

PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. BAPTIST DREAMER



Who: Martin Luther King, Jr.

Where: Georgia and Alabama

When: 1929-1968

What he did: Worked for equal rights for all people

In 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr., was born into a society much different than today. Life in America, especially for African Americans, has changed since his birth. Much of the change is due to Martin Luther King's work and influence.

Growing up in Atlanta, Georgia, young Martin experienced the world as a second-class citizen. Segregation was a way of life that kept white people and black people separated from each other. Some white people set up laws because they thought blacks were not as good as whites. Often whites treated blacks in rude ways. Black people



used different schools, different restaurants, and even different water fountains from their white neighbors. Martin grew up seeing signs that said, “Whites only,” or “Colored only,” or “No negroes.”

Martin’s father was a Baptist minister. Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., did not like the segregation laws and sometimes refused to obey them. One time, King, Sr., took his son to buy shoes. The shoe salesman told the father and son that they would have to move from their seats and sit in the black section of the store. Reverend King told him, “We’ll either buy shoes sitting here or we won’t buy shoes at all.” As they left the store without new shoes, King, Sr., told his young son, “I don’t care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it.”

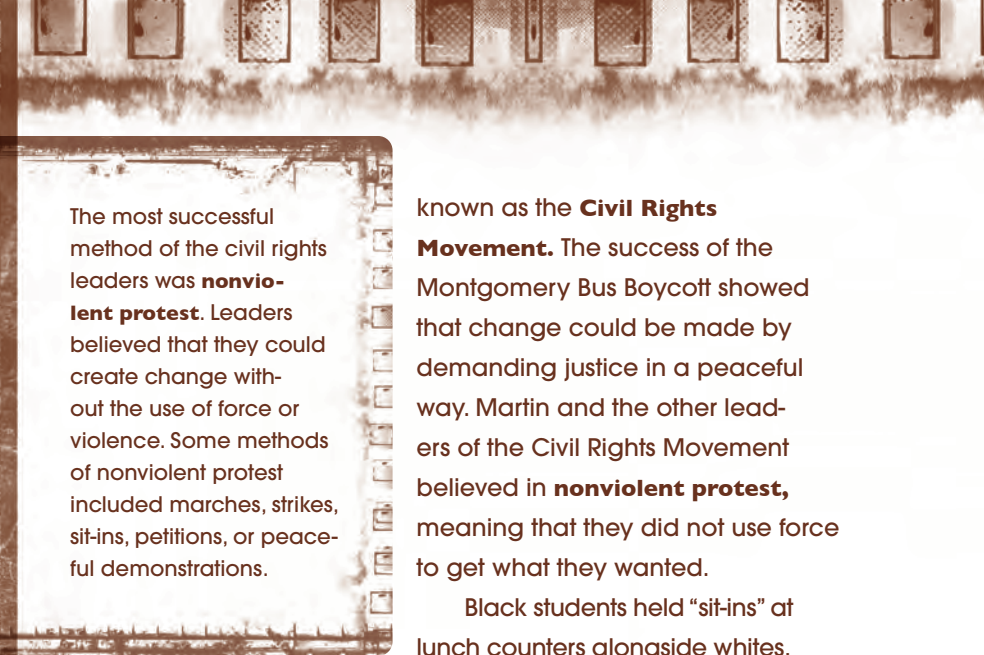
Martin was very bright and a good student. He attended Morehouse College in Atlanta at the age of fifteen. After graduation, he went on to Crozer Seminary in Pennsylvania to train to become a Baptist minister like his father and grandfather. He then enrolled in Boston University to receive a doctoral degree in theology. As he finished writing the paper to complete his degree, King was called to be the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, when he was only twenty-five years old. He thought this opportunity would be a good chance for him to finish writing his paper while he served a church.

