

Gen. 15:1–12, 17–18

Ps. 27

Phil. 3:17–4:1

Luke 13:31–35

Witness and Hope

Goal for the Session

Heeding Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, adults will consider contemporary ways to speak truth to power that are grounded in God's promised future.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Luke 13:31–35

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective,” Leslie J. Hoppe

Luke places the lament over Jerusalem at the end of a collection of parables (13:1–30), all of which are calls for repentance. This is very likely a key to how Luke understands its significance. Jesus’ lament over the city of Jerusalem is less a final judgment on the city and more a call to repentance. The touching metaphor by which Jesus asserts that it is God’s will to protect Jerusalem through him is evidence that Jesus is predicting not the city’s destruction but its salvation. Both Isaiah (60:4) and Zechariah (10:6–10) use the image of the scattered children of Jerusalem being gathered together to speak of God’s unwavering love for Israel.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective,” Daniel G. Deffenbaugh

Jesus is brooding over the face of the deep, as it were, lamenting the excesses of this city’s past and anxious about the birth pangs (cf. Rom. 8:22) that he must soon endure there. In the new kingdom of God, the blessed will not be those who come in the name of power and of strength, but rather those who come in the name of the humble and faithful Lord of creation. It is to this end that Jesus must proceed, even amid such inconsequential obstacles to God’s will as Herod and Rome.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective,” Rodney Clapp

If Jesus expects scorn and violence in Jerusalem, he does not return that hateful rage with rage of his own. The opening words of his speech could easily lead to a revolutionary diatribe: Instead, his oration veers into a motherly lament: “How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” (v. 34). At these words, Jesus’ original hearers could not have helped but pick up echoes of frequent Old Testament references to the God of Israel as the one “under whose wings you have come for refuge” (Ruth 2:12; see also Pss. 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4).

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael B. Curry

For Jesus, God’s passionate dream, compassionate desire, and bold determination is to gather God’s human children closer and closer in God’s embrace and love. That mission and commitment are at the center of Jesus’ work. Like a mother hen, God seeks to draw, embrace, include, and welcome God’s children into the family of humanity that God has intended from the dawn of Eden itself.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:31–35

Focus on Your Teaching

Many adults have experienced abuses of power in their daily lives. A supervisor at work engages in unethical behavior. A patriarch or matriarch in the family abuses his or her privileged standing. A prominent leader in your congregation oversteps her or his authority. How should one respond? Keep silence, fearful of possible consequences? Lash out at them in kind? Or speak the truth and hope for the best? Today's Scripture considers how Jesus dealt with abuse of power and provokes ideas for participants to do the same.

What is the word, what is the work, you would bring to me for the leading and then living of this session, O God? May I hear, that I may do. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- table or bench
- battery-powered candle
- purple cloth
- large Bible (perhaps a pulpit or altar Bible)
- pens
- paper
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 24, 2019

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- option 3: Resource Sheet 2

■ LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, place the purple cloth on the table or bench. Place the candle and large Bible in the center, opened to Luke 13:31–35. Also, write the four assignments for the initial Exploring activity on the board or sheet of newsprint. Or make a copy of the activity and cut apart the assignments to give to groups.

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Invite adults to recall a situation involving conflict where they wanted to speak out but did not do so. For silent reflection: what kept you from speaking out? Next, have adults recall a situation of conflict where they took the risk of speaking out. For silent reflection: what motivated you to speak?

Without disclosing the particular incidents, invite adults comfortable doing so to briefly identify what moved them to keep silent or speak out.

Today we will consider a Gospel story where Jesus spoke and set out on a path undeterred by conflict with powerful individuals and institutions.

Light the candle and offer this prayer or one of your choosing:

Speak to us, O God, through the words of today's passage, through this community you have gathered: that we, in turn, may speak your truth and live your hope. Amen.

