

King's Refusal and Ours

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A sermon preached at Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey, on January 15, 2007.

Scripture texts: Matthew 2:16-18 and Romans 8:18-28

It is a distinct honor and a bit humbling to be your preacher this evening as we gather to commemorate the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This day on which we honor Dr. King is equally a day of remembrance and of mourning. We mourn the loss of Dr. King, cut down by an assassin's bullet at the age of 39; but we also mourn the dream for which he lived and died, a dream that still remains unrealized to this day. The twin evils against which King fought—of poverty and injustice, on the one hand, and violence, racism, and ethnic strife, on the other—are as alive now as they were then. Just as America faced a war without end in King's day, so, too, we have become embroiled in a cycle of violence that is not likely to leave any of us untouched.

As we honor Dr. King this day, let us remember that exactly one year to the day before he lay dying on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, this great leader had delivered an historic address at the Riverside Church in New York, an address in which he courageously criticized the Vietnam War. Urging his fellow clergy and civil rights activists to speak out against the war, King also called upon President Lyndon Johnson to "set a date that we will remove all foreign troops from Vietnam." After this address at Riverside Church, almost every newspaper in the country criticized King for his stance—a stance that in hindsight was so clearly right, and yet that so many at the time ridiculed as wrong. How could so many be so wrong about something that we today acknowledge to be so obvious and clear? And how can we honor King's memory this evening without paying tribute to his prophetic stance against the violence perpetrated by his own country?

Yes, I know, the temptation to embrace violence is powerful. With so many people today claiming that violence is the only language our world comprehends, how can we take seriously Dr. King's conviction that unarmed truth is able to defeat evil? Or his admiration for Ghandi and Thoreau? Or his conviction that unearned suffering has redemptive power? Or his resolution to remain nonviolent even when faced with overwhelming threats and abuse? To some of us, the violence that laid King low may seem more real and more formidable than the peace-seeking movement King inspired and championed throughout his short life. Then, and now, many think of King as an unrealistic dreamer.

And yet, King was no stranger to the realistic, ugly side of human nature. He was jailed twenty-nine times; his house was fire bombed twice; he suffered an almost fatal stabbing; he faced dogs and fire hoses; his supporters, some of them elementary school children, braved night sticks and tear gas. Dr. King was spied on and wiretapped by the FBI. There were those who wanted to force him to commit suicide, as well as those who knew of

plots to take his life, but refused to inform him. King out of touch with reality? No one in his generation was more immersed in the conflicts that beset American culture. And notwithstanding all these indignities heaped upon him—not only in the South but in the North as well—Martin Luther King remained passionately, unswervingly committed to nonviolence. Why?

I think it is because King was a realist in just the way that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew was a realist. What a sobering episode this is, this story of King Herod's slaughter of the innocent children. It would be hard to believe a man capable of such a thing, if we didn't know that Herod had two of his own sons murdered for fear they would usurp power from him. Desiring to do whatever it took to maintain his position, treacherous Herod gives orders to have all the children in the village of Bethlehem under the age of two years old massacred.

There are three lessons I think this horrible tale has to teach us this evening. First, this mindless resort to violence is the sort of thing that unbridled power does—and continues to do. Sometimes when we read the gospel stories we forget that the Roman Empire ruled over the Jewish people as an occupying power. In the years just prior to Jesus' birth, the Romans had taken away and enslaved 30,000 people from Magdala, the region in which Mary Magdalene was born. Similarly, they had burned the city of Sepphoris to the ground, a city just a few short miles from Jesus' own village of Nazareth.

By including this story of Herod's brutality in his account of Jesus' life, Matthew reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth was born to a people who were engaged in a struggle against oppression. And what was Jesus' response to this struggle? He encouraged his followers not to fear the reign of Rome but to trust in the reign of God. In a similar way, Dr. King had responded to the struggle of his people by demanding that America put aside injustice and live up to its own highest and best ideals. Yet this appeal to ideals was thoroughly realistic in its methods. In King's justly famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he observed that "freedom is seldom voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Moreover, when demands are made against power, King was well aware that power often responds by lashing out. But here's the key point: do not think when power lashes out, King counseled, that this is a sign of strength. It is, in fact, a sign of weakness. Violence never presents itself as a solution to a problem; rather, it is evidence that one has failed at a real and lasting solution.

