

Address Delivered during "A Salute  
to Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King"  
at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

31 Jan  
1960

[31 January 1960]  
Montgomery, Ala.

*At the end of King's final day as Dexter's pastor, congregation members gathered in the sanctuary for a tribute and farewell. After an introductory statement from Board of Deacons vice chair William E. Anderson, church members performed a skit, "This is Your Life," that included roles for King's children and friends. His mother, sister, and brother traveled from Atlanta to surprise him and also participated in the sketch, which was modeled after the popular TV show of the same name.<sup>1</sup>*

*In his remarks, King thanks his parishioners and admits: "I have not been able to do all that I had hoped to do at Dexter. When I came here in 1954, I had a program that I put on paper, and I regret to say that much of that program is still on paper." Asking the congregation to pray for him and Coretta, King reflects on the increasing importance of a "personal God" in his life: "I have felt His power working in my life in so many instances, and I have felt an inner sense of calmness in dark and difficult situations, an inner strength that I never knew I had." The following transcript is drawn from an audio recording of the event.*

Dr. Anderson and to the members of our family who have been gracious enough to surprise us this evening, at least surprise me, and to the beloved members and friends of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, I think Coretta has well stated what I need to say and what I would like to say: I have been deeply moved tonight.<sup>2</sup> Often in life, we have those moments, transfiguring moments, that we are able to rise above the dull monotony of sameness and the miasma of everyday life and experience those periods of unutterable joy. Such a moment and such a period we experience tonight. And I do not have words to thank you for this creative program that you have presented. I cannot claim to be worthy of such a tribute and such kind and gracious expressions, but I can assure you that these moments have strengthened me. And they will give me renewed courage and vigor to carry on in the struggle for freedom and human dignity.

As Coretta said to you, you have been amazingly patient in moments that I have not been able to be here. You have carried on, and you have not complained. And I must thank you once more for that. Then I want to thank the men who have worked and the women who have worked very closely with me and the official board, and the chairman of the Deacon's Board, Brother [T. H.] Randall. And to

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1. Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, A Salute to Dr. and Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., 31 January 1960. Prior to the event, Anderson solicited telegrams from friends and associates that were bound in a book and presented to the Kings (Anderson, Memo to Eleanor Roosevelt, 13 January 1960).

2. In her remarks following the skit, Coretta expressed "deep and sincere appreciation" for the evening's program. She thanked the church members for the presentation of a silver service given to her by the church: "I never thought that I would own anything this fine."

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all of the other associates: the vice chairman, Dr. Anderson; the clerk of the church, Brother [R. D.] Nesbitt; the choir director, Brother [J. T.] Brooks; the chairman of the finance committee, Brother [F. W.] Taylor; and the treasurer of the church, Brother [J. H.] Gilchrist; and the custodian, Brother [William] McGhee, and I could go on down the line. I just mention these names because I have worked very closely with them, members of the official board. And we have worked together for these five years as a unit. As I said to you this morning, I cannot remember one second of disharmony, one second of conflict that we've had, and I'm deeply grateful to all of these men.<sup>3</sup>

I should have mentioned also Professor [Richmond] Smiley, who is the chairman of the trustee board. And all of the heads of auxiliaries of our church: Mrs. [Elizabeth M.] Arrington, the head of our missionary society; Mrs. [Louvenia] Herring, the head of our Baptist Training Union; Brother J. T. Alexander, the head of the Sunday School; and all of the heads of month clubs and other organizations that I cannot pause to name at this time. But I'm sure you know that I'm deeply grateful to each of you for your cooperative spirits and the support that you have given me over these years.

Certainly, I have not been able to do all that I had hoped to do at Dexter. When I came here in 1954, I had a program that I put on paper, and I regret to say that much of that program is still on paper because, after I got here, I was still in the process of writing a dissertation, which took a great deal of my time, and you were gracious enough to allow me to do that and go back and forth to Boston.<sup>4</sup> And then, immediately after finishing my dissertation, our struggle started against the injustices and humiliating experiences that we had faced on the buses. And so this took my time. My duties overnight were multiplied, and it made it necessary, it became necessary for me to travel a good deal and to give a great deal of time to the community. And in the midst of all of this, you encouraged me and gave me great and lasting support. And then in those dark and desolate days when we experienced violence occasionally, living every day under the threat of death, you were always on hand, not only with your prayers but with your physical presence and with your support at every point. And so again, I want to thank you for that.

