



## **DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S BIRTHDAY (Beloved Community Day)**

### **CULTURAL RESOURCES**

**Sunday, January 20, 2007**

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#### **A Brief Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was born Michael Luther King, Jr., but later changed his name to Martin. His grandfather began the family's long tenure as pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, serving from 1914 to 1931; his father served after that and from 1960 until his death, Martin Luther served as co-pastor with his father. Martin Luther King, Jr. attended segregated public schools in Georgia, graduating high school at age fifteen. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Morehouse College, as did his father and grandfather. He received the Bachelor of Divinity from Crozier Theological Seminary in 1951. With a fellowship won at Crozier, he enrolled in and graduated from Boston University with a Ph.D. in 1955. While in Boston, he met and married Coretta Scott King. Together they had two daughters Yolanda (who died in 2007) and Bernice, and two sons, Martin and Dexter. Mrs. King carried on the fight for Civil Rights until her death in 2007.

In 1954, Martin Luther King, Jr. became Pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. At this time, he was also a member of the executive committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. This work prepared him well to lead the first great Negro nonviolent demonstration of contemporary times in the United States, the Montgomery Bus Boycott. It lasted 382 days until the Supreme Court, in 1956, declared the laws requiring segregation on buses illegal.

In 1957, Dr. King became President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The ideals with which he ran this organization he took from Christianity; its operational techniques he took from Mahatma Gandhi. Between 1957 and 1968, Dr. King spoke more than twenty-five hundred times around the country protesting injustice, and wrote five books and numerous articles. In the spring of 1963, he led a massive protest in Birmingham, Alabama that caught the attention of the world and inspired his writing of "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." These activities were part of his effort to gain access to the voting booth for Blacks in Birmingham. On August 28, 1963, he

directed The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where more than 250,000 people heard him deliver his now famous address, commonly known as the “I Have a Dream” speech.

King was arrested and assaulted for non-violent protest on numerous occasions, and even had his home bombed. In 1963, *Time* magazine named him man of the year. He was awarded five honorary degrees. At age thirty-five, King was the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. On the evening of April 4, 1968, while standing on a balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was to lead a protest march in support of striking garbage workers of Memphis, King was assassinated.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Struggle For a National King Holiday**

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday is a federal holiday that is observed on the third Monday in January. **In 2008, it falls on January 21.** It is the only federal holiday that honors an African American and the only federal observance honoring a struggle for freedom that is committed to nonviolent social change.

On April 8, 1968, four days after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, TN, Congressman John Conyers, Democrat from Michigan, introduced legislation for a commemorative holiday. Each year Representatives John Conyers and Shirley Chisholm resubmitted King Holiday legislation during each session of Congress. After the bill was repeatedly stalled in Congress, a massive national petition drive involving black disc jockeys, Stevie Wonder, churches and labor unions, gathered six million names and submitted them to Congress. Public pressure for the holiday mounted and a mass march in Washington took place, led by Coretta Scott King, Stevie Wonder, civil rights leaders and Congressional members (all of whom had led the fight to win support of the bill in both houses of Congress).

Congress passed the holiday legislation in 1983, which was then signed into law by President Ronald Reagan (who had initially opposed the bill) to go into effect in 1986.

## **The States Respond**

Even though Congress had passed the holiday legislation and President Reagan had signed it into legislation, several states resisted celebrating the holiday. Some opponents said that Dr. King did not deserve his own holiday—contending that the entire Civil Rights Movement rather than one individual should be honored. In 1973, Illinois became the first state to adopt MLK Day as a state holiday. Several southern states included celebrations for various Confederate generals on that day. Arizona governor Evan Mecham rescinded the state holiday in 1987, and a tourist boycott resulted in the state losing the opportunity to host the Super Bowl in 1991. The next year voters in Arizona approved the holiday, and the Super Bowl was held in Tempe, Arizona in 1996. New Hampshire changed the name of Civil Rights Day to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in 1999. Utah became the last state to name the holiday by name, renaming its Human Rights Day in 2000. That same year South Carolina granted state employees leave of their choice: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day or one of three Confederate-related holidays.

