

“Finding Strength Out in the Open”
March 16, 2025

Jeremiah 12:1-5
Luke 13:31-33

During Lent this year, we are encouraged: “Don’t give up!”

Don’t give up for Lent—find strength.

This morning, I want to explore how we might find strength out in the open.

There were two Op-Ed pieces in *The New York Times* this past week. One announced: “A Great Unraveling Is Underway.” As if responding to that, the other proclaimed: “This Will Not End Well.”

The scripture lessons this morning tell of dangerous times.

Jeremiah speaks to God after hearing that his life is threatened.

Jesus speaks to Pharisees after hearing that his life is threatened.

How Jeremiah and Jesus respond in such challenges show us a way forward as so much does seem to be unraveling.

The prophet Jeremiah, like most prophets, was often ready to question God, to take God to task. Told that his life is in danger, he asks God: “Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”

Perhaps the words of Psalm 27 came to his mind: “False witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.”

Jeremiah is convinced—as many people today are convinced—that God is blind to the ways of those who do wrong. As the prophet sees it, not only the people but all of creation—the land, the grass, the animals and birds—are being destroyed by perfidious people.

How does God respond? Not so much with assurance as with challenge.

“If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?” If what has happened already has upset you, you will soon have even greater reasons to be upset. You think things are unraveling now? Wait. It will not end well.

God’s response is not to pick up Jeremiah, to do it for him. God challenges Jeremiah. What will you do when the horses come?

Challenge can bring strength as we continue to stand out in the open.

Last weekend our nation marked the 60th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday,” the attack on some 600 civil rights marchers as they approached the Edmund Pettis Bridge at the beginning of their walk from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. On that shameful day in our nation’s history, among those attacked was Amelia Boynton, an organizer of the march, who was beaten unconscious and left on the bridge. 14-year-old Lynda Blackmon Lowery was beaten by the police. And perhaps most well-known, John Lewis suffered a skull fracture and bore the scars of that day for the rest of his life.

The violence of that day was not the end of the story, however.

On March 15, President Johnson, in a joint session of Congress, presented a voting rights bill and demanded its passage, calling Selma a “turning point in [the] unending search for freedom.” He concluded by telling the nation that it was not just African Americans, “but really it is all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice,” concluding, “And we *shall* overcome.”

Then, just two weeks after Bloody Sunday, just 14 days after it seemed as though the treacherous thrive and the guilty prosper, on Sunday, March 21, some 8,000 people came to Selma and gathered at the Brown Chapel A.M.E. Church to start the renewed march to Montgomery. Most were Black; but White, Asian, and Latino people from across our nation were part of the crowd.

They marched in rain, they camped in mud, and on Tuesday, March 25, 25,000 people made it to the state capitol in Montgomery.

There, Martin Luther King, Jr., told the crowd: “The end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. ... I know you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long.”

What will you do when the horses come? Those at Selma 60 years ago replied: “We will not back down. We will be out in the open. We will act from the strength that we find in standing for the right in full view of all people.

It was an interfaith group that marched. But many of them did so because they were followers of Jesus.

This Jesus is our example of facing challenge head on, finding strength out in the open.

Some Pharisees come to Jesus and warn him: “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.”

And, yes, you might think: “Wait a minute. Aren’t the Pharisees usually the ‘bad guys’ in the Gospel stories. Doesn’t Jesus keep running into conflict with them?”

Quite often that’s the case.

But more often, when we look closely at the New Testament—or the whole Bible for that matter—we discover that the people we encounter are not the cardboard cutouts that we are often shown in fiction and film, the stereotypes we hold in our minds.

So, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* tells us that Luke’s “presentation of the Pharisees is puzzling, inconsistent, and complex”—that is to say, they were kind of like us. As I’ve told you before, anytime you see the word “Pharisee” in the Bible, substitute “Congregationalist” and you’ll have a pretty close translation.

