INTERFAITH INSIGHT

John Lewis joined other religious leaders in the call for justice

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In the midst of so much negative news, the sad news of the death of John Lewis does remind us of this very positive and effective voice for social and racial justice. It also takes us back to that tragic event some 55 years ago when Lewis nearly lost his life on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Reflecting on it years later, Lewis, age 25 at the time, said, "At the moment when I was hit on the bridge and began to fall, I really thought it was my last protest, my last march. I thought I saw death, and I thought, 'It's OK, it's all right. ... I am doing what I am supposed to do.'"

Years earlier, he had met Rosa Parks and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who had inspired him "to get into good trouble, and I've been getting into good trouble ever since." He was the youngest of the close circle around King, first as a founder and president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and then as a member of the House of Representatives for over three decades. He became the nation's conscience on matters of justice and a powerful voice in Congress.

Lewis was motivated by his deep Christian belief and considered the civil rights movement a religious phenomenon. Last week, just hours before Lewis' death, another civil rights leader and close associate with King also died. The Rev. C.T. Vivian was considered the "resident theologian" in King's inner circle because of his deep understanding of the connections between the Bible and the political struggle in which they were engaged. He was 15 years older than Lewis and died at the age of 95.

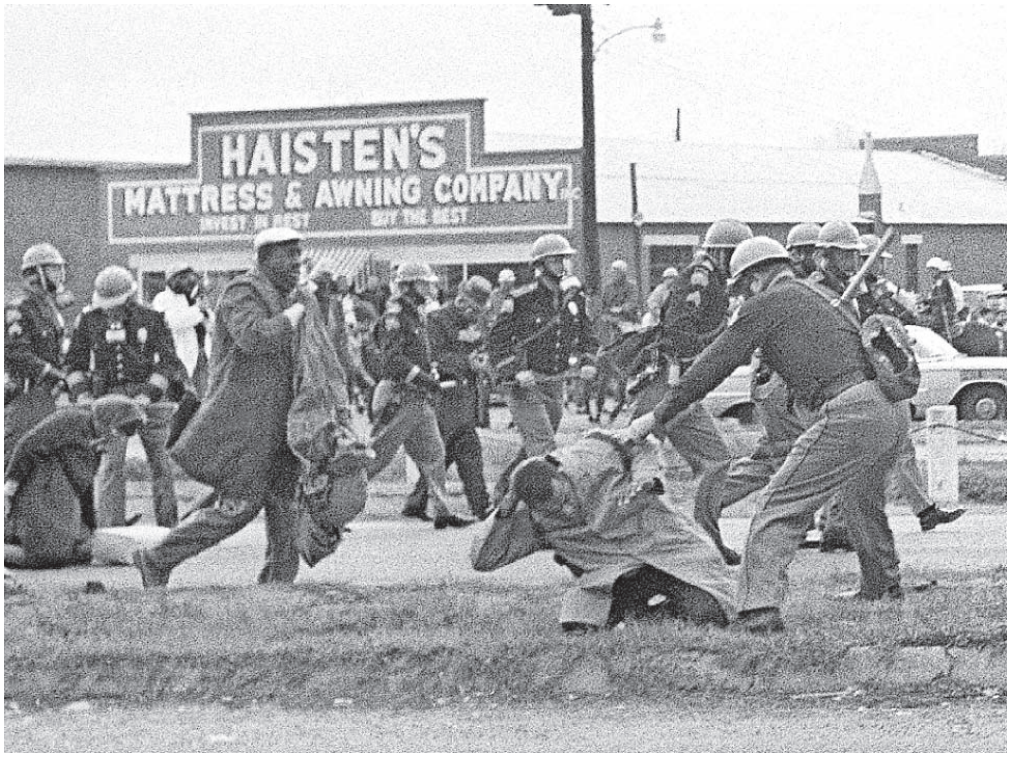
The Washington Post story on Rev. Vivian tells of his encounter with the authorities one month prior to the "Bloody Sunday" on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Hundreds of Black Americans had been stopped from trying to register to vote. Vivian confronted the local sheriff who had been blocking the effort, wagging his finger into his face and saying, "You can turn your back now and you can keep your club in your hand, but you cannot beat down justice. And we will register to vote, because as citizens of these United States, we have the right to do it." Whereupon in front of the cameras, the sheriff punched Vivian in the face.

Other religious leaders became involved in the 1965 events in Selma, including Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who had met King and others at a conference in Chicago. Heschel gave a talk titled "Religion and Race." His talk sought an expansive understanding of God's work in the world and called for kinship with all people regardless of race or religion, pointing specifically to "a deadly poison that inflames the eye, making us see the generality of race but not the uniqueness of the human face. ... The Negro is a stranger to many souls. There are people in our country whose moral sensitivity suffers a blackout when confronted with the Black man's predicament."

He continued pointing to the connection between the crime of murder, which is punishable by law, and the sin of humiliation, which is invisible, saying, "When blood is shed, human eyes see red; when a heart is crushed, it is only God who shares the pain." Heschel concluded his talk with the quote from the Hebrew prophet Amos, later made famous in talks by King: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." (Amos 5:24)

Two years later, Heschel marched with King in Selma and later recalled that it felt like his "legs were praying." For both leaders, it was a religious responsibility to be concerned for all suffering human beings since they were all created in God's image. King considered Heschel a modern-day prophet.

In Jon Meacham's book, "The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels," he writes about John Lewis based on an extensive interview he had with him in 2015, the 50th anniversary of the Selma march. Lewis was born to sharecropper parents and dealt with a childhood stutter "by preaching to the chickens on the family farm." Lewis had expected to be arrested in the march and had even included in his backpack some fruit, toothbrush and some reading material for his use in jail. He had not expected a crushing blow to his head causing fracture, but he was prepared to die.



On March 7, 1965, a state trooper swings a billy club at John Lewis, right foreground, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to break up a civil rights voting march in Selma, Alabama. *AP files*

Lewis considered the civil rights struggle a battle of whether the best of the American soul could win over the worst of hatred and fear. Meacham quotes Lewis:

"(W)e must humanize our social and political and economic structure. When people saw what happened on the bridge, there was a sense of revulsion all over America. ... In the final analysis, we are one people, one family, one house — not just the house of black and white, but ... the house of America. We can move ahead, we can move forward, we can create a multiracial community, a truly democratic society. I think we're on our way there. ... We have to be hopeful. Never give up, never give in, keep moving on."

Meacham's newest book, "His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope," is a biography of Lewis and will be released next month. In interviews reflecting on Lewis' death, Meacham says, "if we only acted on what so many Christians say they believe, but so rarely actually put into action, we could in fact create that world where justice comes down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. For him it wasn't rhetoric, it wasn't a sermon, it was reality."

Meacham goes on to say that Lewis "was on that bridge, he was in those buses, in that House chamber, because of the gospel. He never wavered from that faith." Meacham continues, "There are so many people who look a lot like me, who say they are religious, who say they follow the Lord ... and yet manage to overlook the Sermon on the Mount, because folks are more worried about the Supreme Court." Lewis believed in the very end that "there is a power to a religious vision of the world that can open our hearts rather than leading us to clench our fists."

Civil rights leader and U.S. Rep. John Lewis died Friday. Lewis announced in December 2019 that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. *Alex Wong, Getty Images*

Can we each catch this vision from John Lewis and other religious leaders? Can we never give up, never give in? Can we catch the vision from the Sermon on the Mount and from the Hebrew prophets as we follow our faith in seeking that better community for all people, for all races and for all faiths?

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