Sunday, January 17, 1988
TIRED FEET AND RESTED SOULS
Micah 4:1-4, 6:8; Matthew 5:1-11

A friend of mine recently told me about being the guest preacher in a church down in Georgia, and as he entered the pulpit, he could not help but notice a sign that is there for the eye of the preacher only. It says, “We Would See Jesus.” After the worship service, he asked someone about the sign and was told by an elderly woman, who had been a long-time member of the congregation, that the sign was put there when the church was built as an urgent request from the congregation that the preacher, whoever he or she might be, focus on the good news of Christ at work in the world. She went on to say that the people who come here on Sunday morning want the preacher to “show us the power of God and tell us about the new world.” And then she added that she did not mean the new world of life after death, but the new world that exists right now in the middle of our old world. It could not have been said better by a preaching professor.

Christian preaching is proclaiming the story of a new world that is available now because God’s purpose, God’s intent, God’s rule is in effect. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent.” Conversely, the power and claim of all other purposes and all old intentions have been broken. We need no longer live in fear or deference to those old powers or hope for the gifts of those old regimes. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. Jesus was talking about God’s new world and the new way of living in it in the Sermon on the Mount read earlier.

The prophet Micah was giving his vision of what God’s new world is going to be when he said, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Now let’s go from the general to the specific. This past Friday, January 15, was Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, and on this Monday, our nation will celebrate his birthday. He would’ve been 59 years old. On April 4, 1968, he was killed by an assassin’s bullet in Memphis, Tennessee.

What Martin Luther King Jr. did in his preaching, speechmaking, and actions was to proclaim the new order of God’s rule, just as Micah did and as Jesus did. He was continually giving a new vision of what life is to be under God’s reign. And he called people to begin living that vision right here and now. And therein is the power.

Here’s part of that story. In 1954, Martin Luther King Jr. was called to be the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. At that point in his life, he had no idea that one day he would be remembered as he is now being remembered.

Like most other cities throughout the South — and in other parts of the country as well — segregation was everywhere, and this included the public transportation buses. In that city, as in many others, the rule was that Blacks were to sit in the back, and if up front all the white seats were taken by white people, the Black people in the back were to give up even those seats so that no white person would ever have to stand.

There was a respected Black leader in Montgomery, Alabama, whose name was E. D. Nixon. In addition to being a regional officer in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, he had also

held several leadership positions in the state and local NAACP. For a year or more, he and some other local Black leaders in Montgomery had been talking about a possible bus boycott to protest the segregation law. But they had not found the right person or issue around which to organize. During the year of 1955 and before, a number of Blacks had been arrested for refusing to give up their bus seat to a white person, but E. D. Nixon was still looking for someone who was willing to see the issue through.

Then on December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for not being willing to give up her seat to a white man.

She had finished her work in a tailor shop in the Montgomery Fair Department Store at the end of the day and began to look for a bus home. As she got on the bus, there was only one seat left, and that was just back of where it was considered the white section. So she took this seat next to the aisle, and a Black man was sitting next to her, and across the aisle were two Black women, and there were a few empty seats in the very front of the bus in the white section. At each subsequent bus stop, more people got on, and soon all the front seats in the white section were taken. At the next stop, there was one white man who had to stand, and when the driver looked around and saw him standing, he asked Rosa Parks and the other Black people in her row (four in all) to let him have those seats. All four seats were needed because it was unthinkable that a white person could sit next to or in the same row with Black people.

At the driver's first request, none of the four moved. Then the driver spoke again and said, "You'd better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." At this point, the passenger who would have taken one of the four seats hadn't said anything. Finally, three of the Black people stood up and moved into the aisle, but Rosa remained in her seat. When the driver saw that she was still sitting there, he asked if she was going to stand up, and she told him, "No." He said, "Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have you arrested." And Rosa Parks told him to go on and have her arrested.

