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Text: Matthew 2: 13-21  
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“On Refusing to be Consoled”

Over the last several months, we have often made reference to Miriam, the sister of Moses. In Exodus 2, she hides in the bulrushes, standing at a distance while her baby brother floats upon the current of the Nile, a survivor of the Pharaoh’s terror. Miriam became a figure that spoke to our own condition as we observed the currents of our world, gathering strength for whatever will be asked of us, for whatever is coming next. For better or for worse, whatever is coming next is now. Some of us will follow the ceremonies tomorrow in Washington carefully. Not a few of us will tune it out, having neither the heart nor the stomach for it. For my part, I’ll cast one eye upon it, with the other cast firmly upon the legacy left to us by Dr. King, whose day of celebration happens to coincide with our national transition. That’s a reminder of the better angels of our nature that are still available to us, if we wish. His has been one of the spirits, one of the voices of wisdom that has kept us company down there in the bulrushes with Miriam.

As we return to Miriam once again, I’d like to offer some further reflections upon that scene, based on Matthew’s Gospel. In the second chapter of that Gospel, immediately after the wise men depart, Matthew offers us a crucial update, a revision, if you will, of the Exodus narrative. It adds a further dimension to the story we’ve been following, with the addition of new voices, and new perspectives, down there by the river. Among those voices is that of Rachel, the biblical matriarch who, according to both Matthew and Jeremiah (the text Matthew quotes), refuses to be consoled. What does Rachel’s refusal of consolation mean? What word might it speak into our own situation? Drawing first upon the legacy of Dr. King, I’d like to take us back into the space of the bulrushes. But first, we need a story to situate ourselves.

For most of our married lives together, Rachael - my spouse, now, not the biblical character - and I have made a practice of reading aloud to one another in the car whenever we take long road trips. Mostly, I admit, I tend to drive and she tends to read. For the past five or so years, we’ve been working our way through Taylor Branch’s three volume history of Dr. King, the Civil Rights Movement, and the wider United States during those years. Each volume clocks in at 7 or 800 pages, and so it’s an act of patience for us both! We’ve read it driving through California, and Florida. We’ve read it driving through Alabama and Mississippi. We’ve read it driving across Texas and we’ve read it here in Connecticut. But one of the things I’ve appreciated most about this multi-year immersion into King’s life is how much he evolved over the years, how much he grows and changes across time. After each major campaign he struggled to figure out what should come next, and he agonized about how to preach into a new situation. One time, in the years after Montgomery and before Birmingham, he was so lost that he contacted an old mentor, Vernon Johns, who had occupied the pulpit of the Dexter Ave. Baptist Church in Montgomery immediately prior to King. Johns was a character, and he deserves a sermon or two in his own right. King hoped to find a trove of old sermons that he could poach, or at least receive direction from, but Johns, a brilliant and idiosyncratic man, hadn’t bothered to write much down throughout his career. King left despondent.

Nevertheless, even in the throes of uncertainty, King always found his way and he always managed to expand his vision. Montgomery led to Birmingham, and Birmingham to Selma. But then of course he moved north, to Chicago, to focus on housing in a northern city, and then back south, to focus upon labor rights in Memphis. And in the midst of all that, he was steadily widening his gaze toward international human rights struggles, struggles that had to do with race, but that also had to do with U.S. foreign policy and militarism, with the underside of capitalism, and with the twisted legacy of colonial entanglements. Toward the end, his gaze was focused upon the U.S. war in Vietnam, but he had also begun to consider an oppressed people in Palestine, and his attention was drawn toward the fate of oppressed peoples across the African continent. He kept moving, he kept changing, and he kept growing. Which raises the question of how he might have grown after 1968, had he not been assassinated. What, we can wonder, would arrest his gaze today? What would call forth his passion were he still with us in 2025?

Lots of things, I'm sure. Gaza certainly. Haiti most probably. The global struggle for human rights, and basic human dignity, for black populations around the world. The struggle for a living wage among poor and lower middle class people in this country. Concern about the rise of the oligarchs, coupled with the rise of white supremacy and far right politics here and abroad. All of that and more.

Or perhaps he would have surprised the world, like his friend Ralph Abernathy, and gone all in for Ronald Reagan in 1980, scandalizing not a few of his former colleagues and compatriots. Who can say?

