

# Martin Luther King Day

THIRD MONDAY IN JANUARY

**M**ARTIN LUTHER KING DAY honors the life and legacy of one of the visionary leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and recipient of the 1964 Nobel Prize for Peace.

At a young age Martin Luther King, Jr. showed strong promise, skipping the 9th and 12th grades and entering Morehouse College at the age of 15. His beliefs in equality and brotherly love developed early as he listened to the sermons of his father and grandfather, both ministers.

In late 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr. received his **doctorate** degree in **theology**, and moved to Montgomery, Alabama, with his wife, Coretta Scott King, to preach at a Baptist church.

There, as in many southern states, he **witnessed the indignities** suffered by African Americans as a result of **racism, discrimination,** and unjust laws. One law required all black passengers to ride in the back of public buses and to give up their seats to white passengers when the front of the bus was full. Dr. King knew that this law **violated** the rights of every African-American.

On December 1, 1955, a courageous black passenger, Rosa Parks, was arrested and jailed for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. In response to the arrest, black leaders organized a **boycott** of the public buses in the city of Montgom-

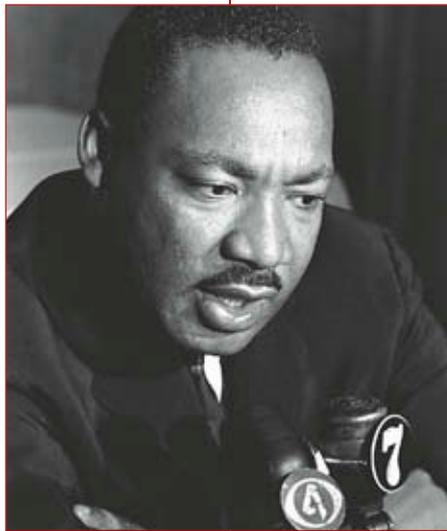
ery. Dr. King was asked to lead the protest. Thousands of people, black and white, refused to ride the bus; instead they formed carpools and they walked. Dr. King urged people to demonstrate peacefully and not **resort** to violence. Nonetheless, the demonstrators and their supporters were constantly threatened and attacked by those who did not want the system of inequality to change. Many of the demonstrators were arrested and jailed. Dr. King's home was bombed, but fortunately, his wife and children were not injured.

Despite the violence, the boycott continued, and the bus company suffered great financial loss. Finally after 381 days the boycott of the Montgomery bus system was successful. The Supreme Court declared the state of Alabama's segregation law **unconstitutional**. Rosa Parks, the woman whose small act of protest inspired the bus boycott, was later named the "Mother of

the **Civil Rights Movement.**"

The **segregation** of buses was just one of the many forms of injustice to African Americans. Schools were also segregated throughout the south, and black citizens were denied equal housing, equal pay, job opportunities, and fair voting rights. Service in many hotels and restaurants was also denied.

The bus boycott brought international attention to these inequities and to the leadership of Dr. King. The continuing struggle for



*PREVIOUS PAGE:* Dr. Martin Luther King speaks to a crowd of people during the March on Washington on August 23, 1963.  
*ABOVE:* Dr. King at a news conference on August 16, 1965.



justice ultimately led to the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King was at the forefront of this movement, and became seen worldwide as a symbol and voice for the cause of African Americans.

In 1957, Dr. King and other ministers **founded** the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to advance the non-violent struggle against racism. In the years that followed, Dr. King led many non-violent demonstrations. He had studied the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and believed strongly in the power of non-violent protest. Some black leaders and other citizens **vehemently** disagreed with this philosophy. But King continued to remind his followers that their fight would be victorious if they did not resort to **bloodshed**. During the **tumultuous** years of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King was jailed many times. From a jail in Birmingham,

Alabama, he wrote the famous words, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

One of the key events of the Civil Rights Movement was the March on Washington on August 23, 1963. A crowd of more than 250,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. and, led by Dr. King they marched to the Capitol Building to support the passing of laws that guaranteed equal civil rights to every American citizen. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial that day, Dr. King delivered one of his most powerful and eloquent speeches, entitled “I Have a Dream.” The March on Washington was one of the largest gatherings of people that the nation’s capital had ever seen...and no violence occurred. The following year, in 1964, Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for leading non-violent demonstrations.

