Fugitivity:
Revisiting Our 2020 Conversation with J. Kameron Carter
November 25, 2026

Marthame Sanders: This is Marthame Sanders, producer of the Ministry Collaborative podcast. As we head into the holidays here in the United States at the end of the calendar year, we wanted to look back on our more than six years of podcasts by revisiting six of your favorite episode. On this episode, originally recorded in August of 2020, Executive Director Mark Ramsey spoke with Dr. J. Kameron Carter. Dr. Carter is currently a professor of African American Studies at the University of California at Irvine. When they spoke back in 2020, we were still in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mark Ramsey: This is Mark Ramsey, Executive Director of the Ministry Collaborative, and it is my distinct honor to be with my dear friend, J. Kameron Carter today. J and I got to know each other about six years ago. It's been one of the most generative friendships that I've had over that time. J, welcome.

J. Kameron Carter: Oh, I'm so glad to be here and just to be talking with you, Mark. Just so happy.

Mark: Your work is everywhere, and I know your inquisitive mind and dedicated heart goes in a lot of different directions. I've really appreciated your work on "fugitivity". Can you just say a word about that?

J: Yeah, I'll keep it as brief and as in a nutshell as I can, but, that word, "fugitivity", if there is a word that might be able to, sort of, contain so much of what I'm thinking about, it is that word. Historically, it's a word that comes out of and has been mobilized in relationship to slaves, in the history of American slavery, who ran away. And at the core of it is they ran away because they believed that the world that was didn't have to be the world that was. The world that is, is not the world that has to be. And they moved, they entered into a kind of social movement, literally running away, following the North Star under the hope of realizing another way of being in the world. That's fugitivity.

And I don't want to think about the action of these fugitive slaves – these lawbreakers who ran away following the stars many times, interpreting the stars as God speaking to them – I don't want to interpret that simply as a thing of the past, but rather there was a form of life and a form of thought in that runaway practice. So the fugitives acted out of an orientation of the world that I call fugitivity. And at the root of it was kind of social movement from the state of things as they are to a kind of struggle to realize an alternative. That's what I mean by fugitivity. And I believe that there's something religious about it that can speak to the Christian intellectual tradition, can speak to Christians, to give them a renewed understanding of their own faith.

Mark: That's really helpful, J. I've shared before that I think this year, particularly with the pandemic and then everything that is attached to that, is not really presenting us much new, rather it's revealing some things that were already there that were perhaps under the surface and are accelerating every trend that was already in motion. So, if things were going in a healthy direction, now their…those institutions and churches have really been able to seize the moment. If they were stagnant or struggling, then that also has been accelerated. What do you see being revealed and/or accelerated right now?

J: Wow, what a great question. As I read it, the pandemic is a virus on top of a virus. It's a virus that is leveraged and moves by way of another virus. The racial animus and strife on which the nation is founded was the first virus, the virus that founds the nation. The pandemic is a virus on top of that virus. And so it inflects the virus that was already there. The problem is that that first virus is that we've been schooled to not think of it as a virus. We've been schooled to think of the settler colonial violence against native peoples, the anti-Black violence by which peoples of African descent were brought into this land to rework that land, to literally convert it – and I use that word convert quite advisedly and theologically – to convert and transform the land into what we now call the United States, that was a genocide as well as it was a certain kind of geocide. It transformed the land, it transformed and destroyed lives, forms of life. That was a virus, a deadly virus. It literally did kill people in the founding of the nation.

Fast forward to 250 years after the founding of the nation. Now we've got this COVID pandemic. The COVID virus is amplifying all of the fissures and fractures that grow out of that first virus that I very quickly just summarized. That's what we're dealing with. Those institutions that have tried to address the first virus, to have some sort of repentive relationship to it, some sort of confessing and repentive relationship to that first virus, are the institutions that are best positioned to address the exacerbation of that virus through the COVID pandemic.

Those institutions that have not are behind the eight ball, they're left flailing. And sadly, I have to confess, and I say this as someone who's worked in a theological institution, I'm a theologian amongst many other things. I worked at Duke University Divinity School. I'm not there now, but I still very much write in theology. I truly, truly believe that many of our church practitioners, and many people who are being trained in Christian ministry today, they have not been given the tools to have a repentive relationship towards the first virus, and they find themselves as pastors and various kinds of church workers, and they don't know what to do, given the exacerbation of the first virus through the pandemic that we are now in, the other virus.