Were I to speculate, though, I would imagine that a large share of his attention would be devoted to the issue of migration, and how the confluence of foreign policy failures, environmental destruction, and grinding poverty have forced many people to be on the move, risking everything to find a better life in North America, or in Europe, or somewhere else that wealth is concentrated. Were I to speculate, I would imagine that he would concern himself with what becomes of human beings when they are reduced to what one philosopher has called "bare life," a condition affecting more and more people across the planet. Bare life occurs whenever claims of nationality, and therefore claims to legal rights, and therefore claims to health care services, and therefore claims upon the right to receive an education, and therefore the right to housing - bare life is what happens when all of that is stripped away. It's what happens when all dignity and, really, all personhood, is simply peeled away from a human life. Were I to speculate, I would imagine that King might turn his attention toward that growing phenomenon.

I recently spoke with Paul Verryn, our mission partner in South Africa. He shared the story of a man gravely injured in a mining accident somewhere north of Johannesburg. The mining company cared little, and the man was dumped at a local emergency room. Paul was outraged to learn that this man was refused medical care because he couldn't be identified, and wouldn't have had the means to pay for his care. That refusal resulted in his death. That is what it is to be reduced to bare life - where no one knows your name, and no one cares whether you live or die. I wish you could have heard Paul speak of his intention to visit that hospital, where he planned to lay a curse upon the hands that refused treatment to an unknown and nameless man.

"If you had been asked to pray over that man's body, how would you have done it?" Paul later asked me. My answer was immediate, and perhaps far too glib, but I think it was right. "I would have prayed over his body as if it were Jesus himself," is what I said. "I would have addressed the body as Jesus, because somehow, I think it's exactly there, within bare life, that Jesus locates himself."

The story of Jesus culminates, of course, in God incarnate being reduced to bare life upon a cross. The resurrection constitutes the stunning insight that God has taken God's place precisely there, within *that* naked flesh, within the bare life of *that* man. When God enters the world, God stakes his – her – ground there, among lives reduced to barrenness.

But really, that movement takes place much earlier in the Gospel narrative, and here I wish to return to the scene immediately after the wise men depart. Herod, a regional tyrant, is threatened by the arrival of a possible competitor, and so he has Hebrew children under the age of two murdered. Meanwhile, Joseph and Mary, together with the infant Jesus, are forced to flee. They become refugees, hiding in Egypt until the terror has passed, at which time they return, taking up residence in Nazareth. As an infant, then, we see that the God-become-flesh has already become one of those who is on the move, forced to leave their homes because of terror or hardship. Already, as an infant, we see that this God become flesh is somehow precisely like those forced to cross the Darién Gap separating Colombia and Panama, is already like those who walk north through the entirety of Central America, is precisely like those who ride the Beast (as the train through Mexico is known), is already like those camped at the wall separating Mexico from the U.S. Look at them, Matthew's text implies, and you will see the face of God.

But there's something further we need to see about this story from Matthew's Gospel. It is a deliberate reframing of the Exodus story, where the action suddenly, and very briefly, shifts to Egypt. You see, Jesus now becomes the child floating upon a swirling current, a new kind of Moses. Consider the elements of both stories. Like the Exodus story, so in Matthew infant children are threatened by a murderous king. Like the Exodus story, a child is placed upon a current - a river in Exodus, and a line of flight made by a family on the run in Matthew. In Exodus, there is a holy witness, notably, a woman, Miriam, who bides her time, waiting in the bulrushes. In Matthew, we discover yet another holy witness, yet another woman who observes the scene with vision and clarity - this time, Rachel. But in this updated account, Rachel arrives in the form of a complex literary citation, from Jeremiah:

“A voice was heard in Ramah,  
Weeping and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
She refused to be consoled...”

Rachel was Jacob's wife, the mother of two of his children - Benjamin and Joseph, through whom God's promise to future generations is carried. But here's where things get really interesting. When Jeremiah cites the figure of Rachel, he does so as waves of Jewish people were being deported to Babylon, just after the destruction of Jerusalem, just as the exile was being enacted. Ramah is a city just north of Jerusalem, and it was known to be the site from which those deportations were taking place. Do you see the significance of this? A weeping and loud lamentation goes up from the scene of deportation. And the woman associated with that weeping is a mother, the mother of all lost and departed children. She is Rachel, and she refuses to be consoled.

It's a complex and nested set of literary allusions that Matthew gives us: the Exodus, the Exile, and Jesus himself, all of which depict moments in which human beings are laid bare, all of which depict moments in which human beings are forced to flee their surroundings, all of which depict God situating Godself, precisely there, and not elsewhere. It is to say that the bulrushes,

in which we have been crouching with Miriam for the past several months, are crowded with witnesses, crowded with voices. There's Miriam, but in a way, Jesus and Mary and Joseph are there too. Somehow Jeremiah is there, but so too is Rachel, a supreme mother figure who weeps over the fate of the human family. And she refuses to be consoled.