After Martin and his wife, Coretta, had been in Montgomery for one year, something significant happened in Montgomery that changed their lives. Segregation law allowed white people to sit at the front of a bus and forced black people to sit in the back seats. A black woman named Rosa Parks got on a public bus, found a seat near the front, and then refused to give up her seat to a white man when the bus filled up. The police came and arrested her because she had broken segregation laws. Black people were angry. Instead of reacting with violence, they planned to boycott the bus system. By not riding buses, they hoped to draw attention from the public and cost the bus system enough money that changes would be made.

Martin and other black leaders in the community had to make some decisions about how they would be involved. Martin had come to Montgomery to finish his doctoral degree and pastor his church. He had not intended to stir up political debates. But he knew that he had to do something. All of his life, he had lived in an unfair society. He could not simply sit by and watch when he had an opportunity to do something about the way Southern society worked. God had called him to this place for a reason, and soon the world would find out why.

Martin quickly became a leader of what became

The **Civil Rights Movement** aimed to stop racial discrimination toward African-Americans in the United States, particularly in the South. The height of the movement was 1954-1968.

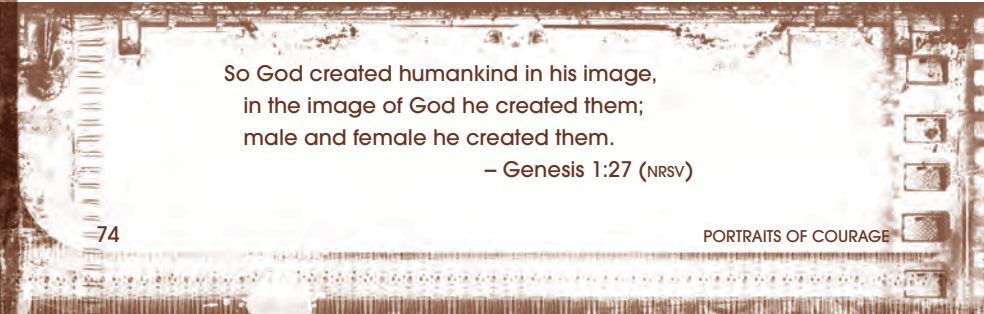


The most successful method of the civil rights leaders was **nonviolent protest**. Leaders believed that they could create change without the use of force or violence. Some methods of nonviolent protest included marches, strikes, sit-ins, petitions, or peaceful demonstrations.

known as the **Civil Rights Movement**. The success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott showed that change could be made by demanding justice in a peaceful way. Martin and the other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement believed in **nonviolent protest**, meaning that they did not use force to get what they wanted.

Black students held “sit-ins” at lunch counters alongside whites, sitting on stools until the stores closed. Protestors rode buses throughout the South on “Freedom Rides” until the buses were safe for blacks and whites to ride together. Some, including Martin, even went to jail for breaking segregation laws.

Why did Martin care so much about changing segregation laws? What made him risk his life to stand up for civil rights? Martin viewed himself first as a minister called by God. His political and social action rose out of his faith. For Martin, the inner life of faith and prayer led to an outer life of social action. Public action was a sign of personal faith.



So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

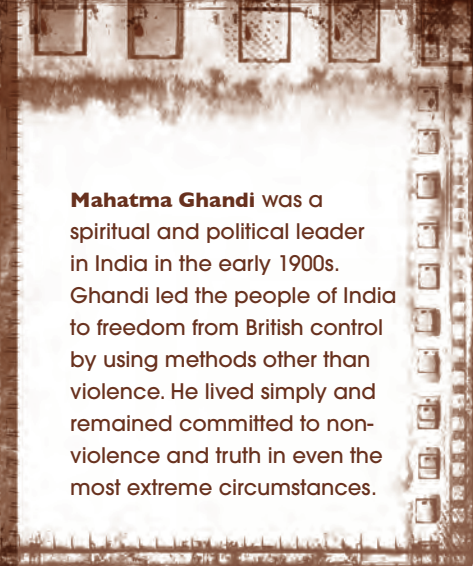
– Genesis 1:27 (NRSV)

Martin believed that every human is created by God in God's image. Because everyone is someone special, Martin wanted to make sure that black people and poor people had hope and were treated with a sense of dignity. Every person has equal dignity, regardless of race, wealth, or social status. So every person should be equally free. His Baptist faith had taught him this lesson.