I could thank you also for the many things that you have given us along the way, the many gifts that you've given. All week long, we have been in the midst of affairs that were given by friends, and I will not take time to name them at this point. But I want all of you to know, all of those persons who entertained us all week long, we want you to know how grateful we are to you. I also want to say for the young lady who talked a few minutes ago that I'm so happy that, as a part of this tribute, you made it a joint one, for I know that I could not have done this job if

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3. For more on King's morning sermon, "Lessons From History," see "Dexter Honors Dr. & Mrs. King!!" *Dexter Echo*, 3 February 1960, pp. 364-365 in this volume.

4. See King, "Recommendations to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the Fiscal Year 1954-1955," 5 September 1954, in *Papers* 2:287-294. For King's dissertation, see King, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 15 April 1955, in *Papers* 2:339-544.

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I had not had Coretta behind me. She has given me words of encouragement when I needed them most, and she has presented a calm spirit in the most difficult and trying situations. A spirit that made it possible for me to stand up and made it possible for me to be calm. And that is why, when I wrote *Stride Toward Freedom*, and the publishers mentioned to me that "I'm sure you would want to dedicate this book to someone," I dedicated it to the person who has been closest to me. And I referred to her not only as my wife but as my coworker, for this is what she has been for these years that we have lived together. And I want to thank her publicly for that, and I'm always thanking her privately.

You see to my right a lot of people, and I could talk all night about them. There is the darling lady who brought me into the world. She is the sweetest lady in all the world, equal to Coretta King. [laughter] They are the two sweetest ladies in all the world. [laughter] But very seriously, my mother has been a great inspiration. Somebody tried to describe my personality at one time, and they said that I have something of the gentleness of my mother and the hard, courageous spirit of my father. This is what the French philosopher meant when he said that, "In order to do anything constructive, you must bear in your character antitheses strongly marked."<sup>5</sup> And so the gentle sweetness of my mother and the strong, hard, rough courage of my father; I hope one day that I will be able to attain and keep them in a sort of harmonious balance.

And then there is my darling sister who has been a real sister all across the years. You know her; she's been with us before. She has been here to sing for us with her beautiful voice. And as you know, she is on the faculty at Spelman College now. And she has a young man sitting here on the front who will confer the M.R.S. degree upon her in a few months. [laughter] And we are very happy to see Isaac along, also.<sup>6</sup>

And then there is my brother, my brother in the ministry and also my biological brother. There again we have had a wonderful, intimate family relationship. We have lived together as a family, and he was not kidding you when he said he has four children.<sup>7</sup> And I just discovered, A. D., that a fifth one is on the way. [laughter] You hadn't told me about it. Coretta was in Atlanta over the weekend, and she told me that A. D. and Naomi were expecting another baby, and they had hid this from me.<sup>8</sup> But one of the things that he said, and it's certainly true, that when he decided to go in the ministry and go back to Morehouse College—he's finished Morehouse now, and he's in the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta—we said that we wanted him to be able to get to work and do the studying, and that as a family,

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5. This statement, often attributed to French mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), mirrors lines from missionary E. Stanley Jones's book on Gandhi, a copy of which King owned: "A French philosopher once said that 'no man is strong unless he bears within his character antitheses strongly marked'" (Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation*, p. 17).

6. In 1958, King's sister, Willie Christine, began teaching in the education department at Spelman. She married Isaac Newton Farris on 19 August 1960.

7. King refers to Alveda, Derek, Esther, and Alfred Daniel Williams King, Jr.

8. Vernon Christopher King was born on 6 September 1960.

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we didn't want him to have financial worries, that we would get together.<sup>9</sup> And there were no strings attached. He doesn't have to pay any of us back in doing nothing but being a good preacher, as he has already proven to be.