What are we to say about that phrase - she refused to be consoled? How does it pertain to our situation? How does it pertain to Dr. King, and to the current that's now swirling around all of us, carrying us along? What would it mean, like Rachel, to refuse to be consoled?

Taking a signal first from Dr. King, perhaps it would mean to refuse the easy consolation of resting upon one's laurels. It would mean refusing to be satisfied after achieving integration on the Montgomery buses, or in Birmingham department stores. It would mean refusing to be placated, even after legal segregation had been struck down throughout the South, even after the Voting Rights Act had been enacted. At each of those moments, King might have decided, "we've got what we wanted, we've achieved what we're going to achieve." But at each juncture, he listened more closely, and he continued to hear the cry of a people that various mechanisms - structural racism, military hubris, colonial domination - had rendered "bare." King refused to be consoled.

Taking another example, this one more current, it might mean looking at the Gaza ceasefire, being enacted now, right this very second, and breathing a sigh of relief on one hand, while refusing to be satisfied by reverting to an earlier status quo that was also inhumane. The greatest danger of the ceasefire announcement, in my estimation, is that the world will once again go back to ignoring Palestine - a scene of bare life if ever there was one - and that the structural injustice that produced this terrible carnage would never be addressed at its root cause. That danger is coupled with another - that a homicidal regime in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, one aided and abetted by the U.S., would never be held to account for the wanton and indiscriminate killing and wounding of hundreds of thousands of people in Gaza. Amidst the celebrations, an agonized weeping can still be heard in Gaza, and we, along with the rest of the world, do well to refuse consolation.

But let me address the future as well, a future that arrives tomorrow. The day after the election, on November 8, the two companies that saw the largest gain on the stock market were private prison contractors, both of which have the know-how to build camps and detention centers. One was GEO Group, which saw the price of its shares jump by 42% in a single day of trading. The other was CoreCivic, which saw the price of its shares jump by 27%. It's also worth noting that another company Axon, which manufactures taser guns, saw its shares leap as well. We say that we don't know exactly what's coming, but the market certainly seems to know. If, as seems likely to happen, roundups of migrants do start to occur, there is every indication that they shall be subjected to yet another form of bare life - the warehousing of human beings, the break up of families, and hasty deportations. There will be a temptation among many to say that the maintenance of law and a concern with security somehow justify that treatment. There will be a temptation to say that it has always been so, and that all administrations must engage in deportations. Perhaps. But tell that to Jeremiah. Tell that to the women of Ramah. Tell it to Matthew. Tell them that it's always been so when conquering powers take hold. I'm sorry, but Rachel, the mother of humanity, refuses to be consoled. We too should refuse consolation.

I think Rachel stands for us in other ways as well. In an America hellbent on sunny optimism, telling even cancer patients to stay positive, she stands for a more honest and humane response, which is sometimes jagged, fearful, angry, and littered with contradictory emotions. It

is ok, sometimes, to refuse consolation. In an America in which even the death of our loved ones is often treated as a growth opportunity, Rachel stands for the holy necessity of grief, of allowing anguish to flow through us. It is liberating, sometimes, to refuse consolation. In an America obsessed with masculinity, with shows of dominance and strength, Rachel stands for something softer, something within our hearts that knows how to weep, that knows how to mourn. It is good, sometimes, to refuse consolation. In an America eager to wipe the sins of its past from memory, so as never to acknowledge the failures of its present, Rachel stands for the cry of history, and for its long unbroken wail. It is necessary, sometimes, to refuse consolation. In an America seeking to justify its allegiance with cruelty, with misogyny, with bigotry, with intolerance, Rachel stands for the righteousness of refusing to be pacified. It is humanizing, sometimes, to refuse consolation. Rachel stands for all those in the world who refuse to be consoled.

She does so because she knows that God stands among those and with those reduced to bare life. She does so for the sake of the human beings soon to be trafficked from Ramah, all those children caught in the currents of a history beyond their choosing. She does so because she refuses all the ways that injustice trades in pieties about what is necessary, about what God might or might not will, about what laws or customs might or might not require.

And so now return to the bulrushes once more with me. See Miriam there, calculating her next move. But notice Rachel as well. Listen to her.

A voice is heard in Ramah, with weeping and loud lamentation. She refuses to be consoled.

Can you hear her? Can you hear her even now?