I have been away the last two Sundays. It is very good to be back. Thank you for giving us this time away.

In our travels, Lori and I went to the Northwest to visit relatives and friends, and then to Florida to attend the North American Cathedral Deans conference, which is an annual gathering of the Episcopal and Anglican deans from cathedrals in the United States, the Caribbean and Canada.

It was quite the gathering, and I will say more about it in a bit.

Along the way, we worshipped in two Episcopal cathedrals, one in Oregon and the other in Florida. This was a very rich experience for me to worship in other cathedrals.

Today is commonly called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The lessons for this Sunday, in all three years of the lectionary cycle, have something to do with sheep and shepherds – we being the unruly sheep, and Jesus being the Good Shepherd.

But before we can get to the Good Shepherd, I want to talk about a hard topic that the gospel lesson raises for us that we might wish to avoid, but which is timely. This may make some of you uncomfortable, but I promise we will end up in a good place.

The hard topic is this: The Gospel of John, which we hear a great deal of in the fifty days of Easter, is arguably the most anti-Jewish sounding book in the entire New Testament. We need to be honest about it.

And its jarring anti-Jewish tone is right here in the Good Shepherd passage we hear today.

Yet I am also aware that the Gospel of John is perhaps the most beloved of gospels among Episcopalians, and maybe all Christians.

This is largely because the Jesus of the Gospel of John is the Good Shepherd, who loves us, finds us in our low places and brings us safely into the arms of our creator.

How do we reconcile this tension that is leaping off the pages today in John’s gospel?

One way, I think, is to bob-and-weave through John, avoiding the harsh, exclusionary passages, and focusing on the beautiful, comforting and loving passages.
But sometimes these two centrifugal forces in the Gospel of John collide. We get one of these collisions today. Listen closely:

“So the Jews gathered around him,” the passage reads, setting the scene. “If you are the messiah,” the Jews say, “tell us plainly.”

Then Jesus replies harshly: “The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.”

The impression is left that the Jews are out, and the Christians are in. Let’s be clear: this idea is not acceptable. But are we stuck with it?

There is even a fancy ten-dollar theological term for this concept: “supersessionism,” the idea that the Christians have “superseded” or replaced the Jews as “the chosen people.”

Lest you think this is merely an obscure academic theory in biblical exegesis, this idea of supersessionism has dominated much of Christian history, fueling persecutions, pogroms and crusades. The Holocaust is built on supersessionism.

Like it or not, this is the legacy of the religion we profess to follow. Nor is this legacy behind us. If you listen closely to some sects of Christianity, you will still hear supersessionist ideas.

And worse, as you know, our world is immersed in an epidemic of hate-filled violence fueled by religious bigotry.

In just the last few weeks we’ve seen shootings in a San Diego and in a Pittsburgh synagogue, and the bombings of churches in Sri Lanka, and a massacre of Muslims in a mosque in New Zealand.

The fact remains that the sacred texts of all three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are weaponized by fanatics to justify their violence and political agendas.

The young man who shot people in the San Diego synagogue left a manifesto filled with supersessionist ideas that he picked up in his Presbyterian church.

Are we stuck with this? How do we counteract this?

We can start by being here in this cathedral. The simple act of your being here witnesses to a way of faith based on love, not fear; healing, not hatred; peace, not violence; forgiveness, not vengeance.

This is no ordinary church. This is a cathedral, and that means something in this deeply conflicted church.

Being a cathedral has nothing to do with architecture. Officially, this is a cathedral because the bishop’s seat – or “cathedra” – is here. Cathedrals are the symbolic flagship of a diocese, in our case, the Diocese of Northern California.

But being a cathedral is even more than that. Our being a cathedral gives us a broad mission beyond ourselves.
At the conference I attended, there were deans from large cathedrals – such as the National Cathedral in Washington DC and Grace Cathedral in San Francisco – and deans from smaller cathedrals, like St. Andrew’s Cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi – and us.

What all of these cathedrals have in common is their missions are bigger than their buildings and bigger than their congregations.

Deeply embedded in our Anglican-Episcopal tradition is the idea that our cathedrals stand as beacons of hope for their regions, and safe places of interfaith dialogue, understanding and cooperation.

My deepest hope and prayer for Trinity Cathedral is that we will claim anew our identity as a cathedral and explore what it means to be the Episcopal Cathedral in Sacramento, the capital city of the most populous and most powerful state in this nation.

As cathedrals we are upholders of our tradition, we fervently proclaim the saving grace of Jesus Christ from the rooftop.

But we also know that the God speaks to people through many tongues, and God is infinitely capable of reaching all people, everywhere, in all times. We, as a cathedral, have a particular role in widening the perspective of the rest of the Church.

This also makes cathedrals places of learning and teaching. This is why we have a bookshop and a library, and why we bring in guest speakers and preachers who are provocative.

This is also why we sponsor an art show and why we have faith formation and education for all ages, from the nursery on through Thursday Night at the Cathedral for adults and the Journey With Jesus program,. It is why we have the four-year Education for Ministry program.

Education is central to who we are as a cathedral.

It is imperative that we understand our own sacred texts, who wrote them, where they came from, and their social and political contexts.

The words of the Bible cannot be read in a vacuum. The words of the Bible are not always self-evident. This is why is so crucial that we study the Bible – all of us – and not settle for superficial and weaponized interpretations supporting someone’s prejudices.

It is important that we know the Bible was written over many centuries by many faithful people in their own languages. The Bible is filled with multiple perspectives and arguments – in Jewish tradition it is called “midrash.” Hearing God in through these ancient sacred words can be challenging.

I bring us back to the Gospel of John: It is important to know that the Gospel of John was likely the last of the gospels written, composed about 90 years after Jesus walked this earth.
The first disciples were long gone by then.
John’s gospel – whoever he was – was written at a time when the next generation of Jesus’s followers were themselves persecuted by the Romans. They needed to know that Jesus would be with them no matter what.
They were likely Jewish, and therefore also in conflict with the Jewish religious authorities who were kicking them out of the synagogue. They were under intense pressure from all sides, and that tension is reflected throughout John’s gospel.
Is there another way to hear these passages from the Gospel of John?
There is a hint elsewhere in the New Testament that these early followers of Jesus were themselves troubled by the anti-Jewish tone of John’s gospel.
There are three short, pithy letters that are written almost as addendums to the gospel. We rarely hear these in our lectionary – they are labeled “letters from John” though we don’t know who wrote them. The author describes himself only as “the Elder.” In one of them, he writes:
“Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.” [3 John 11]
The letter writer gives us a wide highway that can cross into every religion.
And this, I believe, is how Jesus intends us to hear him when he describes himself as the Good Shepherd. He embraces all people with love and has a place for everyone in his flock.
“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.”
AMEN.