And when violence lashes out, innocent people find themselves in the line of fire. We all know about those four little African American girls who were killed in Birmingham, Alabama by a bomb as they attended Sunday school the morning of September 15, 1963 at the height of the civil rights struggle. In his eulogy, King spoke of the murdered children as "martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity." He went on to tell those assembled for the funeral that these little children (and I quote Dr. King):

have something to say to us in their death. They have something to say to every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained-

glass windows. They have something to say to every politician who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism.... They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about *WHO* murdered them, but about the system, the way of life and the philosophy which *PRODUCED* the murderers.

You see, violence, and warfare, and torture, and fear are not just events that arise from nowhere. Perpetrators of violence seldom act merely on their own. Perpetrators of violence are almost always part of a **system** that cultivates violence, that depends on violence, that somehow sees violence as the best solution to our problems.

The traumatized and beaten down people who first listened to Matthew's story of the senseless slaughter of the children were well aware of the systemic nature of violence. The sorts of atrocities that had been perpetrated by Herod and his ilk were seared into their memories, no less so than memories of lynchings and other injustices were etched into the consciousness of African American peoples who followed Martin Luther King—and no less than images of genocide have been burned into the memories of the Jewish people, or ethnic cleansings into the minds of the peoples of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur; or daily civilian casualties into the hearts of the war-weary people of Iraq.

Again, these outrages do not just arise from nowhere. Abu Ghraib, if you will allow me to say it, did not arise from nowhere. When the innocent Canadian citizen, Maher Arar, was transported to Syria by U.S. agents to be tortured for 10 months, this did not arise from nowhere.

Matthew's story of Herod's senseless slaughter reminds us that violence can proliferate until it translates itself into a way of life. To King, however, violence as a way of life is a self-contradiction. In his essay, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Martin Luther King pointed out that in a day of modern weaponry set loose in densely populated cities war has become futile, because no one can really win at war. When nations go to war, they think they are engaging in a show of power. Historians are likely to look back on the current war in Iraq not as a demonstration of American power, but as the turning point in a seismic diminishment of American power. Of course, it did not need to be that way. What if, during the days following September 11, 2001, when the United States of America received such a great outpouring of sympathy and concern from around the globe, our government had used that great reservoir of political capital not to lash out but to strengthen diplomatic ties among the community of nations? Imagine if we had taken efforts to forge friendships with the many Islamic peoples around the world. What if we had taken the 1.27 trillion dollars it is costing to fund the war in Iraq and spent it on something constructive? 1.27 trillion dollars is the equivalent of spending 1 million dollars a day for 3,487 years. For those who favor realistic options, I ask you, is it realistic to spend this kind of money on a campaign of destruction?

Yes, I know, I know. I am quite aware that in the light of 9/11 we face real enemies with real designs to do harm to the innocent. I know that just as police act to protect the citizenry, so it may be necessary to use force to stop harm when danger is imminent. But a great nation must operate by a higher set of principles than those who would do it harm.

Will we never learn that when violence becomes our primary way of dealing with problems, it not only makes the problems worse, but something even much more alarming happens? As King knew well, it comes to infect our very souls.

Not only does this biblical story of the slaughter of the innocents remind us of what happens when violence becomes a way of life, the second thing it does is remind us that violence and injustice must be resisted. They must be resisted. Notice the perspective through which Matthew forces us to consider the carnage—this massacre which, in a way, stands for all the senseless slaughters that ever have been or ever will be in the world. Quite remarkably, we are asked to view these killings through a single set of eyes. Matthew would have us view it through the eyes of a solitary grieving mother. Amid the blood-dimmed horizon of destruction, we hear the sound of a single distraught, dismayed, and disconsolate woman—her name is Rachel—crying out:

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more. (Matt. 2:18)

What could be more realistic than that? A mother refusing to be consoled, because her babies were gone.