EXPLORING

Set the passage's context by inviting participants to briefly review the stories in Luke 13 that precede it by looking at the subheads of those passages in study Bibles. Note that these stories of repentance, conflict, and transformation are set in the midst of a much longer section

The so-called Travel Narrative (Luke 9:51–19:48) sets the course of Jesus' ministry to Jerusalem by providing extensive teaching (in word and example) on how disciples can follow Jesus' example.

At the time of Jesus, Jerusalem (which literally means “foundation of Salem,” a Canaanite god) contained the seats of power of both Jewish religion (Temple rebuilt by Herod the Great) and Roman occupation (fortress Antonia presided over by Pilate).

(Luke 13:10–17:10) that weaves those same themes into Jesus' teaching by word and example. Have adults silently read Luke 13:31–35. Invite general observations about or questions raised by this passage.

Form four small groups. Give each group one of the following assignments posted on the board or newsprint or give them the strip of paper with the assignment. Ask each small group to discuss the assignment and prepare a brief report for the whole group.

- ❖ Make a case that the Pharisees warn Jesus out of genuine concern for him rather than to somehow entrap him (see Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1; also Acts 5:34–39).
- ❖ Find out which Herod this is (not Herod the Great) and why he might be seen as a threat to Jesus (see Luke 3:18–20; 9:7–9; 23:6–12).
- ❖ Consider traditions of prophets being threatened or executed by Israel's political authorities (Jeremiah 26:20–23; 38:4–6; 2 Chronicles 24:20–22).
- ❖ Explore the image of a mother bird gathering her brood vis-à-vis prophetic images of God's promised gathering of Jerusalem's children (Deuteronomy 32:11; Psalm 61:4; Isaiah 40:11; 60:4).

Gather the whole group. After each report, discuss what light this background sheds on the powers or authorities Jesus addresses; the potential impact of his truth-telling; and Jesus' understanding of God's future.

Call attention to the prominence of “Jerusalem” in this passage. Invite adults to brainstorm all that they know about or associate with Jerusalem. Write these responses on a board or newsprint sheet. Underscore Jerusalem's identity as the religious and political center of Judaism (and Rome's occupation of that region). Invite adults to imagine themselves the leaders of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. Ask:

- ❖ What does Jesus seem to be saying, explicitly or implicitly, about your authority?
- ❖ How would you respond to your city, and power, being linked to the killing of prophets?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 13:31–35). Read and discuss the “Where?” excerpt. Focus your conversation on the sentence there that begins “In the new kingdom of God . . .” Ask adults:

- ❖ What does it mean for Jesus to say his ministry will not be dissuaded by those like Herod (and later Pilate) who flaunt their possession of power?

Shift the conversation by substituting “the church” for “Jesus” in that previous question:

- ❖ What does it mean for Jesus to say his ministry will not be dissuaded by the powers that be in his day?

Raise the same question, substituting the church and its ministry for Jesus and his ministry.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Truth, Mission, and Power** Jesus' dismissal of Herod's threat for the sake of ministry empowers the church's witness in the midst of contemporary authorities that might otherwise stifle our mission. Ask adults to read the "Now What?" excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Talk about dreams and hopes that people have today that are threatened by powers that do not welcome them. Identify ways in which the church might speak truth about such power for the sake of the "mission and commitment at the center of Jesus' work." Commit as individuals, and as a group, to one such missional act of speaking truth.
- 2. Hope That Empowers** Jesus grounds his courage to defy Herod in the hope asserted in verse 35. Have individuals recall the situation of conflict discussed in Gathering. Ask: How does hope, or its absence, play into these occasions where you spoke out, or refrained from doing so? Form small groups to explore ways in which hope empowers faithful speaking and living. Apply these insights to a conflict in your community (church or wider) today. How might hope transform what we say and do in its midst?
- 3. Stories of Witness** The church's contemporary witness to powers stands on the shoulders of others who have borne such witness in the past. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Resource Sheet 2 (Facing Power with Truth). Lift up the "truths" that inform the witness of each individual, the nature of powers encountered, and the risks taken. Identify a divisive issue in your community. Discuss how these stories might inform your congregation's witness: in the truths that need to be upheld; in the powers that are in play; in the risks that are faced. Determine next steps for urging the church's continuing witness in the face of this issue.