ABOVE: Rosa Parks is fingerprinted by the Montgomery, Alabama police on February 22, 1956, two months after refusing to give up her seat for a white passenger on the bus.

(The following is an excerpt from the speech entitled "I Have a Dream," delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 23, 1963.)

*I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.*

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.*

*I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*I have a dream that my four little 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...*

*I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama... will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.*

*I have a dream today.*

*I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.*

*This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together knowing that we will be free one day.*

*This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride from every mountainside, let freedom ring."*

*And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!*

*Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!*

*Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!*

*But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!*

*Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!*

*Let freedom ring from every hill and mole-hill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.*

*When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"*

That same year the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, calling for equal opportunity in employment and education. Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of others now knew that they had not struggled in vain. Yet there was still much work ahead to ensure that new laws were **enforced**, and other inequities **abolished**.

In the years that followed, Dr. King helped champion many legislative **reforms**, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed black citizens the right to safely register and vote. That year a record number of black voters went to the **polls**.

On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was **assassinated** while supporting a workers' **strike** in Memphis, Tennessee. He was just 39 years old. All people who had worked so hard for peace and civil rights were shocked and angry. The world **grieved** the loss of this great man of peace. Martin Luther King's death did not slow the Civil Rights Movement. In 1969 Coretta Scott King founded the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Non-violent Social Change. She passed away in January of 2006, after working throughout her life to keep her husband's dream alive. Today people continue to work for social justice.

### The Making of a Holiday

Throughout the 1980s, **controversy** surrounded the idea of a Martin Luther King Day. Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, along with congressional leaders and citizens had **petitioned** the President to make January 15, Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, a legal holiday. Many states were already observing the day. However, some people did not want to have any holiday recognizing Dr. King. Others wanted the holiday on the day he was assassinated. Finally, in 1986, President Ronald Reagan declared the third Monday in January a federal holiday in honor of Dr.

Martin Luther King, Jr. On Monday, January 20, 1986, people across the country celebrated the first official Martin Luther King Day, the only federal holiday to commemorate an African-American.

Now, every year, there are quiet memorial services, as well as elaborate ceremonies and public **forums** to honor Dr. King and his dream, and to discuss issues of social justice. Schools at all levels offer courses, curricula, and events to teach about racism, equality, and peace. Religious leaders give special sermons **extolling** Dr. King's lifelong work for peace. Radio and television broadcasts feature songs, speeches, and special programs that tell the history of the Civil Rights Movement and give highlights of Dr. King's life and times.



ABOVE: Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at a news conference in 1985.

### Glossary

**recipient:** *n.* person who receives a gift, award, or honor

**doctorate:** *n.* the highest academic degree

**theology:** *n.* study of religion

**witness(ed):** *v.* to observe a situation or event

**indignity(ies):** *n.* acts of disrespect and humiliation

**racism:** *n.* hatred and prejudice based on racial or ethnic background

**discrimination:** *n.* unfair treatment because of race, color, age, etc.

**violate(d):** *v.* to act against a right, law, or contract

**boycott:** *n.* act of protest by refusing to use a product or service

**resort:** *v.* to turn to an extreme action

**unconstitutional:** *adj.* not legal according to the Constitution of the United States

**Civil Rights Movement:** *n.* political activities during the 1950s and '60s to end discrimination and unfair laws

**segregation:** *n.* separation by race, color, age, or other characteristic

**found(ed):** *v.* to establish; to set up; to start

**vehemently:** *adv.* strongly, with anger  
**bloodshed:** *n.* violence resulting in injury or death  
**tumultuous:** *adj.* turbulent; troubled  
**in vain:** *adv. phrase.* without the hoped for result  
**enforce(d):** *v.* to make people obey laws or rules  
**abolish(ed):** *v.* to end or terminate by law or decree  
**reform(s):** *n.* official or legal changes  
**poll(s):** *n.* voting place  
**assassinate(d):** *v.* to kill; to murder someone in a planned way  
**strike:** *v.* to refuse to work in order to make demands on an employer  
**grieve(d):** *v.* to feel deep sorrow or sadness as when someone dies  
**controversy:** *n.* dispute; debate  
**petition(ed):** *v.* to request by means of a formal document  
**forum(s):** *n.* place or meeting for open exchange of ideas  
**extol(ling):** *v.* to praise