He got off and came back shortly. A few minutes later, two policemen got on the bus, and they approached her and asked if the driver had asked her to stand up, and she said, "Yes." And they wanted to know why she hadn't stood, and she told them she didn't have to stand up. She said that she had paid her fare and occupied a seat and didn't think she should have to give it up. They placed her under arrest, and she was taken to jail and booked on suspicion.

Through a friend, E. D. Nixon was notified, and he made arrangements with a friendly white attorney to post bail and get her out of jail.

Later that evening, they met together at the home of Rosa Parks and her husband, and E. D. Nixon said, "Mrs. Parks, this is the case we've been looking for. We can break this situation on the bus with your case." She said, "Well, I haven't thought of it just like that." So they talked with her mother and her husband, and finally, they agreed to go along with it.

That was the beginning. E. D. Nixon went home and began to organize the boycott. Using a map of Montgomery, he calculated that most of the Black people could walk to work if they wanted to. Then he began to call the Black ministers in town that he knew. He wanted to organize a citywide meeting of Black people. He said that when he called the new minister in town, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., he said, "Let me think about it a while and call me back."

When E. D. Nixon called Reverend King back, he agreed to go along with the meeting to plan the boycott. Then E. D. Nixon told him, “I’m glad you agreed because I have already set the meeting up to meet at your church.” He had chosen the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for the meeting because it was near the center of the city and was easiest for everyone to get to. At that time, Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t even know Rosa Parks.

A few days later, and after several more community-wide meetings, E. D. Nixon and a few others suggested that all the Black people in Montgomery organize, and the name of the new group should be the “Montgomery Improvement Association.” It was at first suggested that E. D. Nixon should serve as president of the Association. He declined and said that he wanted the new Black preacher in town, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., to be the president of the Association. The date was December 5, five days after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man.

When someone asked E. D. Nixon later why he chose Martin Luther King Jr. to be the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, he said that a few months earlier, he had heard him as a guest speaker for the NAACP, and that he made a heck of a speech, and E. D. Nixon then said to one of his friends, “I don’t know how I’m going to do it yet, but someday I’m gonna hang him to the stars.” He knew he had found a man who could give the vision of God’s power at work in the world and our part in fulfilling that vision.

Martin Luther King Jr. continued to be a visionary who let his people see that a new world is possible even in the midst of the old.

A Black man named Yancey Martin was a college student in 1955, and in December of that year came home to Montgomery for the Christmas holidays. He immediately became involved in the bus boycott by driving a car to see that Black people who had too far to walk could still get to work.

Later someone asked him his impressions of what was happening and of Martin Luther King Jr. He reported that he was absolutely amazed with the unity of the Black community in Montgomery. He had never experienced anything like it.

He went on to say that everyone was captivated by Martin Luther King Jr. “He was a very articulate person. He sounded good, and it was just great to see a Black person who could get up and move an audience the way he did. He was talking about what we oughta have, and what we oughta be, and what the situation oughta be in the South, and what kind of country we oughta live in.”

“I can remember one incident especially. I happened to be in church that day when we had a meeting. Martin asked this old lady, he said, ‘Now listen…you have been with us all along, so now you go on and start back to ridin’the bus, ‘cause you are too old to keep walkin'.’ She said, ‘Oh, no.’ Said, ‘I’m gonna walk just as long as everybody else walks. I’m gonna walk till it’s over.’ So Martin said, ‘But aren’t your feet tired?’ She said, ‘Yes, my feets is tired, but my soul is rested.’ Yes, sir, and that was kind of like a story he used to tell a lot in the Movement through the years. As he’d go somewhere, and he’d think people would be getting a little tired of marching, he’d tell that story about the lady who said, ‘My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.'”

Tired feet and rested souls… that's what peace and justice are all about in God's world. After 381 days of walking in Montgomery, Alabama, the buses were integrated peacefully on December 21, 1956.

Tired feet and rested souls. That's what following the way of Jesus often brings us. It's the way that leads to peace and justice for all, and it's better than tired souls and rested feet. Amen.