

Courage, Strength, and Faith in Perilous Times
A Sermon on Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15 by the Rev. Philip Major
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You and I are seeking to follow Jesus by being faithful, by being courageous, and by being strong in perilous times. Today in our scripture we have a powerful example of strength, courage, and faith in our story of the prophet Jeremiah. But let's start by considering an example that is a bit closer to home.

The most important event in my lifetime was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to a new birth of freedom, equality, and democracy in America. When I was born, in 1961, people suffered from overt discrimination against black Americans, women, and religious minorities in communities and states all across our nation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination in schools, housing, and employment, and led to a significant decrease in discrimination in our nation.

President Lyndon Johnson exerted powerful leadership in assembling a coalition to pass the legislation, which he signed into law on the second of July, 1964. I consider President Johnson to be one of the greatest presidents in our nation's history. Let's consider that there were several leaders of the Civil Rights movement who demonstrated courage and strength and faith in ways that were more profound and had even more impact than President Johnson.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 would not have come to pass, and our nation might have descended into chaos and violence without the leadership and wisdom of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I would also remind us that Martin Luther King's leadership would not have amounted to anything if not for thousands of people who had the courage and faith to put their lives on the line, people like Rosa Parks.

We don't know most of the names of those who were willing to do the dirty, dangerous work of protesting against racial discrimination and segregation in America, but we do know the name of Claudette Colvin. Claudette was a fifteen-year old girl when she demonstrated her courage, her strength and her faith in the promise of democracy. Claudette Colvin's role in the Civil Rights Movement is told in Taylor Branch's book, titled *Parting the Waters*.

Like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, Claudette Colvin lived in Montgomery, Alabama. She rode the city buses every day on her way to and from high school.

Nine months before Rosa Parks' much more famous arrest, on March 2, 1955, the bus driver told Claudette and three other black people they had to give up their seats in order to make space for white people who had just boarded the bus. Claudette refused to give up her seat. The police came, and threatened to arrest her, and still she refused to give up her seat. Claudette forced them to arrest her, to put her in handcuffs, to lead her off the bus kicking and screaming. Claudette may not have felt strong and courageous as she was resisting her removal from the bus, but her action revealed the brutality and viciousness of discrimination in the United States. This is what had to happen first. White people's eyes had to be opened to the brutality and viciousness of racial segregation and discrimination in America.

People who demonstrate the greatest strength, courage and faith are people like Claudette Colvin. Claudette didn't have lots of people supporting her. Claudette didn't have a personal attorney to argue her case in court. Claudette demonstrated tremendous courage, because courage is doing the right thing, even when we have good reasons to fear being punished for doing the right thing.

Claudette refused to give up her seat because she knew that segregation was an evil way of life. She knew that discrimination was deadly for her and for the people she loved. Claudette might have looked weak to the bus driver and the police officers who arrested her. But Claudette had strength that was beyond their comprehension. Claudette was stronger than the bus driver and police officers, because Claudette's actions led to the overturning of a way of life based on segregation and discrimination. Claudette showed her strength by refusing to go along with a system of state sponsored terrorism, where entire communities of people in our nation have been so afraid of the police that they will never dial 911 and ask for help.

Claudette was also an example of faithfulness. Faithfulness is about building trust. Segregation and discrimination break the bonds of trust between people. Claudette showed her faithfulness to the ideals of America by refusing to participate in a culture of discrimination that broke relationships and communities.

This fifteen-year-old girl, Claudette Colvin, is the example for you and me to follow as we make our way through perilous times. Like Claudette, we reveal our courage, strength, and faithfulness during times of great challenges.

It was the same way for Jeremiah. Jeremiah's courage, strength, and faith were revealed during a most difficult time. Jeremiah lived about 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Jeremiah's desperate situation is described in chapter 32, beginning with this verse: *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD in the tenth year of King Zedekiah of Judah, which was the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar.* Nebuchadnezzar was also known as Nebuchadnezzar, was the king of Babylon.

