Biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

It was in the late 1950s, a young Baptist minister visited Denver to hear for the first time a Negro spiritual that would reflect his own vision and wisdom . . .

“If I can help somebody as they go their way, Then My Living Shall Not Be In Vain.”

Thirty-nine years — so brief a life-span. Thirty-nine years would begin with a depression and follow with a World War. There would be smaller wars, explorations in space, revolutions in education and science and even religion.

January 15, 1929, “Daddy King” and his wife, Alberta, gave birth to a son, Martin Luther King, Jr. A gifted student, young Martin entered Morehouse College at age 15, and received a Bachelor’s Degree in 1948. Three years later, he earned a Bachelor of Divinity Degree from Crozier Theological Seminary, and in 1955, a Ph.D from Boston University.

In 1953, he married Coretta Scott, a student at the New England Conservatory of Music. Together they parented four children; the ministry now would be a family affair, and Coretta Scott King continued to give visualization to their dream.

It was during his pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama, December 1, 1955, the young Dr. King combined his Gandhian nonviolence philosophy with his Christian faith, to lead a bus boycott, protesting the arrest of a woman, Rosa Parks, for refusing to give her a seat on a bus to a white person.

But non-violence would result in violence for Dr. King personally and his family. He was arrested and his home bombed. But his 381-day boycott ended with success, after the United States Supreme Court upheld a District Court Decision outlawing segregated seating on municipal busses.

In 1957, Dr. King and his family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in answer to a call to co-pastor Ebenezer Baptist Church with his father. It was there young Dr. King would launch non-violent movements throughout the South and the nation.

In 1960, he supported sit-in demonstrations organized by Atlanta students to protest segregated lunch counters. Arrests followed, and while those charges were dropped, trumped-up traffic charges would result in a sentence at Reidsville State Prison Farm. Through intervention by a young presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, he was released, and the cause continued throughout the South.

History would record his greatest moment in August of 1963, when civil rights activists would join together in the nation’s capital, 250,000 strong, coming from every state, representing every creed and color. They would hear Dr. King proclaim: “Even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live the true meaning of this creed.”

Calling himself “a drum major for justice and peace,” the event would spur the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The following year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

He believes that greatness cannot rest on its laurels; therefore, in 1965 Dr. King organized two marches from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol, focusing on the need for a Federal voting rights law. State troopers were called upon to stop the march, but again, success prevailed for the marchers. President Lyndon B. Johnson sent voter-rights legislation to Congress, and the Courts removed state injunctions which allowed 3,000 marchers to march into Montgomery.

Journeys would take Dr. King west to Watts, South to Mississippi to march for Black voter registration, and north to Boston and Chicago, where his Freedom Movement would lead to enforcement of open-housing laws, encourage banks to lend money to Black people, and the formation of Operation Bread-basket to stimulate the hiring and promotion of Black people.

His words addressed the war in Vietnam. In 1967, in New York City, Dr. King led another march from Central Park to the United Nations, speaking against war and violence and suppression. 1967 would see publication of a major work, Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or COMMUNITY.

On April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, this vibrant life ended in death from an assassin’s bullet.

“If I can help somebody as they go their way . . .”

We as a nation, have our saints and heroes, statues and postage stamps and street names and holidays which eulogize the past. But Dr. King is alive today, still dreaming in the work of leaders and followers, rich and poor, Black and White.

“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.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., when his dream is wholly realized ... then His Living Shall Not Be In Vain.