Mark: J, that…I think that is such an important word and I would say it's echoed. In the Ministry Collaborative, we're talking to pastors around the country every single day, and they would say that they are finding that this is revealing that they were not adequately prepared. Now that's not all on the institution, obviously. It's also on them, but this has left them wanting for equipping they do not have.

J: Yes, sir. I take inspiration on a certain level. In this book I'm finishing, I have a chapter in it on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And I take a certain inspiration from Bonhoeffer. Me and Bonhoeffer, we love each other. We friends, and I truly mean that. My relationship with Bonhoeffer is different from my relationship with Immanuel Kant, the philosopher who I wrote about in my first book. I always said that I love Kant, he just wouldn't love me back. I actually think that Bonhoeffer would love me back. He and I are simpatico. We both are trying to be a Christian. We are trying.

And one of the things that I like about Bonhoeffer, got great inspiration from, is that he too realized in the moment of 1930s German fascism, European fascism, that the Christian church was ill-prepared to deal with it. And he knew that at least part of the issue was theological formation. So what he did is that he started an underground theological education movement. And I use that word "underground" intentionally to echo back to the fugitivity stuff. He started an outlaw fugitive church. It was a church that broke the law. It literally was against the law to do the kind of formation he was doing. He was trying to train pastors for how they could speak to, and intervene into, a fascist world because they weren't getting it in theological training. And, you know, I don't know what that translates into or looks

like in 2020 in the US, but we need some sort of fugitive approach to theological education. We need a fugitive theology that takes its inspiration from the fugitive tradition. I'm hoping that we can begin to think in that direction as we move forward into the future.

Mark: Yeah. I have great sympathy and empathy for pastors right now and how much is on the line. And as many of them said, it sounded like they had a incomplete job description before now, but now they're online producer and, and, and, to go along with that. It is very hard to continue to build a vehicle while you're driving it. And congregations are saying "you got to drive this" and they're not…all the conversation about "When are we going to reopen?" or, I think more insightfully, "When are we going to get back?" is just loaded with danger. As I've been saying to some folks recently, it's not like January of 2020 had the church in a really robust, healthy place in America. We were already struggling and then we've gone down from there.

Of all places in an article about Tim Cook, the head of Apple, he quoted Colin Powell: "Management is tasked with moving an army from point to point. Leadership moves an army where it never thought possible." What are the places the church can't think possible that we need to lead right now?

J: I mean, in some sense, the unanswerable question, right? We could guess, we could speculate, but really that's I think what the work of the church is now. We have to begin to speculate futures, not the futures that we imagine inside of the timeline we are already in. In some sense, we have to disconnect from the current trajectory, and that's the work of speculation. We have to speculate: what does it mean to imagine the *ecclesia* emerging from the street, the *ecclesia* emerging from, for example, when my daughters are talking about what they're learning from listening to Beyoncé. In a certain sense, I guess what I want to sort of say is, it might not even be so much speculating where we need to go, but it needs to be more so about opening ourselves up to the possibilities that might present themselves, positioning and posturing ourselves in an opening towards the Spirit to receive what we would never have ourselves dreamed of or thought of.

Part of the problem, I think, of Christianity and the Christian church, certainly in the present and in America, is that we've already put ourselves on a trajectory in which we already believe we think we know where we gotta go. And part of that comes out when we talk about the language of "When are we going to get back?" And in a kind of frightening way, the language of when are we going to get back kind of echoes this kind of political language of "Make America Great Again", which is a form of "When are we going to get back?" But if that's a problem, part of what's at stake is not even so much imagining a future so that we can chart it according to our terms of comfortability, but opening ourselves up towards possibilities unseen, unimagined, and being able to receive it.

Now part of that means, then, we have to be open to being other than ourselves. And at that point, we're getting to the crux of the problem because part of what America has done, and especially what the racial imagination has done, is it has put us on a trajectory in which we don't know how to be other than ourselves. And that manifests by not wanting to be other with someone else.

Mark: Talk about Jesus for 90 seconds.

J: Talk about Jesus for 90 seconds. I like Jesus, but he's also a dangerous person. There's been many dangerous things done in the name of Jesus, right? And yet if we're Christian, we claim to have some sort of relationship to Jesus. I think that the greatest challenge that Jesus poses to us is to stop seeing Jesus as just one of us. Jesus has to be other than us. In order for us to be other to ourselves, we have to

see that Jesus is not simply in the form of divinity, a better version of us, but rather that Jesus is taking us to another place, something other than ourselves. And when that message is lost, the Christian game is over. And in many respects, to the extent that the Christian game has been played that way, the game was over before it started. This in fact, Mark, as I see it, may be a moment in which Christians might be able to discover what it might mean to even be Christian.

