

A Sermon by the Reverend John S. McDuffie
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 19, 2020

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
I Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

I love this passage in the Gospel of John. A simple exchange between Jesus and two men leads to their new life in discipleship. It tells me that sometimes appointments with destiny begin as seemingly ordinary moments, with insignificant details, that would otherwise be forgotten in the sands of time. And as we come to the eve of the national celebration of the life, witness, and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, I am thinking of one of those moments, which set in motion a much larger series of events.

The moment occurred on Friday, December 5, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama. Maybe it was also about four o’clock in the afternoon. An African-American woman named Rosa Parks, who was a seamstress and who worked in a department store in downtown Montgomery, was riding home on a city bus. A Montgomery city ordinance decreed that black people had to sit in the “colored” section in the rear of the bus, and if the bus were full, and a white passenger got on, a black person would have to give up his or her seat to the new passenger. Rosa Parks was seated in the front part of the colored section that afternoon, and the bus was full. Three white passengers boarded, and three black passengers were asked to give up their seats. Two complied with the request, but Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. The bus driver engaged a nearby policeman, who repeatedly asked Ms. Parks to give up her seat, but she refused to move. She was subsequently removed from the bus, arrested, and taken to the local police station where she was fingerprinted and fined for her violation of a city ordinance, and placed in jail. Later Rosa Parks was asked why she didn’t give up her seat, and she simply replied, “I was tired.”

It might have been just another insignificant moment in the old Jim Crow south—but as it turns out, it wasn’t. Rosa Parks called E.D. Dixon, a prominent black leader in Montgomery, and he came and bailed her out of jail. He engaged the Women’s Political Council, an African-American group in Montgomery working for the cause of civil rights. They hastily produced a mimeographed flyer and distributed it throughout the entire African-American community that weekend, urging all black citizens to stay off all city buses on the following Monday, as a protest against the unjust city laws. It was also shared in all of the black churches that Sunday. Amazingly, on Monday morning, December 8, not one black passenger could be found on any of the city buses. 40,000 citizens—75% of all of the passengers of Montgomery buses—did not ride the bus to and from work that day. Car pools were quickly organized, or people simply walked to and from work.

The black leadership in Montgomery urged citizens to continue the boycott—and at a meeting of black leaders and pastors a new group was formed, called the Montgomery Improvement Association, dedicated to maintaining the bus boycott and seeking concessions from the city for more just treatment of its black citizens. A 26-year-old man, relatively new to Montgomery, was the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He came from Boston University, with a doctorate in theology. His plan was to pastor a congregation for a time, and then teach within the confines of academia. But he was unanimously elected the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. His name was Martin Luther King. And the rest, as we say, is history. The full civil rights movement in America had begun.

The boycott would continue for more than a year, and a lawsuit filed by five women against the city of Montgomery, citing discrimination and violation of fourteenth amendment rights, would ultimately travel all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which would rule in favor of the plaintiffs. On December 20, 1956, Martin Luther King and several other African American leaders in Montgomery boarded a city bus, more than a year after the boycott had begun. The old city bus ordinance had been struck down. But this victory did not come without a price.

Almost four years ago, I experienced one of the most moving times of my life in ordained ministry. I went on the Historic Civil Rights Tour, conducted each year by the Montgomery County, Maryland Office of Human Rights. A group of us—a combination of whites and African-Americans—boarded a bus early on a Sunday morning in April, and traveled together for an entire week. We went to Greensboro, North Carolina, site of the first lunch counter sit-in, and then on to Atlanta, where Dr. King was pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, and where he is buried. We went on to Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma, Alabama—then to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; then Jackson, Mississippi; and on to Memphis, Tennessee where Dr. King was assassinated; and to Nashville and Fisk University, where Diane Nash and other young student leaders taught the principles of non-violence and brought events like the Freedom Rides to birth.