## **Martin Luther King, Jr. Was Never Alone**

One of the important lessons to share about this holiday is that it is a celebration of a movement of people of goodwill to stand in the face of evil. Most often during our observances of this holiday, Dr. King is pictured alone. And yet, during the time in which he served in the Movement, he was almost never alone. He shared an extraordinary partnership with his wife, who joined him in his work and kept their home and family.

All of the camera shots of Dr. King show him surrounded by his aides and supporters, and those who were blessed to walk with him on this journey. His determination that this struggle would follow non-violent principles is one of the greatest contributions he made. It gave something new to the American culture. It provided a way for one's life and body to move against an enemy, without destroying life. In a culture where violence is a major way to bring about change, Americans needed the lessons of the Civil Rights Movement and it is important to find ways to make these lessons contemporary ones in your congregation. Talk about how many times violence—individualized and organized state sponsored violence—has been used as a strategy to obtain change and power and ended in great destruction. Talk also about what it means to step out non-violently and face organized firepower and what the costs might be. People who joined Movement activities paid a price: with their lives, their jobs, burned churches, lost opportunities for school, and more. So, it is important to understand that facing down evil using non-violent methods is not an easy strategy and it is not without costs.

## **Freedom Songs And the Montgomery Bus Boycott**

Song as an expression of power and communal unity emerged as early as the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama Bus Boycott. After Rosa Parks's arrest for refusing to let a white man take her seat on a bus, black leaders, led by the Women's Political Council, called for a one-day bus boycott on December 5, 1955. It proved effective, and that night Montgomery's African American community crowded into Holt Street Baptist Church. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been elected leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association, later recalled the singing: "The opening hymn was the old familiar 'Onward Christian Soldiers,' and when that mammoth audience stood to sing, the voices outside swelling the chorus in the church, there was a mighty ring like the glad echo of Heaven itself."

Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war  
With the cross of Jesus, going on before!  
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe  
Forward into battle, see his banner go...

This hymn, penned by Sabine Baring-Gould at the end of the Civil War in 1865, was a staple of Sunday school and academic school devotional services. It was often sung without fervor, with the congregation minding text and melody—that is, until it became the contemporary freedom anthem of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The text references to the marchers being soldiers and the struggle being a war and a battle with Christ in the lead suited the time and named the situation for many of the participants.

The other hymn that saw a lot of use during that year was Johnson Oatman, Jr.'s (1856-1922) "Lift Him Up."

How to reach the masses, men of every birth  
For an answer, Jesus gave the key  
And I, if I be lifted up from the earth,  
Will draw all men unto me.

The white city fathers who ran Montgomery refused to sit in council with African Americans who sought to change the segregated practices by which their communities were run. The lyrics of this hymn were a way of communicating for those who gathered nightly in mass rallies. Here, the text seems to suggest that with Jesus as leader, even the racist city fathers of Montgomery might be drawn to righteousness and to the negotiating table. Also, almost nightly one heard "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," a hymn that expressed the joy and peace that came from those joined in battle in that community with the assurance that their struggle was in resonance with their commitment to live Christian lives:

What a fellowship, what a joy divine  
Leaning on the everlasting arms.  
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine  
Leaning on the everlasting arms.  
Leaning on Jesus, Leaning on Jesus  
Safe and secure from all alarm...

This hymn by Elisha Albright Hoffman (1839-1929) which expresses joy, peace, and safety, was a flag bearer for Montgomery participants who risked everything to change their community. The year 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama was not a safe time, it was not peaceful, and there was mourning and frustration at a system that refused to enter a dialogue to end injustice for American citizens who happened to be black. Yet wrapped in the arms of this raised song, the mass meeting's singing established a safety zone for the moment. "Leaning" was a very popular freedom hymn, sung *by the book* and in congregational and gospel styles in mass meetings across the south.

While old songs would continue to be given new life throughout the movement, new songs began to appear as the boycott continued and reprisals became more severe. After eighty-nine leaders were arraigned for allegedly organizing a boycott, they walked to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Writing for The Nation, Alfred Maund described the scene: "With the spirit and ingenuity that has characterized the leadership of this historic movement, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. offered a new hymn for the occasion, set to the tune of "Old Time Religion." The stanzas went like this:

We are moving on to victory (3X)... with hope and dignity.