And then there are these two wonderful persons, my mother-in-law and my father-in-law.<sup>10</sup> You might not know the Scotts, but they are persons of great spirit. And it has been great to have them as a new mother and a new father. And I'm so happy that they came tonight, and I assure all of you that I knew nothing about it. [*laughter*] I went to hang my coat, try to get in my office, and they blocked me; they wouldn't let me go in the office. And I knew something, but I just assumed, I said maybe they have a gift in there and they don't want me to see it. So, I didn't know any of this was here. Nobody, they really kept this a secret. And even Coretta, who will share all of the intimate secrets of life with me, was able to hold this back. [*laughter*] And when a woman can hold a secret, it's a great secret. [*laughter*] So this was really a wonderful surprise to me.

And then my great friend and my brother, Ralph Abernathy. I will not leave Ralph because we will be together forever. He has been a great companion and a great associate. We have worked together across these years and have developed a relationship that nothing in all the world can separate. And although we will be separated by a few miles, just a hundred and seventy-five, we will still be working together. And I ask *you* tonight, and all of the people of Montgomery, to join Ralph Abernathy as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. He has already proven his ability as a leader; he has already proven his ability as a thinker; and he has already proven his ability as a detail worker and as a great administrator. And so Montgomery will not suffer at all. And I predict that under his leadership, Montgomery will grow to higher heights and new and creative things will be done. I hope that you will be able to find a pastor of this church who will join him and the movement in this city and will carry you on to higher heights and do many of the things that I wanted to do and that I couldn't do. I will be praying as I leave you, as you embark upon this serious and important responsibility of calling a pastor. And as I know Dexter, I know you will get a good one because you have proven your ability to do that across the years.<sup>11</sup>

I close now by saying that I solicit your prayers as we go to a new field of labor. I do not know what the future holds for us. When you move into another area, there is always an element of risk involved when you move to a new job. I only know that I'm trying to serve a call, being catapulted into the leadership of a movement that has profound implications for the growth and the development of our democracy. I do not intend to desert that call to that movement. I intend to stay with it until victory is won and until every black boy and black girl can walk the streets of Montgomery and the United States with dignity and

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9. A. D. King earned a B.A. from Morehouse College in 1960.

10. King refers to Obie and Bernice Scott.

11. For more on Dexter's search for a new pastor, see King to Earl Wesley Lawson, 23 April 1960, pp. 441-442 in this volume.

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honor, knowing that he's a child of the Almighty God and knowing that he has dignity and self-respect. It may not come in the next five years; I do not know. I hope it comes tomorrow morning by nine o'clock. But realism impels me to admit that there are still days of resistance ahead, difficult, dark days. I do not know what suffering we will have to go through. Some more bombings will occur, I'm sure. Some of us will have to go to jail some more. And I'm not so sure now that some of us may not have to pay the price of physical death, but I'm convinced that if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more Christian. And so let us go out with new and bold determination to make this old age—a new age.

As somebody has said, "I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future."<sup>12</sup> And I know this God enough to know that He's with us. I've come to believe in prayer stronger, stronger than ever before, since I've been in Montgomery. And I'm convinced that when we engage in prayer, we are not engaging in just the process of autosuggestion, just an endless soliloquy or a monologue, but we are engaged in a dialogue. And we are talking with a Father who is concerned about us. And I've come to believe that. Maybe this is rationalization. Maybe I have believed more in a personal God over these last few years because I needed Him. But I have felt His power working in my life in so many instances, and I have felt an inner sense of calmness in dark and difficult situations, an inner strength that I never knew I had. And so I say to you: continue to pray for us. And if we will take God with us, I know we will make it, no matter what comes.

In closing, I'd like to mention three other people. Names, it's always perilous to mention names. I could call all of the names here, but I do see three young ladies who have worked very closely with me over the last few years. They have worked with me in difficult periods, and they have proved their concern and loyalty. First is my personal secretary, Mrs. Maude Ballou, who has been a loyal secretary and who has worked long and difficult hours when I needed her most, and she has been a real associate and a real encouraging person in this total struggle. I'm happy to say that, for at least a period, Mr. [Leonard] Ballou has been gracious enough to release Mrs. Ballou to go to Atlanta to help us get adjusted. It's difficult to adjust to a new secretary, and I will have to be in the process of finding a new one, but she will be there for a few months with us. And then there is Mrs. [Lillie] Hunter, who has served as the church secretary, and as the church secretary she's had to work very closely with me. And, there again, she has been a very loyal worker, and I want to express my appreciation to her publicly. For you know, when you have to work with people like me, you have to have a lot of patience. And running all over the country and being in the midst of things all the time, you are always flying off and all that. People don't think I fly off, but I occasionally do. If you don't believe it, ask Mrs. Ballou and Mrs. Hunter. [laughter] And then,

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12. Country and gospel singer Stuart Hamblen included this phrase in his hit song from the 1950s "Known Only to Him."

