



On January 15, 1929, a King was born in Atlanta, Georgia.

Rev. Martin Luther King Senior and his wife Alberta welcomed a son.

Little did they know that the baby born that day — Martin Luther King Junior — would go on to become the nation's foremost civil-rights leader.

Since 1986, the nation has honored Doctor King by making his birthday a holiday.

Every year, that holiday is celebrated on the third Monday in January.

So even though Dr. King was born on the 15th, the date of his holiday this year is January 16th.

You might already know about Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

But there's so much more to know about him — and his role in making this nation live up to the words, "All men (and women) are created equal."

The truth is, Martin Luther King Junior was far more than a dreamer.

He put his faith into action.

He defied discrimination.

And he always did it non-violently and courageously.

Dr. King often spoke of “The Beloved Community” — a community where no one faced discrimination, no one was homeless and no one went hungry.

And that vision was deeply rooted in his religious faith.

As a young man, he wrote, “It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present.”

But even though young Martin came from a strong and loving family, the world outside his childhood home could be harsh to African-Americans.

Discrimination against blacks was rampant in the South – all over the country, really.

It was legal to discriminate based on race in education, housing, employment, and virtually every other walk of life.

And African-Americans who resisted ran the risk of being “lynched” — hanged from trees by white racists.

As a student, young Martin learned how to read before he started school. He was smart enough to skip the ninth and 12th grades.

But he wasn't just a bookworm. He liked football, baseball and socializing with his friends, too.

Martin entered Morehouse College in Atlanta in 1944 at the age of 15.

He graduated with a degree in sociology, not religion. But during his senior year, he decided to follow in his father's footsteps.

He entered Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania and graduated as valedictorian of his class in 1951.

He then moved onto Boston University, where he continued his religious studies. He eventually got his doctorate in 1959.

While in Boston, he met his wife — a music student from Alabama named Coretta Scott.

They married in 1953.

A little more than a year later, they moved to Montgomery, Alabama.

And in September 1954, Martin Luther King Jr. became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.

On December 1, 1955, an incident on a Montgomery bus sparked a boycott that would change the course of history.

At the time, African-Americans were required by law to sit toward the back of the bus, and give up seats to whites if seats ran short.

But on this day, a middle-aged seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man.

Parks was arrested, and outrage over the arrest caused African-American riders to boycott the city's bus system.

Dr. King led the group that organized the boycott.

And despite hateful phone calls, time in jail and even a bombing at his home, he didn't back off.

In April 1956, he won. The U.S. Supreme Court struck down laws requiring segregation on buses.

In 1957, King was elected president of the newly created Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

And he became increasingly involved in civil rights protests.

His activities got the attention of the FBI, which ordered wiretaps and surveillance of King.

In 1960, he became co-pastor of his father's church, Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta.

As the 1960's began, Dr. King was now working across the South, demonstrating against discrimination and registering African-Americans to vote.

Civil rights demonstrators got violent reactions from many whites.

They were beaten, attacked by police dogs and sprayed with water from powerful fire hoses.

But Dr. King continued to stress non-violence.

"If the Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in his struggle for justice," he said, "unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate life of bitterness, and his chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos."

As Dr. King's reputation grew, so did his family. Mrs. King gave birth to four children — Yolanda (1955), Martin III (1957), Dexter (1961) and Bernice (1963).

On August 28th, 1963, Dr. King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

It was in that speech that he spoke of his children.

"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," he said.

Over 200,000 people turned out for that speech, both black and white.

Their goal: a federal civil-rights law that would outlaw all forms of discrimination based on race.

Just one year later, in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, and Dr. King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

As the 1960's went on, Dr. King's activism expanded.

He protested on behalf of the poor, both black and white. And he spoke out against the Vietnam War.

He continued to make enemies.

But he didn't let that keep him from doing what he thought was right.

In April 1968, Dr. King traveled to Memphis, to speak in support of striking sanitation workers.

During his speech, he seemed to sense his life was in danger.

"I've seen the Promised Land," he said during his speech, a reference to Moses on Mount Sinai in the Bible. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."

Just as Moses never made it to that land, neither did Dr. King.

The following day, on April 4, 1968, he was assassinated.

On April 9, Dr. King was laid to rest at South-View Cemetery in Atlanta.

A white man named James Earl Ray was later convicted of killing him.

The words on Dr. King's crypt echo to the final words of his "I Have a Dream" speech: "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, I'm free at last."

The nation has come a long way in the 44 years since the assassination of Martin Luther King.

But if Dr. King were still alive today, there's no doubt that he would still be speaking out against violence — and speaking up for the poor, the homeless and all the other powerless people in society.

It's now up to all of us to make Dr. King's dream a reality.