CLOSING

Read aloud Jesus' words in verse 33: "Today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way." Invite the adults to silently consider the "ways" that our calling in Christ, as individuals and as congregation, requires that we be on. Imagine the forces arrayed both in favor and opposition to those ways. Thinking now of the conversations and activities in this session, ask adults to call out the truths that need to be affirmed and the hopes that sustain us on that way.

Offer this paraphrase of a portion of today's psalm (27:1) for a commissioning on our way:

God is your light and salvation: whom shall you fear?

God is the stronghold of your life: of whom shall you be afraid?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for March 24, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week, so that they have adequate time to reflect on the Scripture passages and the excerpts throughout the coming week.

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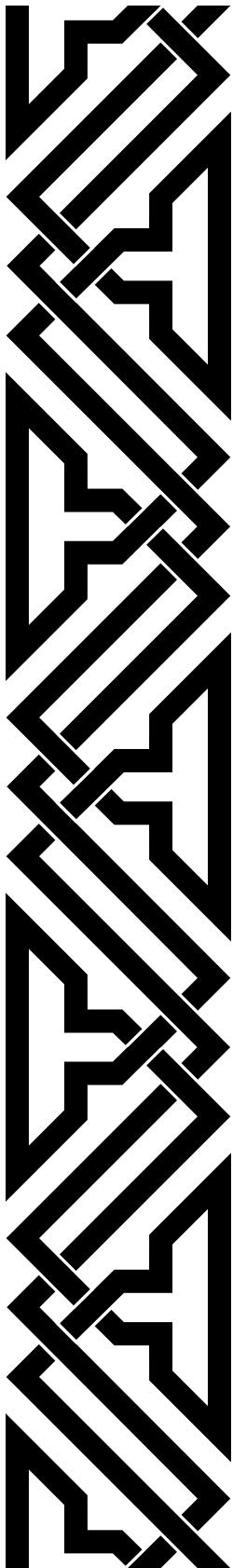
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Facing Power with Truth

Martin Luther

Three years after posting a series of debate propositions on the church door at Wittenberg, the German monk Martin Luther was summoned to an imperial assembly (“diet”) in the city of Worms. Luther had already been excommunicated by the church and branded as a heretic. The assembly was convened to grant Luther a hearing, and consider whether the appropriate punishment for heresy, being burned at the stake, was in order. At the assembly, Luther was given the opportunity to recant his writings. He asked for time to reflect on the choice. The next morning, speaking to this gathering of religious and political authorities, Luther declared: “Unless I am convicted by the Scriptures and plain reason . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.”

—Roland Bainton, *Christendom*, vol. 1
(New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 21

Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, an African American department store worker was asked to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, so that a white person could have her seat. She refused. When the driver asked why she didn’t move, Rosa Parks simply replied: “I don’t think I should have to stand up.” The bus driver called the police and an officer responded. As she was led away to jail, Ms. Parks asked the officer: “Why do you push us around?” Her arrest sparked a bus boycott organized by a 26-year-old named Martin Luther King Jr. Within a year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Alabama’s state and local laws establishing segregation on buses were unconstitutional.

Kefa Sempangi

Kefa Sempangi was a Ugandan pastor during the reign of Idi Amin. In his book, *A Distant Grief*, he tells the following story. At the conclusion of an Easter worship service he led, a death squad entered the church with orders to kill Rev. Sempangi. When asked if he had any final words, he said: “I am a dead man already. My life is dead and hidden in Christ. It is your lives that are in danger. . . I will pray for you.”

—Kefa Sempangi, *A Distant Grief* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1979), 115–21