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Last Updated: 05/23/2023



Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, 1987

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

In celebrating the birthday of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we honor an American who recognized the great injustice of segregation and discrimination, and made it his life's purpose and toil to right those wrongs in favor of justice, freedom, equality, fairness, and reconciliation.

Because Dr. King eschewed violence, relying instead on his eloquence and the moral force of his convictions, the cause he led changed not only laws but hearts and minds as well. He braved imprisonment, violence, and threats because, as he said, "History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive." Martin Luther King, Jr., fell victim to the violence he fought so fervently—but his nonviolent quest had already altered our land irrevocably and for the better.

Dr. King's vision, as he said so often, was the fulfillment of the American dream. He explained this to the graduates of Lincoln University in 1961 when he quoted our Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" and said, simply, "This is the dream." Dr. King emphasized that this dream excludes no one from its promise and protection and that it affirms that every individual's rights are God-given and "neither conferred by nor derived from the state."

Martin Luther King, Jr., also expressed his vision in the eternal calls for justice, forgiveness, brotherhood, and love of neighbor recorded in Holy Writ. He frequently prayed, in the words of the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

Dr. King also appealed clearly and compellingly through moving accounts such as his description of a little girl marching with her mother who answered a policeman's question, "What do you want?" by replying, "Freedom." Said Dr. King, "She could not even pronounce the word, but no Gabriel trumpet could have sounded a truer note."

Every American knows the story of Dr. King's last sermon, given April 3, 1968, the night before his death. He said, expressing his credo, that he wasn't concerned about living a long life but about doing God's will. He'd been to the mountaintop, he said, and he'd seen the promised land. He said that America would reach that land, but added, "I may not get there with you." He concluded, "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."

Nearly five years before, Dr. King had spoken words of solace, of reconciliation, and of promise during his eulogy for the children who had died in the bombing of their Sunday school class. He said that we must not despair, nor become bitter, nor lose faith in each other. He said that death does not end the sentence of life but "punctuates it to more lofty significance." He told the children's parents that although their daughters had not lived long, they had lived well: "Where they died and what they were doing when death came will remain a marvelous tribute to each of you and an eternal epitaph to each of them." Surely Dr. King's courageous fight for justice, equality, and brotherhood will remain his lasting epitaph and his living legacy.

In a sermon on April 4, 1967, a year to the day before his murder, Dr. King quoted the famous lines from the poem, "The Present Crisis," by James Russell Lowell: "Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide;/ In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side; . . ." Dr. King did decide for the good, and the measure of his greatness is that his Nation thereupon did likewise.

By Public Law 98-144, the third Monday in January of each year has been designated as a public holiday in honor of the "Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr."

NOW, THEREFORE, I, RONALD REAGAN, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim Monday, January 19, 1987, as Martin Luther King, Jr., Day.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this 9th day of January, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-seven, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and eleventh.

Ronald Reagan