“Terror on every side!” the whisperings that Jeremiah hears of those who would undermine him are reminiscent of the cacophony of alarmists as acts of terrorism continue to test the ability of Christians who would embrace the dignity of nonviolence. It is coming from the Right who want a military solution for Islamist suicide bombers and it is coming from the Left who want to physically assault those who represent a resurgence of violent white supremacist crimes against minorities. Indeed, the one who stands for nonviolence is becoming a marginalized voice because so many equate a response without physical retribution as weak when so many seek to rally around a strong leader who would advocate the action no one has the boldness to do. When Jeremiah hears “take our vengeance upon him,” he hears vengeance and turns to God to rescue the life of the poor from the wicked. Is this an adequate response? Is it legitimate to fear that when we turn to God and prayerful response, that more will die and we will have been complicit in their death? This is the dilemma of the person of active nonviolence in violent times.

When we look at global terror, it can feel like we are playing a game of Whack-a-mole at the arcade. Each time one mole head pops up, we try to whack it with a club for points before the next one pops up. The object is to hit the heads, collect the points, and win. To not collect the points is to never win the prize. If it is not easy to see how collecting points with God by “whacking” the evil out of the world. Consider what it means when Paul says in his Letter to the Romans that “death came to all men, inasmuch as all sinned.” The realization that all men (and likely women as well) are sinners and inherit death by virtue of the prescriptions of the law. Just as Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, “Let the one who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7) we are asked in our response to terror to stop to consider whether there is any among us who has not been complicit in the terrorization of other people. For most people it might seem a simple “of course not,” but with those whose eyes are open to the entire course of history there is no assurance that someone from a similar background as each of us participated in a global war, a hate crime, torture, or simply an act of callous indifference to the suffering of another. Often it seems as if the revolt against indifference to suffering is the well-meaning impetus behind vengeance. We say, “How could ever someone do such a thing!” and as our indignation rises and our adrenaline clouds our patience, it surprises us that what we once thought was “caring” has taken on the language of “warring.”

Perhaps that is when we hear Christ the clearest. His is the voice, after all, that said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” and “you are worth more than the
“price of two sparrows.” Jesus did not survive the terror on every side of him, and most of us may have been just as ready as Peter to draw arms against those ready to put him to death. He cautioned that living by the might of our arms would be our undoing. Instead, he advocated that what he says “in the darkness, speak in the light;” and what we hear whispered about a life beyond violence “proclaim on the housetops.” Now is always the time to speak in a way that resonates with our soul and not to waste our breath in lip service to the means employed by anyone who can destroy our body and soul. While Jesus’ encouragement to “Fear no one” may sound bold and lack pragmatism; speaking the Gospel in times of trial is foremost an acknowledgement of the worth of human life in a time when so much indifference to the worth of life has crept in. If we believe that there is life in the Gospel, then we must not kowtow to the loudness of those seeking vengeance. Nonviolence can no longer be whispered.

Rhett Engelking, OFS, was the director of the Franciscan Action Network for 3 years and is now a student at Georgetown University’s Complementary and Alternative Medicine program.