King Zedekiah has the distinction of being the last king of Judah. In general it's not good to be the last king, or the last professor in your department, or the last clerk in the store because it means something is coming to an end. The Babylonians had installed Zedekiah as the king of Judah in the year 597. The Babylonians installed Zedekiah as king the same way the Soviet Union used to install presidents in the nations of Eastern Europe. The Babylonians chose Zedekiah as king not because he was strong and wise, but because Zedekiah weak and foolish.

Zedekiah never followed Jeremiah's advice. Jeremiah's criticisms of his rule bothered him so much, he ordered his guards to capture Jeremiah and put him in the little prison that had been constructed within the palace. Zedekiah might have thought he was strong and courageous. He wasn't. He was desperate and weak in the face of Jeremiah's words.

In the ninth year of Zedekiah's reign the armies of Babylon returned to Judah, to conquer, rape and pillage. The army of Judah offered almost no resistance to the invaders. By the year 587 BCE the Babylonians had conquered all of the smaller cities and had surrounded the walls of the Jerusalem and sealed it off. No food could be brought into the city, and no one could leave. All through this time Jeremiah was being held prisoner in the palace by the king.

Then one day Jeremiah had a vision that his cousin would come and visit him in prison, and offer to sell Jeremiah a vineyard. This might seem strange to you and me, but in Jeremiah's time this type of interaction was not unexpected.

Jeremiah had been born in the village of Anathoth, just a short distance from Jerusalem, and part of the land of the tribe of Benjamin. Let's recall that there were twelve tribes of Israel, and that each tribe was given a region of the land of Israel as their own. Land was precious, and was sometimes treated as a gift from God, so there were rules about the right way to sell a piece of land. One rule was that the land could only be sold to a member of the same tribe. So a piece of property in the land of Benjamin could only be sold to another member of the tribe of Benjamin. A second rule was that the land must be offered to the next closest relative to purchase.

So Jeremiah was not completely surprised when his *cousin Hanamel came to him in the court of the guard, in accordance with the word of the LORD, and said to him, "Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, for the right of possession and redemption is yours; buy it for yourself."*

But what happens next is a surprise, and it is powerful. Jeremiah bought the vineyard from his cousin, even though he was being held in prison. Jeremiah bought the vineyard, even though the entire kingdom, including the village of Anathoth, had been overrun by the Babylonian army. Jeremiah bought the land and said with confidence *Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land by the people of Israel.*

A short time after Jeremiah bought the vineyard from Hanamel, the Babylonian army broke down the gates of the city and conquered, raped and pillaged. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple, the one built by King Solomon four hundred years before that time. When all of the fighting and destruction was finished Jeremiah was taken captive by an officer of the army and led off to Egypt, where he spent the rest of his life. Jeremiah never planted or harvested any grapes from the vineyard, the one he bought from his cousin.

I'm guessing the guards and King Zedekiah thought Jeremiah was foolish for buying the vineyard, the same way the bus driver thought Claudette Colvin was foolish for not giving up her seat. But Jeremiah was demonstrating his strength and faith by purchasing the vineyard.

We demonstrate our strength, courage, and faith by our actions in situations that might look like defeat. This is the message of the Bible. We don't reveal our strength, courage, and faith by defeating our opponents with swords or by our cruelty or by being so powerful that people are afraid to talk with us.

Claudette demonstrated her strength, courage and faithfulness through her resistance to a system of state sponsored terror. The people of Ukraine demonstrated their strength, courage and faithfulness in February of 2022, when they resisted the invasion of the Russian army. Victims of sexual or physical abuse demonstrate their strength and courage in their time of peril through their resistance and persistence. Christ demonstrated his strength, courage and faithfulness through his death on the cross.

Those who threaten and intimidate peaceful people going about their daily lives, or unleash armies of soldiers, or armies of lawyers on poorly equipped adversaries might think they are strong. The story of Claudette Colvin reminds us they are weak.

The message of scripture is that the strength of the oppressor is fleeting. The Gospels remind us their violence will not prevail. God struggles alongside those who are oppressed. God labors beside those who seek freedom and dignity for all people. God's strength will sustain you who seek to do the right thing in perilous times.