My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Eastertide Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Peter confronts the leaders of his people with a truth they were not anywhere close to being ready to hear. “You killed Jesus”, he says, in effect. “The stone that was rejected by you, the builders”. The authorities in charge are our builders of society, making laws for us to follow. But there’s a very fine line between laws passed to care for us and keeping us safe to ones which are controlling our behavior so that the leaders can keep their station.

That world is our world in this last decade. And we have to do what we can to know the difference.

Leviticus 16: 20-22 outlines a ritual sacrifice that we might recognize. For the ancient Exodus Israelites wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt, Aaron, the chief priest, brought a live goat before the people. He put his hands on the head of the goat, and confessed over it all the wicked acts and rebellion of the people—all their sins—putting them on the goat’s head. Then they drove the goat away into the desert, and the goat carried on itself all the sins of the people away into a place where it, and hence their sins, would never be found.

To our ears today, it’s a strange ritual. But to William Tyndale, author of an early English translation of the Bible in 1530, he named this goat the “escapegoat”, which we have modified in today’s English as the word ‘scapegoat’. When we say someone is a ‘scapegoat’ for something bad that’s happened, we mean that people blame them for an event and may even punish them for it, even though it may not be their fault. So to scapegoat someone means to blame them publicly for something bad that has happened, though it was not their fault.

Think about it: the scapegoat mechanism is a ritual which transfers onto an innocent animal everything that is likely to poison relationships between members of a community. The effectiveness of this ritual, according to the philosopher Rene Girard, is the idea that the sins were expelled with the goat and then the community was rid of them. But this pushing the sins into the background where they aren’t visible anymore wasn’t a one-time thing. It then happened annually. I wouldn’t want to be a goat in ancient Israel.

But when we think about why it’s not a once and done deal it’s because we somehow, when confronted by keeping control or giving up control, seek to want to get our own way first before considering how others might feel. It’s human nature: we are in our own skins and thoughts, and we project our own life and experiences on others as if they, too, see things our way. And therein lies the rub—we assume others see things through our assumptions, our upbringings, our experiences, and who WE are first. Our first impulse is to make everybody like us, because if that were true, the world would be so much easier to navigate. Boring, but easier.

But all of this assumptions about ourselves brings us back to where we started our sermon. This is the world that we live in. The murder of a victim, a goat who did nothing but was in the wrong place just being a goat, attempts to restore order and reinvest administrators of the law with control over an unruly population.

And people these days somehow don’t understand the Black Lives Matter movement, or the phrase “Driving While Black” renewed in this last week’s news in the killing of Daunte Wright. Daunte was a 20-year old black kid with his life ahead of him and was stopped outside Minneapolis, Minnesota by police who had noticed he had an expired vehicle registration.

The officers asked him to exit the vehicle and were going to cuff him for missing court on a misdemeanor charge, when Daunte shook off the officers and got back in his car to flee the scene. As one officer struggles with him, another officer, Kim Potter, shouts from behind the first officer, “I’ll taze you!” After a few more seconds of struggle with the first officer, Potter shouts “Taser, Taser, Taser!” rapidly, three times, and the first officer lets go of Daunte and immediately afterward Daunte is shot with a single shot from the officer’s gun, not a taser. The car door closes and Daunte drives off, before crashing the car while dying. Officer Potter says, as the car pulled away, “Holy Shit, I just shot him”. She says she had thought she pulled her taser to shoot and not her pistol.

 What I’ve just told you is from Officer Kim Potter’s body cam footage recorded that day, and it’s available on YouTube. It lasts just over one minute, and it’s a minute that might just change your life. Officer Potter has resigned and is charged with 2nd degree manslaughter, which is a common charge for accidental shootings. 2nd degree manslaughter, in Minnesota, means the officer’s negligence created an unreasonable risk and consciously took the chance of causing severe injury or death.

At this point you might be wondering what all this has to do with our scripture. I’ll remind us that this is the world that we live in today: black motorists are, statistically, 20% more likely to be stopped than white ones. In major cities from coast to coast, it’s between three and nine times as likely. But it’s not restricted to cities. Senator Tim Scott, a black senator from South Carolina, was stopped seven times last year. The phrase Driving While Black may be new to white folks, but it’s something we all need to know about and speak out about now that we know. Because people are getting stopped and killed as a result. And we are blaming the victims—if only they hadn’t been stopped so many times and cited for something, then maybe it wouldn’t have happened in the first place. But what isn’t said is that the mere fact of stopping someone gets on their record and it snowballs from there.

The more someone is investigated, the more they are implicated as guilty. This is our world. We organize our lives according to systems of governance that banish members of our communities from trying to live their lives and raise families into the criminal justice system, because they are driving while black, walking while black, or just being at the wrong place when police drive by and want to know why they’re there? Where they goin’? Have some ID? Oh, you’ve been in trouble before? C’mon, let’s go. Another incident on record for the next time. Eventually they’ll find something. Maybe resisting arrest. This is our world, and we all know it even if we want to look the other way or not be reminded of it on a Sunday morning.

This cycle of violence against blacks in America is our scapegoating. As we seek to reduce crime, we have to find criminals to expiate our society and send the sins far away from our sight, into prisons where no one sees or remembers them. Lawmakers call it “criminal justice reform” and assure us that if we will get tough on crime, if we pass laws that give sovereign immunity to police officers from criminal liability, that it will preserve the common good.

The only thing we need to do is stand aside while the police stop on vehicle at a time. Repeatedly. And over time, about one in five black men in America are in prison. That’s what Driving While Black means.

I’ll leave you with this final thought. The death penalty pushes the scapegoat function in our punitive society to an extreme. Attorney General William Barr, in defending resumption of federal executions last year, said, “Congress has expressly authorized the death penalty, and the Justice Department upholds the rule of law”. If that doesn’t sound familiar it should in the aftermath of Easter.

Rome authorizes the death penalty, and the Sanhedrin and pharisees uphold who should be subject to it. The execution of Jesus reminded the disciples of it. Innocence was not the issue when Jesus was killed. The system made sure of it, that there was no escape. The law was lawless. The rulers were unruly.

The parallels are striking aren’t they? Our society demands bloodletting, because we have grown all too comfortable with systems of punishment that promise us safety. If only we’re willing to make some sacrifices.

And if we think this is a recent thing, remember we have a national holiday for someone who fought against this kind of injustice beginning 65 years ago upon graduation from the University of Boston Theology School. His name was Martin Luther King. So if we can’t bear to watch the George Floyd or Daunte Wright killings, watch the Bloody Sunday march to Selma, the Birmingham riots, or the many photos of lynchings that have taken innocent lives.

Innocence be damned. I would not want to be a goat in modern America, would you? The decision when we have had enough is ours this day and each day.

Thanks be to God, Amen.