

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church



Photo from the series "Obscure" by Ruben Plasencia Canino

Sunday, March 15, 2026
John 9:1 – 41

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, we continue our Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem and to the cross. And throughout this journey, we are asked to look both within, and without, to find the places we carry our brokenness. We are asked to reflect upon the dynamics we carry both as individuals, and as a people, that make possible our abandonment of Jesus, our denial of him, our rejection of his vision for us, and for the world, even if we can't imagine that we could ever do such things. Because our story of the final days of Jesus's earthly ministry tells us that we can, and we will, add our voices to the voice of the crowd that calls for his crucifixion, even if our voices speak through a silence that is as loud as any of the shouts heard around us.

This week I was struck by so many horrific things that happened in our world: of the ongoing war in the Middle East, of the shootings at Old Dominion University that left two dead and two others critically wounded, and of the attack on the Temple Israel synagogue in Bloomfield, Michigan, that left the attacker dead, but thankfully did not kill anyone else.

Of these terrible acts, the one that has affected me most was the attack on the synagogue because it is the latest expression of an ongoing assault on our Jewish brothers and sisters. In 2023, the Anti-Defamation League reported that it documented 8,873 antisemitic incidents in the US, which is the largest number since the group began tracking these incidents in 1979. The number of incidents spiked after the events on October 7, 2023, when the terrorist group Hamas attacked Israel, killing over one thousand people and kidnapping 250 people, and led to Israel's destruction of Gaza.

In one sense, the attack on the Temple Israel synagogue was not the worst event of the week in that only one person died - the attacker, a man named Ayman Mohamad Ghazali, a US citizen. But I think one of the reasons this event has stayed with me is the sheer terror his attack provoked.

On Thursday afternoon, Ghazali rammed his vehicle into the synagogue, drove down a hallway, and then was fired upon by two security guards, before killing himself. The vehicle subsequently caught fire, and filled parts of the synagogue with smoke. This all happened when 140 preschool children were in the building. The staff and the children were ultimately taken safely to a nearby

building and reunited with their families. And that is something to be thankful for.

Imagine if we had to have armed security guards here at our church because of individuals and groups threatening us.

Imagine if someone attacked Pilgrim Preschool with the intent of harming our community's children.

Imagine if you came to our building and saw the doors blown open and smoke pouring out of them.

Imagine if you heard gunshots ringing out in the halls of this church.

To me, and maybe to you, if something like this happened to our church it wouldn't just be an act of senseless violence. It would be an act of terror, and an act of sacrilege. And this kind of event has been happening with more frequency to our Jewish brothers and sisters, in synagogues across our nation.

In the face of this terror, in the face of this increasing evil, what do we say? How does this church respond? Or is the best thing to do to remain silent, as if this problem is not our problem?

I think another reason why this attack on Temple Israel has touched me so deeply, is because the season of Lent, and especially Holy Week, has traditionally been a time when Christian communities have attacked Jewish communities as retribution for a false narrative that Jesus was killed by the Jews. Now Ghazali was not a Christian, as far as I know, and the reporting is that his attack was motivated by what is going on in the Middle East. But his attack, at this moment of the year, makes me remember another history: our

Christian history, of Christians attacking innocent Jews as a form of extra-judicial justice, as a form of retribution, as a form of lynching.

And it is a text like the one we've heard today that has been used to incite violence against Jewish communities across centuries, and across communities. Over and over in our story we hear that the "Jews" did not believe, that the "Jews" should be feared, that the "Jews" intimidated people to keep quiet about the truth. It is the "Jews" who become the symbol of blindness, and a resistance against the Son of Man and his ministry. And by picking up the term "the Jews" from this story and others, groups within our Christian tradition have understood that all Jews, everywhere, at all times are evil, and in conflict with Christianity.

This kind of narrative has led to terrible acts of violence throughout history, and continues to fuel antisemitism today, underpinning the rise of Christian nationalism and acts of terrorism in our country.

We, you and I, are not to blame for our faith's history of anti-semitism. You and I are not to blame for what has been done to Jewish people in the past. But we are responsible for what we do today, and whether or not we raise our voices to support our Jewish family members and neighbors. We are responsible for whether or not we take action to counter the sick antisemitic narratives being promulgated throughout our communities.

Because Jesus was a Jew. And his earliest followers were Jewish. They weren't Christians. That name only came later. And because of this, I think if we don't do anything to support our Jewish neighbors today, if we sit back and respond with silence, we are bringing Jesus closer and closer to the cross at every moment. A

cross not erected by the Jews, but a cross on which our apathy will allow our Jewish savior to be nailed.

And so you ask me, what can I do? What can I do at this moment in which our Jewish neighbors are living and worshipping under a constant threat?

I have an idea.

We've been invited, along with houses of worship throughout the area, to attend a Yom HaShoah memorial - a service of remembrance for those who died in the Holocaust. The service will be held at Bnai Keshet, a synagogue in Montclair, on Monday, April 13 @ 7 PM. A flyer with additional information about this event will go out in this week's eNews.

This is one opportunity to show our Jewish neighbors that we support them, that we believe their history is important, that we stand with them not only in remembering the past tragedy of the Holocaust, but that we see and stand with them against the ongoing acts of terror that continue to be visited on the people of their faith, from which our faith springs.

I think this is an important invitation for us to consider accepting; not just for us, but also for them, and for all of the people who would divide us, and try to make us believe that what they are saying about, and doing to, Jewish people all around us is really none of our business.

But it is our business, because it is the business of the Jewish Rabbi we follow. And because of that, I don't think we can remain silent.

Amen.