities to lock their doors and hide on Good Friday, trying to keep themselves safe from raging mobs that would spill out of church services in which these words were read, looking for some Jews to assault.

Many scholars argue that the Greek word we translate as “the Jews” should in fact be translated as “the Judeans.” Religion and ethnicity, they argue, weren’t separate identities for John in the way we separate them now. The people of a region and the people of a faith were the same.

There is a lot to be said for this argument. And yet, in our everyday lives, we have Bibles in our homes and churches whose pages say, “the Jews.” We live in a world in which Christians on every continent still believe our Jewish neighbours are responsible for the death of Jesus. The term “Christ killer” is not confined to history. And so, we need to name and grapple with this.

Beyond the unspeakable suffering, including the Shoah, that Christian institutions and people have visited upon Jews, the tragedy of this reality is that John’s telling of this story was *never* meant to be about assigning blame. John’s gospel has been—and is—weaponized in a way that misreads the text and loses John’s point.

John’s telling of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus never assigns blame to any person or group. Instead, John is very clear: *Jesus chooses this for himself.*

The Jesus of John’s gospel is no victim. He does not pray, anguished and alone, in the garden. There are no jeering bystanders in John’s telling; this Jesus does not cry out his abandonment from the cross. John’s Jesus shows neither fear nor pain—not because he is a superhero who doesn’t feel anything, but because for John, Jesus is in control the whole time. This death is the fulfillment of what Jesus has come to do. In a way that none of Jesus’ enemies can understand, this is the hour in which the “kingship” they mock and scorn is actually on full display as a contrast to worldly power.

Why? How? Why would Jesus come just to die? What’s the point of that? And what about any of this makes Jesus a king? Let’s wrestle with these questions.

(*There are several theologies of the cross that you might discuss here. We have developed a pastoral or psycho-spiritual approach that may be relevant to your congregation.*

*You might also take a structural approach to the interpretation, emphasizing Jesus’ place within a people colonized by the Roman empire. As the minister discerns the appropriate approach, ask: How can we express the importance of the cross without blaming the Jews or implying that Jewish theology is deficient?*

*Alternatively, you could take a cosmic approach, emphasizing the way the cross unites that which is divided: a symbol of the four directions in many cultures.*)

In John’s theology, Jesus has come to reveal the fullness of God. Everything he does, whether it’s turning water into wine, raising Lazarus from the dead, or walking on water, points back to God. Everything this Jesus does, is, and says is a revealing of God. It’s like John wants Jesus to have a neon sign above his head blinking the word “God!” Everything this Jesus does, is, and says is an invitation, a question, a challenge: Will we trust the life-giving God for which Jesus is a walking billboard? This is not the same as asking us to believe without question or doubt. Trust ebbs and flows; it’s vulnerable, but it’s also life-changing. Are we, Jesus asks, going to trust God or not?

Every one of us has days, times, seasons in which our answer is much more on the “not” side of things. Trusting God is not an unthinking belief that everything will be okay. Good Friday is about naming how often things are not okay. Trusting God is the stubborn insistence that whatever mess we’re in, God is in it with us. Trusting God is the determined insistence that there is nowhere we can be that God is not. Trusting God is the heartfelt insistence that we are never, ever alone.

Are we ready to lean into that kind of God? Or will we decide that it is safer to trust only to ourselves and our own bootstraps, living and dying by the idol of self-sufficiency?

(*Or, in a structural approach, “the idol of power as power-over-others rather than the empowerment in and with community?”*

*Or, in a cosmic approach, “the idols of the divisions we have created between ourselves and the Earth, cultures, nations, and differences within our communities?”*)

John’s Jesus insists, by word and deed, that his love and God’s love will give us a life far beyond the possibilities of self-reliance. And that insistence never let up, which is why Jesus winds up on the cross. Fear and hurt will cause humans to keep our defences up, on guard for any sign that our trust has been misplaced, that this source of love is unreliable. “Prove it,” insists fear. “Prove that you love me and I can trust you.”

And so Jesus does.

Jesus goes to the cross not because there is some redemptive quality about pain, but because his love has no boundary. Jesus goes to the cross because life is the greatest possession humans have, and there is nothing that God-made-flesh will not give up for humans.

This is what Jesus’ kingship looks like. This is where God’s power lies: in a love so great that it will go to the furthest ends to demonstrate its trustworthiness.