Mark: Yeah. It'd be nice if Jesus and the church met each other at some point. I think that would be a good thing.

J: It would be a wonderful thing. But here's again, the other challenge: the ways in which the church has been so constituted, in which we think we know what the Christian message is, we know where the reign of God is going to show up, we know what this whole game is all about: if Jesus truly showed up in the church, that's the Jesus we want to kick out of the church. As I see it, therein lies so much of the problem.

Mark: Yeah. It's a huge challenge. And it's an exciting opportunity, but it's a huge challenge for faithful people everywhere to actually sit with this and see where it takes us rather than saying, "Well, we know…we know what church looks like, we know what faith looks like, we know what Scripture tells us." I mean, the Scripture that I read does not…I mean, it is mostly disruptive, not confirming.

J: Absolutely. And when we think about, you know, the Jesus that is presented in so much of the gospels, it's a radically beautiful – I would also say, however, disorienting – Jesus. He comes along and he spits on the ground as a gesture of a total healthcare policy. He comes along and he does such radical, strange things as to overthrow the money-changing capitalist system that set itself up in the religious institution. He is so disruptive that, at the end of his life, they decide they're going to kill this dude, because if his vision of the world truly comes to pass, the political orders as we know it are over. This is a radically, to use your language, "disruptive" Jesus. The question that we've got to deal with is: what feats of gymnastics have we gone through to domesticate that Jesus? That's what I'm trying to understand, because this is a quite radical Jesus.

Mark: Yeah. What Scriptures are speaking most emphatically to you in this season?

J: I recently preached. The lectionary happened to have coincided with one of the most important scriptures that emerges from me that womanist theologians like Dolores Williams and others have really forced me to think about. In her book, Sisters in the Wilderness, Dolores Williams anchors that book in the story of Hagar in, I believe it's Genesis 18 and then again, Genesis 21. And it all turns on God meeting the dispossessed in the wilderness. And the story of God emerges, not in the household scene of Abram, Abraham, but in the uncharted territory of the wilderness. It's there, at a stone's throw, that streams flow in the desert. It's there that God meets the needs, and gives Hagar's son a kind of maternal training. It's there that we get a glimpse of a God who meets her in the wilderness. That Scripture has been speaking quite deeply to me, because I do think we are in the wilderness moment. We are wandering in the wilderness, and wandering need not be a bad thing.

Mark: And wilderness need not be a bad thing. We're in the wilderness and have no certitude. God is our certitude. I mean, that's…

J: Absolutely.

Mark: I've touched on acceleration before. One question I've been asking a lot of people is I think time and velocity are spiritual disciplines. What's going too fast that needs to slow down right now, and what's going too slow that needs to speed up right now?

J: I think so much of our world has been going fast. I think much of it needs to slow down. If there is a blessing out of COVID, and I, in so many ways, I don't even like that formulation, I just haven't come up with a better way to put it because I don't want to name the death and the pain that so many are feeling now under the rubric of some sort of "blessing". But if there has been something that has come out of this, is that we've been forced to slow down. I don't travel the way I used to, at least I'm not on planes the way I'm used to. And once I slowed down, I realized how exhausted I was. And I also realized how much I had invested in not slowing down enough to really hear what God might be saying.

And so now, I start my day before I get going writing, I start my day with a three to four mile run, and then I sit down after I finish the run. Before I come home, I have a spot where I sit out…outin the wilderness as it were, and I have about a 10 to 15 minutes silent meditation time, just to slow down and see if I can, one, hear what God is saying, hear what the environment is saying, and in that sense, come into a deeper touch with myself. And sometimes that's scary, because I've also had to see some things about myself that I want to change.

And I don't know what needs to speed up. Well, one thing I know that needs to speed up, we need to put an end to racializing violence and brutality, an end to that needs to speed up. An end to economic devastation of so many people, that needs to speed up. The kind of cultural revolutions and transformations that we need, those need to speed up, but those need to speed up even as the sense of a kind of capitalist consumer self needs to slow down.

Mark: My friend, I can, just talking to you here, I can hardly wait until the time we can be together again for a longer conversation, but thank you so much for this.

J: Oh, this has been such a joy.

Mark: It was a feast.

J: Thank you. Thank you for just the conversation. I truly enjoyed it.