Pharisees were concerned with how one lives a life of faith before God. They lived in the hope of the resurrection. The conflicts that Jesus had with them he had as one devout Jew with others—a “lovers’ quarrel.”

It is not the Pharisees who want to kill Jesus here. It is Herod, a gentile ruler both despised and feared by most people in Israel; Herod, who as Luke alone relates, later mocked Jesus and became a close friend of Pilate’s.

Last Sunday we heard of the wilderness temptation of Jesus. Herod, Nancy Rockwell once said, gave into “the same temptations Jesus refused: Herod lusted to rule his world; Herod controlled the people by controlling their food; Herod defied God and Temple by his actions.”

Herod, like most ancient rulers, was a brutal despot. He killed one of his ten wives, two of his sons, and many others. And like most despots, he also feared both the masses and his fawning court—first refraining from killing John the Baptist because he was worried about the opinion of the crowd; then ultimately beheading John because he was worried about the opinions of his guests at a feast.

How does Jesus respond to the warning from the Pharisees?

Go tell that fox! Jesus begins, using a slur. To Jesus, Herod is an insignificant little predator compared to, say, the lion that he likes to think he is. Tell that fox, Herod, this: I’m still alive, and still doing all the things he fears the most—healing people and raising them to new strength. I am moving toward the capital city. And I won’t back down. I’m doing all of this, “today, tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”

The promise of the resurrection echoes in those words—although I doubt Herod heard it that way.

Herod was motivated by fear.

On the other hand, threats will not stop Jesus. He is not foolhardy. But he knows the path that he must follow and holds to it.

“Here I am—out in the open. What I do, I do publicly.” In a sense Jesus meets challenge with challenge. When the horses come, he does not back down.

At our best—and these are times that call us to our best—at our best, we say the same thing as the One whom we follow: Here we are. This is *who* we are.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said 60 years ago, we are those who seek “a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.”

In these days when our nation seems to lack conscience, when it is in no way at peace with itself, let me be clear. Christianity is a *public* faith.

While our faith may be individual, it is not a *private* matter. Christianity has never been a cozy matter of “me and Jesus.” It calls us out beyond ourselves and our concern for our own well-being.

The Congregational tradition, in particular, is a public way of faith.

We have long recognized that the biblical promise of redemption is for the healing not only of the individual but also of society. Our concern is not, “what Jesus did for me” but in the ancient words of the Nicene Creed, what he did “for *us* and for *our* salvation.” God’s salvation is cosmic in scope. It includes all of creation, of which we are blessed to be a small part. God seeks not only our redemption but that of the land and the animals who are, as the prophet said, threatened by the treacherous.

So it is that as Congregationalists we find ourselves involved with the poor, the hungry, the outcast—with those whom the rest of society would push to the edges. We find ourselves stewards of the air and land and water and all who live therein. By faith we recognize that we’re all in this together.

We are Congregationalists. We may not talk much *about* our faith. But at our best we are great at *living* our faith out in the open.

This short account of Jesus standing up to Herod comes to us as a gift and a challenge today. We are still called to stand against powers that would destroy—against the hatred toward people on the margins of society, against our own fearful spirits. The issues that call for our public response of faith are many and growing. The tasks facing us as people of faith are great. No one can do everything. But everyone can do something.

If we will have any strength for discovering and carrying out our mission, that strength will come from a faith that the risen Christ stands with us and understands what it means to resist the powers of destruction and hatred.

In these days of unraveling, when we awake in the night and worry that this will not end well, this is challenge and encouragement of Lent: Don’t give up. Be out in the open. When the horses come, let us stand.

And this is the good news: We have covenanted with each other to walk in the ways of Jesus Christ. Our walk is a public one. Today and tomorrow, and the next day, let us, like Jesus, continue on our way. In the hope of the resurrection, may we receive the strength

that God gives. In the hope of the resurrection, let us continue the work that Christ has given us to do in our time.