In one of his sermons, Martin said, "The question is not, 'If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?' The question is, 'If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?' That's the question." There's no question that Martin's courage came out of his deep sense of his Baptist beliefs, his Christian faith, and his commitment to human freedom.

Martin believed strongly that freedom must be sought





Mahatma Gandhi was a spiritual and political leader in India in the early 1900s. Gandhi led the people of India to freedom from British control by using methods other than violence. He lived simply and remained committed to non-violence and truth in even the most extreme circumstances.

by nonviolent resistance. He was heavily influenced by the methods of **Mahatma Gandhi** in India as he worked to bring about change. Martin also thought that Jesus practiced non-violent resistance. For Martin, love is the solution to the world's

problems rather than fighting.

A sense of love on the inside would produce the courage needed to stand up for human rights on the outside.

This kind of love, the love that treats every person as a neighbor, Martin believed would lead to a better community for all. In one of his most famous speeches, during the March on Washington in 1963, Martin proclaimed:

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. . . . With this faith we will be able to work together, to play together, to struggle together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

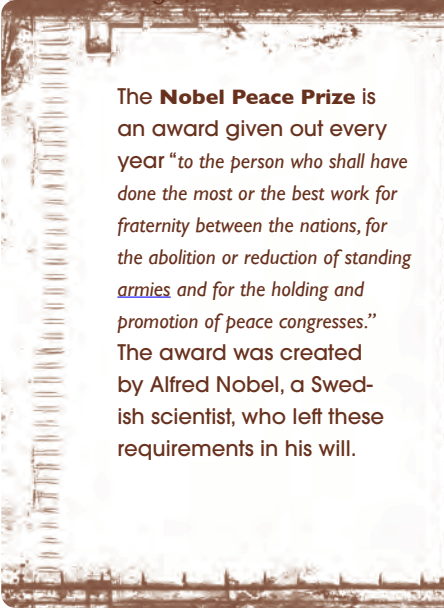
People around the world listened to Martin. In 1964, he received one of the greatest awards a person can receive—the **Nobel Peace Prize**—for his important work

in civil rights.

Sadly, Martin did not live long enough to see his dream become reality. On April 4, 1968, he was shot while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was in Memphis to help lead a protest against low wages and poor conditions for city workers. On the night before he died, he preached a sermon in which he said:

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. And 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.

Martin hoped that all people would one day be treated equally. He never saw what his work would do for African Americans, but he had faith that God



The **Nobel Peace Prize** is an award given out every year "to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between the nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing [armies](#) and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses." The award was created by Alfred Nobel, a Swedish scientist, who left these requirements in his will.

would see his people through their struggle.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is a hero—a hero for African Americans, a hero for Americans, and a hero for all people who believe in equal rights. But what makes him a Baptist hero?

Martin understood himself first as a minister of the gospel. He got involved in social action because his faith pushed him to do it. Faith was not only about going to church or praying or reading the Bible. Faith required putting his beliefs about God and the Bible into action. Martin stood by his faith convictions no matter what it cost him, even as it cost him his life. Like Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin believed that faith must impact society.

As a Baptist, Martin learned to believe in freedom for all people. God created every human, and every human had the right to be treated with respect. Baptists like John Smyth and John Clarke fought for that freedom from the beginning of their history. Martin worked for freedom in his own time and place.

Finally, Martin is a Baptist hero because he followed God's voice. Martin did not look to stir up action when he moved to Montgomery. Yet, when he saw God moving, he did what God called him to do. Martin's portrait teaches all of us that we can serve God when and wherever we live. When we love people and find ways to help them, God will be with us and will call us to follow.

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Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.