

Linking Arms (Matt. 3.1-12)
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church
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In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

It’s surprising how he catches your eye in the photograph.¹ The photograph wasn’t really taken of him. It was taken of the man at its center, the young African-American preacher, Martin Luther King. In the image King is frozen with one foot lifted as they begin the march from Selma to Montgomery. He is casting a pensive glance to his left, and perhaps that is the reason that your eyes move toward the margin of the photograph. But the reason they stay there is that they invariably land on the image of that other man. He doesn’t quite look like the other rather clean-cut religious leaders who have linked arms to march for African-American voting rights. Though he wears a similar overcoat with a pressed shirt and tie beneath it, Rabbi Abraham Heschel cuts quite a different figure. He has long, almost wild white hair that falls in a great sweep over his temple. His chin and cheeks are completely lost beneath an equally unruly beard, broken only by the trace of his mouth with lips pursed in determination. Almost all you can see of the rabbi’s face are his nose and thick round glasses. He looks like a sort of Hebrew prophet dressed in the garments of the 1960s and your eye can’t help but land on him when you see that old photograph of the march. Rabbi Heschel, however, would have been the first to tell us that the photograph wasn’t really taken of him. But he probably would have added that it wasn’t a photograph of Martin Luther King either. Rather, he would have

¹ Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-68* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), Plate 1.

told us the picture of the march from Selma to Montgomery is a picture of the kingdom of heaven.

When Martin Luther King and Abraham Heschel joined arms with others that morning in Alabama, they were already linked by a certain friendship. They had met two years earlier at a Chicago conference on religion and race. According to King's biographer, Taylor Branch, at that conference, "[Heschel] and King...found seeds of a surprising bond...when they brought almost interchangeable sermons on the claims of prophetic justice. Each had railed against a national religious climate of resigned, trivial piety, prodding some two thousand eminent clergy to inflict healing discomfort on the world's racial divisions. 'To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart,' Heschel had proclaimed, 'to remember that humanity as a whole is God's beloved child.'"² He was followed by King, who brought the conference to its feet several times with a brokenhearted lament that to segregate ourselves and deny our shared humanity was also to radically sever our relationship with the divine source of that humanity. As the two men preached to a nation that they believed needed to repent of its sins, each found in the other a kindred spirit. And although their lives could hardly have been more different, each of them had linked arms with certain ideas about what it meant to be a person of faith.³

King had grown up in the American South, a black man making his way in a harsh climate of segregation. Heschel, about twenty years his senior, had grown up in Central Europe, an aspiring rabbi as the Nazi party rose to power. Each of them had encountered

² Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 135.

³ Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 217-18.

the worst of what humanity, including its religious institutions, had to offer. Heschel had watched so many Christian churches sit idly by as Jews were designated second-class citizens, housed in ghettos, and ultimately rounded up. He emigrated to the United States in 1939, but his mother and three of his sisters were unable to leave Europe and died under the Nazi regime. King had seen the similar support of churches for the separate and unequal system of race relations in America, where people of color were not only discriminated against in nearly every aspect of daily life but lived under the threat of a history of beatings and lynchings. When Heschel came to America, he actually made a number of direct links between the inhumanity he had seen in Europe and the inhumanity that was evident in this country. In his writing, he noted, “There is an evil which most of us condone [support] and are even guilty of: indifference... We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done to other people.”⁴ Perhaps what united King and Heschel above all was their shared commitment to pierce the silence of this indifference with a prophetic voice. And beyond the differences of an African-American preacher and a Central European rabbi, they began to see their own brotherhood in the struggle. They linked arms with each other and with a certain radical spirituality that would call them each to Selma and beyond. Of course, they were not the first to issue such a call.

This morning’s lectionary reading offers us a character with a word just as prophetic as those offered by King and Heschel. “In those days,” the gospel tells, “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” John was a strange character, not unlike a Hebrew prophet himself. We

⁴ Or N. Rose, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Man of Spirit, Man of Action* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 43.

are told that he lived on the outskirts of town, at the margin of the photograph, as it were, and he surely would have caught most anyone's eye. The Book of Matthew says that he dressed himself in coarse camel's hair clothing that he bound with a leather belt. He lived on locusts, wild honey, and a sort of vision that the kingdom of heaven had already come near. The kingdom was closer than anyone thought, John preached, and those who recognized it could begin to live out its values in the here and now. Hearers who accepted his message joined John in the river, where they went beneath the water and came up again to symbolize the birth of some new consciousness in themselves. The kingdom of heaven *has* come near. It is, as Tolstoy said, already within you.⁵ But to recognize it is to wake to its demands, which are anything but slight. John himself must have known this, for the harshness of his language seems to make it quite clear. "Bear fruit," he said. "Do not presume." "I baptize you with water...but [you will be baptized with] the...Spirit and [also with] fire." That is, if you keep on this path, the path that leaves the world of indifference behind.

