

Martin Luther King Jr carried out much of his ministry during the time I was in high school in Towson, Maryland and college at the University of Maryland. You might think that I would have been paying attention to the important events of that era, but I was pre-occupied with things like grades, courses and getting into medical school. Besides, I wasn't black, nor were any of my friends.

If we fast-forward to April, 1968, I was in my first year of medical school in Michigan, living in the Medical School Sorority. In the middle of dinner, someone called out from the living room that the television was reporting the assassination of Martin Luther King. We all gathered at the TV and tried to take in the meaning of this. But I don't think it had a huge impact on me; I still wasn't black, and I wasn't involved in any of the riots in cities across the country.

I knew he had been an influential man, but didn't know what he had been doing for the previous four years. I did know that the FBI had monitored him, and J Edgar Hoover accused him of having had extramarital affairs and communist tendencies. I guess you could say that I was sleep-walking through the near proximity of some of the most important history of our country. It's easier to do that when you're white.

When Ivy and I moved here to Minneapolis, we had the experience of hearing Mariann Budde preach

important sermons about him every year around the King holiday; and I began to listen. But of course, racism was not much of reality here in the North.

Then came 2020 and the killing of George Floyd by a policeman. You know as well as I that all hell broke loose here, with riots and fires in the city. This was a monumental event, that cracked through my layers of protective not-knowing. I guess you could say, as the title of the book has it, I Woke Up White. White, and ashamed of my ignorance and tone-deafness. It is in this drawn-out context that I truly met Martin Luther King Jr.

He was a brilliant, driven man who completed his PhD in religion at Boston University by age 25. Living in Montgomery, Alabama he served the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. He was chosen by his ministerial peers to lead them in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which began when Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus to a white man. King joked that they chose him because he didn't know enough to refuse. The strike lasted 382 days and during that entire time not one Black person rode a city bus. In spite of an attack on his home, by the time he, Ralph Abernathy and others formed the SCLC in 1957 they all saw clearly that Nonviolent Protest was their best and truest gospel-based instrument for opposing segregation.

King moved back to Atlanta and joined his father as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church (which has now produced our newest US Senator). By 1960 he was joining and leading local students at lunch counter sit-ins, with subsequent arrests, and violence received but not returned. These confrontations reported in newspapers began to impact politics at the national level. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, and King received the Nobel Peace Prize.

But by 1965 the Civil Rights legislation had produced little change in the South. Peaceful demonstrations in Selma and surrounding communities resulted in the arrests of thousands, including King, who wrote to the *New York Times*, "This is Selma, Alabama. There are more negroes in jail with me than there are on the voting rolls."

It was then that a group from the SCLC organized a march from Selma to Montgomery to take their cause directly to the state capital. By the time the 600 marchers came to the bridge outside Selma, those looking up could see, staring right back at them in big block letters, the name of Edmund Pettus, Confederate general and Ku Klux Klan Grand Dragon. Just over the crest of the bridge was a wall of state troopers and deputy sheriffs with tear gas, clubs, horses and attack dogs. As the marchers continued forward in

single file, without resistance, they were pushed to the ground, beaten and clubbed, including with billy-clubs wrapped in barb wire. Many were injured on what became known as Bloody Sunday.

When the television footage of this was played afterwards, there was a huge national outcry. By two weeks later, Lyndon Johnson had intervened and the march went all the way to Montgomery, numbering 25,000 people by the time they got there. At the conclusion of the march, on the steps of the state capitol, King delivered a speech in which he stated that equal rights for African Americans could not be far away, "because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice". Five months later the President signed the Voting Rights Act.

So that victory surely brought an end to the struggle for civil rights, didn't it? But the most important things were still the same. A year after the Voting Rights Act, White backlash had become a powerful emotional and political issue in most Northern states. As Vincent Harding wrote, "For the vast majority of White Americans, the previous decade had been a struggle to treat the Negro with decency, not equality."

King was determined now to take the Negro's cause into Northern cities, starting with a rough neighborhood of Chicago. He pledged himself to

live in the SCLC apartment there at least three days a week, regardless of his travel and speaking schedule. The Black leaders studied the unemployment, poverty, housing discrimination and slum schools that marked the lives of that Black population.

With all of this, his message began to change from civil rights to issues of deep poverty and the Vietnam War which had drained resources from The War on Poverty. He was calling out Whites for racism, materialism and militarism, and not surprisingly financial donations from his formerly reliable liberal White donors were drying up. Younger blacks abandoned his cause, having a desire for Black Power and a deep dislike for non-violence. It was a draining and discouraging timer for King.

He and the SCLC were planning another march on Washington, this one to be the Poor People's March, for people of all oppressed, impoverished races. But first there was one more call for a demonstration, this one in Memphis, Tennessee to support the Black garbage worker's strike. The Black workers received significantly less pay for mandated partial days than Whites, and so they had already been on strike for two weeks, when they asked King to join them. It was perhaps much like Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

and the culminating conflict with the Powers who ruled the land.

Things were uneasy for all the SCLC leaders staying at the Lorraine Motel. The very air seemed thick with menace. At the dinner after their first day, King gave this prophetic speech.

“And then I got to Memphis. And some began to talk about the threats that were about. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well, I don't know what will happen. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So, I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The next day he was shot to death on the balcony of the motel, by a fugitive felon named James Earl Ray, who was tracked down after two months on

the run. There was grief and rioting in cities across the nation. King's wife, Coretta Scott King, asked that the sermon at his funeral be the tape of the last one he had preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Like the speech the night before the assassination, it had a tone of finality.

He had said, "If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize—that isn't important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school.

"I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. And I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and

luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.”

Perhaps after all these years, we are finally ready to hear Martin Luther King’s longing for equality and peace for his people, his judgement against us for our racism, materialism and militarism. Perhaps we will notice that even with the violence done this past summer in our city, those who perpetrate and support such actions did not go away, but instead would next bring it home by storming and violating the Capital of our nation. Racism is a form of violence that spreads to all corners when not named and opposed. We cannot escape our involvement in this sin and all its accompanying evils until we listen closely to King’s call for peace and an end to poverty.

It is a thoroughly American call to end a thoroughly American evil with the responses we have been given by Jesus in the gospels – to love, to serve, to turn aside attacks with non-violence. Oh, we still have so much to learn from Martin Luther King Jr, the prophet and saint of our own day.