Sunday, January 21, 1996
MY SOUL IS RESTED
Matthew 4:12-23

Did you hear that one verse from today's scripture reading where the Gospel of Matthew quotes Jesus, who has now begun his public ministry? "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" What does that mean for you and for me?

A friend of mine 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 was there in large letters for the eyes of the preacher only. It said, "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 God at work in the world. She went on to say that the people who come there 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 professor of preaching.

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, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." That's what he meant when he called those first disciples to follow him and calls us to do the same. He was saying, "I'm going to give you a new understanding of your life's journey and, in the process, help you discover God's purpose for your life."

So this sermon is about what it means to follow the way of Jesus. It's about helping you discover what God's purpose is for you in your life, and when you begin to follow that purpose, your life's journey, like that of those first disciples, will have a number of detours and surprises you hadn't expected.

Last Saturday and Sunday in the sermon, Jim Goode urged us to ask ourselves, "What am I looking for?" That's a good question. In this sermon, I am proposing that you ask that question from a different angle—"What is God's purpose for me in this life?" I want you to focus not so much on what you are looking for or what you want, but rather on what God's purpose is for you. I believe that if you discover God's purpose for you, you will also have found, at the deepest level, what you are looking for.

Now let's move from the general to the specific. This past Monday, January 15, was Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. On April 4, 1968, he was killed by an assassin's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee. Today, I want us to look at a part of his life's journey because it illustrates how he — and each one of us — goes about finding God's purpose for us.

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. He understood God's purpose for him as that of being a faithful pastor. But it turned out to be much more than that.

Like most other cities throughout the South and in other parts of the country as well, segregation was everywhere and included the public transportation buses. In that city, as in many others, the rule was that Black people were to sit in the back, and if all the white seats were taken by white people up front, 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 Black people had been arrested for refusing to give up their bus seat to a white person, but E.D. Nixon was still looking for someone 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. It was the end of a long day; she was tired and began to look for a bus home. As she got on the bus, there was only one seat remaining, and that was just back of where it was considered the white section.

So she took this seat next to the aisle. A Black man was sitting next to her, and across the aisle were two Black women. 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 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 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 that 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." The driver said, "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.

The driver got off and came back shortly. A few minutes later, two policemen got on the bus. They approached her and asked if the driver had asked her to stand up, and she said, "Yes." They wanted to know why she hadn't stood up, and she told them she didn't have to stand up. She said that she had paid her fare, 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. 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, "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 city-wide 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 for 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, 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, 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. 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 going to 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.

A young Black man named Yancey Martin was a college student in 1955, and in December of that year, he 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, when someone asked him his impressions of what was happening and of Martin Luther King Jr., he reported that he was absolutely amazed at 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 great to see a Black person who could get up and move an audience the way he did. He was talking about what we ought to have and what we ought to be and what the situation ought to be in the South, and what kind of country we ought to live in.”

“I remember one incident especially. I happened to be in church that day when we had a meeting. Martin asked this old woman, he said, ‘Now listen, you have been with us all along, so now you go on and start back to riding the bus because you are too old to keep on walking.’ She said, ‘Oh no. 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 feet are tired, but my soul is rested.'”

That was the kind of story Martin Luther King Jr. used a lot in the movement through the years. When he'd go somewhere and he'd think people were getting a little tired of walking, he'd tell that story about the old woman who said, "My feet are tired, but my soul is rested."

Tired feet and rested souls — that's what finding God's purpose in your life and living it is 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 discovering God's purpose and living it often brings us. Those first disciples who answered the call of Jesus to follow him had no idea how God was going to use them in building God's church. They had no idea of the detours that were ahead of them on their life's journey. They, too, often had tired feet and rested souls.

Rosa Parks had no idea how God was going to use her when she refused to give up her seat on a bus so a white man could sit. But through it, she found God's purpose for her life, and thousands of others, through her example, found God's purpose for them as well as they walked and carpooled for 381 days so that justice would be served.

E.D. Nixon and Martin Luther King Jr. had no idea how God was going to use them when they answered God's call. The same is true for each one of us.

Tired feet and rested souls. If you find yourself with tired feet and a rested soul, the odds are that you are living out God's purpose for you. On the other hand, I meet so many people who have just the opposite — they have rested feet and tired souls because they are not open to discovering God's purpose for them. Amen.