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there is Mrs. Hazel Gregory, who is the secretary of the Montgomery Improvement Association and who also has been a very loyal worker in our association and with me. At times when Mrs. Ballou has been away on vacations and been out, she has worked with me, and she has never said, even though most of her work was to carry on work in the office of the MIA, that she was too busy to do something that I asked her to do. So, I'm grateful to these three ladies, and I'd like to ask them to stand so that everybody can see them. [*applause*] These are very wonderful ladies.

I could mention my biographer, but enough has been said about him, and it has been said well. I think we all know Lawrence D. Reddick. He's been a friend, not only to me and to Coretta, but to our total movement. And he is revealing that continual interest through his relationship with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and through his relationship with Ralph as the new president of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

And let us never forget that behind Ralph is a strong, encouraging, fine wife. And that's our good friend Juanita, who just thought of the idea of giving something in our honor. And she had an affair at their home on Wednesday night and invited about eighteen of our most intimate friends. And there they gave us one of the most beautiful, useful gifts. And we can never totally thank Juanita for thinking of this idea. And Ralph admits that he didn't do any of the work to get it ready. She did all of it.

Finally, let me thank you for what you have already been thanked for. I, like Coretta, never knew and never thought that anything this fine and this beautiful [*laughter*], I don't know if you're supposed to, are you supposed to touch it? That's the, so beautiful that I'm afraid to touch it. [*laughter*] It's really, this is really wonderful. I don't know who conceived of the idea to have this as the gift, but it's something that will last through the generations. And even Yoki and Yoki's children [*laughter*] will, and Marty's children, will be able to look back across the years and think of Dexter as results of this beautiful gift, which we will take to Atlanta.<sup>13</sup> Now, I assure you that the house that we will be living in will in no way match and fit anything this beautiful; [*sustained laughter*] but it will really be something to point to. Thank you very much.

And may I say to you as I said to my fraternity brothers last night—Dr. [*R. D.*] Crockett was gracious enough, who's president of our fraternity, to have an affair in my honor where the brothers assembled at the home of Dr. [*J. Garrick*] Hardy.<sup>14</sup> Large numbers of them assembled and presented me a beautiful picture with a beautiful inscription there in beautiful words. And as I talked with them, I closed with these words: We must keep going in our struggle with the faith that God lives. And they that stand with Him stand in the glow of the world's bright tomorrows.

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13. On behalf of the congregation, Elizabeth Arrington had presented King with an inscribed silver service and remarked: "May you find it useful and may it serve as a reminder of your years here as our pastor. And finally, and finally, may Yoki and her family have a service of it. And Marty may borrow it, if Yoki gives the consent. May God's richest blessings rest upon you and yours always."

14. King was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha.

And they that stand against Him stand in a tragic and an already-declared minority. This is our hope, and this is our witness. 31 Jan  
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One or two other people that I should mention I think I forgot to mention Reverend B. J. Johnson. Is he still there? Yes. Of Atlanta, Georgia. His father pastors in Atlanta, and he is now pastoring.<sup>15</sup> He is a very good friend of our family and very good friend of my brother's, and he came down with him tonight. We're very happy to have all of these friends come and be with us, and God bless you.

And God grant that Dexter will continue to move on and go to higher heights. And one day, when you get tired of hearing good preaching and you want to hear a fellow still trying to learn how to preach, invite me back and I'll try to do it for you. [*sustained applause*]

[*congregation sings "Blessed Be the Tie That Binds"*]

At. MLKEC: ET-56.

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15. B. Joseph Johnson, Jr. served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Clarkston, Georgia, and succeeded his father, B. Joseph Johnson, Sr. (1927-1977) as pastor of Greater Mt. Calvary Baptist Church. Johnson, Jr. was also an SCLC field secretary (1962-1971).