(*Or, in a structural approach, “to demonstrate its solidarity with the ‘least of these.’”*

*Or, in a cosmic approach, “to gather those who have been driven away, to break down the dividing wall of hostility, to unite East and West, North and South, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; to reconcile humanity with the Earth and with God.*)

Pilate and Jesus’ accusers cannot see this. They make fun of Jesus as a king, draping him in a purple robe and writing “King of the Jews” on the cross. They don’t see that they are in the presence of a kingship that relies not on violence or oppression. Pilate doesn’t see that his soldiers and wealth don’t give him the power that Jesus has in God. The accusers don’t see that in their zeal to destroy Jesus, they abandon the very God in whom they believe.

(*In a structural approach, you could expand on the character of this God, as the one who sides with the widow and the orphan, the oppressed, and the colonized; who calls us to solidarity, to be with Jesus at the cross.*)

John doesn’t assign blame. He can’t, because John’s Jesus chooses his hour, going forth to meet the soldiers, knowing Pilate has no power that is not given from above, and deliberately stating his thirst from the cross, thus fulfilling a prophecy of drinking sour wine. John instead illustrates for us the tragedy of human fear and our reliance on the power of force. There is no comment of rejoicing or gloating over the rejection of Jesus. Instead, John lets the scene speak for itself: When Jesus’ enemies claim, “We have no king but Caesar,” they have abandoned the theology of Passover, the very festival they are about to celebrate, a festival that proclaims God alone as judge and king. And for God’s people, that is a tragedy.

This sermon began by claiming that a Good Friday message is usually easy to write. Pleasant, no. Meaningful, yes. Familiar, too much so. That’s why it’s easy.

The other easy piece—and the sinful piece—of Good Friday is to assign blame for Jesus’ death. It’s someone’s fault. Someone must be punished.

That easy choice conveniently lets us off the hook. This story is never about whose fault it is or isn’t that Jesus died. This story is never about who should be punished for a death Jesus chose for himself.

Instead, this story is asking us when God’s radical love for us makes us so uncomfortable that we push it away. When does God’s radical love for others make us so fearful that we lash out, condemn, and punish? The cross asks us to recognize the presence of God in our lives, right in front of us.

This story is entirely about whether we will recognize God when God comes to us. Will we dig our nails into the myth of independence, clinging to the lie that we need nothing and no one? Or will we have the frail courage to trust in a God whose love will change the chemistry of water, defy the physics of gravity, make abundance from our scarcity, and never stop pursuing us, even unto death?

## Offering

Let us present our gifts to God.

## Offertory Prayer

Nurturing and Comforting God,  
You call us to be with Jesus at the cross.  
May the gifts of our hands, bodies, and hearts,   
be offered in solidarity with your Love   
as you are steadfastly with us, bringing life out of death.  
In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

## Embodied Prayers of the People

Invite the congregation to write or draw prayers, and give time and space for those who wish to place them near the cross. This can be done in silence or with a repeating chorus (e.g., VU 148 Jesus, Remember Me).

## Hymn

VU 139 At the Cross Her Vigil Keeping (v. 1‒4)

## Commissioning and Benediction

As we go from this space, may our hearts keep vigil at the cross.  
Steadfast as Mary, may we accompany Jesus in his death and accompany each other in our grief.

And we go, trusting that  
the love and grace of God carries us,  
the compassion of Jesus lifts us,  
and the gentleness of the Spirit guides us.  
Amen.

### Countering Antisemitism Reading List for Congregations

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, Touchstone Books, 1995).

Committee on Inter-Church Inter-Faith Relations, [*Bearing Faithful Witness: United Church‒Jewish Relations* study document](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/interfaith-relations/countering-antisemitism) (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 1997).

Fredriksen, Paula, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

Fredriksen, Paula, and Adele Reinhartz, *Jesus, Judaism, and Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

Hirsh, David, *Contemporary Left Anti­Semitism* (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2018).

Levine, Amy-Jill, “[Holy Week and the hatred of the Jews: How to avoid anti-Judaism this Easter](https://www.abc.net.au/religion/holy-week-and-the-hatred-of-the-jews/11029900),” ABC.net.au (1 April 2021).

Levine, Amy-Jill, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

Levine, Amy-Jill, and Mark Zvi Bettler, eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament NRSV Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Melnick, Olivier J., *They Have Conspired against You: Responding to the New Anti-Semitism* (Purple Raiment, 2007).