I was a child, and then a young teenager in the segregated south when much of the civil rights movement was going on. And I learned so much more than I had ever known in that week-long journey. There was not one day in which I did not find myself in tears—learning about the injustice of the Jim Crow laws, and the vicious racism which included mass murders, lynchings, bombings of black churches, and other acts of almost unspeakable cruelty—but also of the courage and faith of those who collectively said, “We’re tired of being tired”—and who repeatedly risked, and even gave their lives in the pursuit of justice. As Georgia congressman John Lewis once said, “If you want change, you’ve got to make some noise.”

I wish to share two of the many stirring moments for me on my trip. They were in Montgomery, Alabama. We visited the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church parsonage where Dr. King and his family lived while they were in Montgomery. Today it is a museum. Ms. Shirley Cherry, who lives in Montgomery, led our group on a tour of the house, which begins with entering through a side door and into the kitchen. As we stood there, Ms. Cherry said with considerable gravity, “You all are standing on holy ground.” She recounted that after the bus boycott began, Dr. King had already received death threats on an almost daily basis. On the evening of January 27, some

six weeks into the boycott, Dr. King received an anonymous call, which began with the “n” word, and continued: “We’re tired of your mess, and if you don’t get out of town in three days we’re going to blow up your house and we’re going to blow your brains out.” Dr. King was shaken. This call was profoundly disturbing. At midnight he sat at the kitchen table and prayed. His wife Coretta and baby daughter Yolanda were asleep elsewhere in the house. “Lord”, he prayed aloud, “I’m down here trying to do what’s right---but—I must confess...I’m losing my courage.” But suddenly he heard an interior voice saying to him: “Martin Luther—stand up for truth. Stand up for justice. Stand up for righteousness.”

His work continued, but three days later a bomb did explode at the front of the house, in the evening while Dr. King was out speaking at another church. He ran home to find that his wife and daughter were fortunately not harmed; but a crowd had already gathered on the front lawn armed with guns, and pitch forks, and other makeshift weapons. He urged everyone to disperse. “Hate cannot drive out hate”, he reminded them. “Only love can drive out hate.”

My other memorable moment came when our group visited the Civil Rights Museum in Montgomery, where we had the privilege of meeting the Rev. Robert Graetz and his wife Jean. They were both in their mid-eighties. Bob Graetz is a white Lutheran pastor who was the leader of a black Lutheran congregation in Montgomery during the bus boycott. On the day Dr. King was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, Bob Graetz was elected its secretary. He worked tirelessly during the boycott, organizing carpool transportation. His tires were slashed more than once, and his car was destroyed. On January 10 during the boycott, his home was bombed, on the same day that five black churches were burned. The Graetzs were not harmed, but they endured a second bombing later, and a third bomb was later planted but fortunately did not go off, because it contained enough explosives to blow up three city blocks. During our brief visit with Bob and Jeannie Graetz, one of our group asked Jeannie how they could have managed to stay in Montgomery during the boycott, with the constant threat of danger. “What enabled you to stay there?” Jeannie, who was seated, looked up at her questioner, smiled serenely, and simply said, “God.”

Jesus said, “What are you looking for?” They answered, “Rabbi, where are you staying?” Jesus said, “Come and see.” Little moments, small exchanges, lead to momentous appointments with destiny. Tomorrow we give thanks for the witness of a man who lived fully into the baptismal promises we make, and most especially “to strive for justice and peace, and to respect the dignity of every human being.”

So much was achieved with the work of those who kept their eyes on the prize during the struggle for civil rights. But the work goes on. Racism and injustice continue to threaten to rear their ugly heads in the world around us today. How might Jesus be speaking to each one of us, in subtle and simple ways? “Will you come and follow me, if I but call your name?” begin the words of a hymn in one of our supplemental hymnals. “Will you go where you don’t know, and never be the same?...will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare? Will you let me answer prayer in you, and you in me?” Might we be beginning a new adventure in faith, if we open our hearts and minds? “What are you looking for?” asks Jesus. “Where are you going, and where are you staying?” we might well answer. Jesus simply replies, “Come and see.”