This is a quotation, of course, from the prophet Jeremiah, that great figure from the Hebrew Bible. Jeremiah, you will recall, lived during the time when Israel was invaded by the Babylonian Empire, which carried the people off into captivity to live in a region that, it just so happens, corresponds with modern-day Iraq. Amid the carnage and the confusion, the prophet imagines the voice of one of the great matriarchs of Hebrew Scripture—Rachel crying for the children of Israel.

In Jeremiah, Rachel, who is the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, is depicted as the symbolic mother of the nation crying out in the city of Ramah, from which the people of Judah were being deported to exile (Jer 40:1). Any one of us who has children, or who has faced intense grief, can relate to Rachel's sorrow. Nevertheless, Rachel's cries signifies something much more than mere sorrow. Notice what the text tells us. Not only does Rachel cry out for her little ones, but she absolutely **refuses** to be comforted. Her cry, that is to say, is not merely an expression of grief, but of rage. Psychologists tell us there is supposed to be a natural progression in grief; it begins with denial, moves on to bargaining, then despair—but it eventually resolves itself in acceptance. But here there is no acceptance. There is no moving on. There is no getting over it. And why is that? Because this is the sort of thing we're simply not supposed to accept, and Matthew knows it. Matthew lives in a world, as did Martin Luther King—and as do we—that is not the way it's supposed to be. And Rachel's tears are telling us that we should not reconcile ourselves to the injustice of this world.

Yes, I know, I know. This world of violence seems so powerful. It seems so compelling to **give in** to the world as it is, and to **give up** on the world as it ought to be. It compels us until we make “giving up” and “giving in” a way of life. “I can't do anything about that,” we say. “It's never going to change,” we declare. “OK, whatever,” our children whine.

“We just have to accept the way things are,” we reason. “That’s not a ditch I’m willing to die in,” we tell ourselves. “I’m just one person, without power, without influence.... what do you expect of me?” we protest.

Looking at the way we give in too easily, Martin Luther King bemoaned the fact that the church had let itself become the great defender of the status quo. In his “Letter From Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King saw the church as a taillight “standing...behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading [people] to higher levels of justice.”

What do you suppose it would take for our churches, our synagogues, our mosques, our temples, our communities of every sort to begin to see ourselves as headlights here in this community and not taillights? Oh, if it were only possible to pierce the darkness as a headlight! Here in this time! Here under the challenges of this day!

And this brings me to the third and final point. If we, like Rachel, cultivate the courage that refuses to accept injustice, then the light will dawn. If we refuse to accept evil, we can do so, confident that God joins us in our refusal. God not only joins us; God is already present in every situation. God is not lurking behind the scenes of history, but God is already on the scene. In the passage I read from Romans, Paul of Tarsus encourages us with the thought that suffering is not forever, and with the assurance that the very Spirit of God is present with us in our struggle. Even as the creation groans for justice, he says, so also the Spirit groans within our hearts as we seek to do God’s will. Paul compares God to a mother groaning in the pains of labor, as God works with us to give birth to a new and renewed world. In one of the oft-quoted verses of the New Testament, Paul assures us in Romans 8:28 that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to [God’s] purpose.”

And here’s the challenge I want to lay before us tonight: no matter what our religious tradition, or even if we don’t have much use for religion, I want to challenge each of us to dare to be part of God’s great work. I want us to dare to **be** that comfort for which Rachel so painfully longs. I want each one of us to join Rachel in her outrage and refusal of injustice. Join her tonight, just as Dr. King joined her in refusing to let injustice have the last word.

In 1967, at an address before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s minister training program in which he defended his decision to come out against the Vietnam War, Dr. King declared:

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it politic?” And Vanity comes along and asks the question, “Is it popular?” But Conscience asks the question, “Is it right?” And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

What is conscience calling us to say and to do tonight? Like Dr. King, what is it that we can no longer find it possible to accept? And with the sound of Rachel's cries ringing in our ears, what shall we together commit ourselves to do about it?

I can tell you Dr. King's answer. Is it saying no to violence, warfare, and torture? That would be a good answer, but it's not the whole answer. Martin Luther King would have us say no to the habit of mind that makes violence, warfare, and torture seem to be our only option. The true realism, according to Martin Luther King, Jr., is to embrace the reality of the God who created us and who wants to live out among us a higher, better way.

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