We don't know how long John stayed in the wilderness preaching his radical message, but as the gospel story goes he was there long enough to greet another rabbi who sought him out and hoped to be baptized in the river. And it's a telling thing that Jesus, at the outset of his ministry, went to the margins to find John and ask if he himself could go into the water to ritualize his own new consciousness. Afterwards, Jesus would follow his own path. But his way wouldn't be any more neutral than that of John the Baptist, Martin Luther King, or Abraham Heschel. For rabbi Jesus would also completely reject the second-class status of so many – everyone from women to Samaritans – and he

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1984).

including among his friends tax collectors, prostitutes, day laboring fishermen, and anyone else who might be open to the idea that the kingdom of heaven has always been as real as people are willing to make it and can only go as far as sisters and brothers will carry it together. Over and over again Jesus taught that our lives are our prayers. And if we would pray for peace, then we must live out a measure of justice. For, as Heschel and King knew, one cannot move forward without the other. They must link arms in the struggle.

For some people the new consciousness comes when they go under the water. Others may find it at bar mitzvah. A few come upon it walking in the wilderness or even talking with someone they meet there. But Advent's hope is that the new consciousness is possible, that if we watch, wait, and maybe even seek, we can find it within ourselves. Both the prophets of old and the more recent prophets would have us believe that the kingdom of heaven is not a distant dream but is a present possibility. Real prophets, of course, would say that it is more than a possibility, it is an obligation. We are obligated, they say, to move beyond our indifference, our comfort, our status quo, into the new consciousness of the work that is ours to do. We are obligated to link arms with other people of good faith who would join in the struggle for a more just world. This is the path to peace. And it is a path that takes sides – it takes sides with everyone who has ever been made into a second-class citizen. We might just pause to consider that while the issues of racism and anti-Semitism with which King and Heschel struggled remain unresolved, we can now add to them the current bigotry we see directed at groups like Arab Muslims and undocumented migrant workers in our country. Perhaps we would do well, then, to remember what happens when we lose sight of our common humanity and

begin to treat people differently based on race, ethnicity, or social status. Perhaps we could ask, with those American prophets from Selma, if our society isn't still in need of repentance and a new consciousness. Perhaps we should consider what we might do to raise our own voices this Advent on behalf of every sister and brother who has been forced to live at the margins. Perhaps to follow such a path would be the beginning of real peace. For their part, the rabbi and the preacher would have us believe as much.

After the march from Selma to Montgomery, Martin Luther King and Abraham Heschel continued to work together for a more just society. Heschel strongly supported the civil rights movement throughout his life, and King joined him in the growing opposition to the American war in Vietnam. King spoke to the American Rabbinical Assembly on the occasion of Heschel's 60th birthday, and, not long after, Heschel read from the prophet Isaiah at the funeral service held for King at Morehouse College. Over the years they marched together a number of times, but it was that moment when they linked arms and took the first step from Selma that always remained with Rabbi Heschel. It was an incredibly poignant symbol to him of a new kind of consciousness, a moment that sustained him for years afterward in the long, slow struggle for justice and peace. In a personal letter to King, Abraham Heschel wrote, "The day we marched together was a day of sanctification. That day I hope will never be past to me – that day will continue to be this day..."⁶ The rabbi added in his diary, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling.

⁶ Susannah Heschel, "Praying with Their Feet: Remembering Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King," *PeaceWork*, Issue 371: December 2006 – January 2007, 2.

And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”⁷

At the heart of the Christian message lies the affirmation, “on earth as it is in heaven.” This Advent may we link arms with such a vision and prepare our hearts for its way. This Advent may we walk the path together away from our indifference and toward a new consciousness of every person as our sister and brother. This Advent may we commit ourselves anew to working for justice. May our work be our prayer for peace.

Amen.

⁷ Ibid., 2.