We will all stand together (3X)... Until we all are free.

Indeed the blending of “Old Time Religion” with a new determination to achieve racial equality is the essence of the boycott... The meeting that day closed with the singing of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” Here were two songs, both a part of black traditional sacred music repertoire: The first, “Old Time Religion,” was updated to address an immediate need of the movement; the second, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” was sung in its traditional form. On many occasions, the new borrowed from the old in the midst of movement activity. These transformed songs, used in conjunction with older songs, effectively conveyed the message that the black struggle had a long history.

### **Jeremiah Reeves And Racial Injustice in Montgomery**

There was a court case in Montgomery when Reverend King arrived at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Jeremiah Reeves, at the age of 17, had been arrested and accused of raping a white woman. His case was taken up by the NAACP. It went to the Supreme Court twice. The first time the Court reversed the decision and returned it to the State Supreme Court for rehearing. That Court upheld it and it was sent back to the Supreme Court, which dismissed the appeal, leaving it to the Alabama Supreme Court to render a decision. Reeves was electrocuted by the State of Alabama on March 28, 1958, all the while denying the charges. For the entire period of the struggle for a fair trial for Reeves, white men who were accused of raping black women had their cases dismissed.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott occurred while Reeves was in jail. Both fights were on the agenda of the NAACP, which helped to focus national attention on each issue. Thus, even though Reeves was killed by the state in 1958, those who had fought for his right to justice, understood that with his death, the struggle for equality had not been killed. So they walked away from the funeral ground looking for ways to change the ground black people had to walk on.

### **Quotes of Dr. King:**

#### **Concerning the Vietnam War**

“As we gather today struggling to understand what the Movement lessons offer us today, we must remember the evil of war... the idea of non-violence as a powerful organizing strategy and way of living that promises a longer future...”

“Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam... The time has come for a real prophecy, and I am willing to go that road.”

#### **Concerning Inclusion And Poverty**

The Civil Rights Movement targeted overt systemic practices of racism. Its membership core was Black, but the doors were opened to all who would join... And as King considered greed and profit as major drivers in the organization of this nations culture, he began to understand that solutions had to be formed that cross all boundaries...

“The disposed of this nation, the poor, both White and Negro, live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of... their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing... to lift the load of poverty...

“Poverty is the most violent force in organized human society.

“I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I’m going. If it means suffering a little bit, I’m going that way. If it means sacrificing, I’m going that way. If it means dying for them, I’m going that way, because I heard a voice saying, ‘Do something for others.’”

### **AND WHEN HE DIED, THE POETS SANG...**

Where one dies thousands rise  
For martyrs are made to multiply  
The stars catch the sound  
The wind carries the word...  
N. Ellsworth Bunce, Jr.<sup>2</sup>

In an age when courage is measured by destruction  
His courage was the courage of love  
John Dixon

A man went forth with gifts  
He was a prose poem  
He was a tragic grace  
He was a warm music

He tried to heal the vivid volcanoes  
His ashes are  
Reading the world  
Gwendolyn Brooks<sup>3</sup>

### **Notes**

1. “Biography.” The King Center. Online location: [www.thekingcenter.org/mlk/bio](http://www.thekingcenter.org/mlk/bio) accessed 4 November 2007
2. The Reverend N. Ellsworth Bunce, Jr., (1930-2001) was a United Methodist Minister. Along with serving five Methodist churches in the Baltimore area, he was active in

education, worked for social justice and was a pillar in various ecumenical concerns such as the Central Maryland Ecumenical Council for many years. A colleague commented, "He was very much inclined to apply Christianity to society in America - both in social action and in educational knowledge." (*Baltimore Sun*, May 10, 2001: 6B)

3. Brooks, Gwendolyn. In Montgomery: And Other Poems. Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 2003.

**Other sources for this cultural unit:** King, Martin Luther. Stride Toward Freedom; The Montgomery Story. New York: Harper, 1958; King, Martin Luther. Why We Can't Wait. New York: Harper & Row, 1964; and Reagon, Bernice Johnson. "Civil Rights Movement." African American Music: An Introduction. Ed. Mellonee V. Burnim, and Portia K. Maultsby, New York: Routledge, 2006. pp. 598-623.