

A WHITE PREACHER'S MESSAGE

Chapter 1

WHY AM I (STILL) HERE?

After all that I have been through, I keep asking myself the question, “Why am I still here?” As I reflect on the first fifty years of the modern civil rights movement, one of the most remarkable realities to me is that I am still alive and able to report it and to tell my story. Quite frankly, I didn’t expect to be. I have vivid memories of some of our discussions in the Montgomery Improvement Association Board of Trustees meetings. During those long, difficult months of the bus boycott and its follow-up actions, Dr. King would remind us, “If you’re not ready to sacrifice your life for this cause, you have no business sitting on this board.” We all believed that some of us were going to die. That was the reality that we lived with day after day. Though it was never spoken aloud, we were all aware that Dr. King would be the prime target. We also knew, for a variety of reasons, that I too was likely to be high on the list of targets. I was the only white member of the board. Since my very presence was a novelty to the press corps, my picture appeared much too often in local and out of town newspapers. Most significantly, Jeannie and I had the audacity to live in a black neighborhood and to consider ourselves totally part of “black” Montgomery.

Our lives and those of our children were constantly threatened in anonymous letters and phone calls. We assumed that most of the threats were meant merely as intimidation, in hopes of frightening us into leaving Montgomery. However, we took all the threats

seriously, and for good reason. When our car was vandalized in January 1956, the front tires were carefully slashed on the inside, where the damage would not be noticed. The cuts were just deep enough not to flatten the tires until they heated up after a long drive. The vandals must have hoped that one or both tires would blow out when I was on the road.

In those days I made frequent car trips out of Montgomery. Early on I discovered to my dismay that not only did many of our opponents know what car I drove, but I was frequently followed. It did not take long for me to learn alternate routes to the places I normally drove, and I never used the same route twice in a row. Nevertheless, knowing I was a target, each time I said good-bye to Jeannie and the children when leaving home, I was very much aware that I might not come back. Jeannie, on the other hand, always “knew” that God would not allow anything bad to happen. To this day she remembers her shock when the second bomb exploded at our house. She says she was mad at God for allowing the Klan to throw bombs at our house again, this time with children inside!

I had taken Dr. King's warnings seriously about the danger all of us faced; and I was determined to be faithful to the commitment I had made, though it might cost me my life. I fully expected that I would not survive. Whatever our differing expectations, Jeannie and I learned to live our lives one day at a time.

Montgomery never became a “Bombingham,” the nickname given to Birmingham, Alabama, after a long string of bombings there of African American homes, businesses and churches. But bombings were plentiful enough in Montgomery, beginning on January 30, 1956, less than two months after the beginning of the bus boycott. The first target, as was to be expected, was the home of Dr. King and his family. Another early target was Mr. E. D. Nixon, a courageous labor leader and one of my all-time heroes, who had spent his entire life fighting racism.

On August 25, 1956, and again on January 10, 1957, our home was the target of bombs, each estimated to contain two or three sticks of dynamite. The first had landed more than forty feet from the house; so the damage to the structure (and to our neighbors' homes) was minimal. The second time, however, the bombers had put more strength into their throw, landing the bomb just a few feet from our front door. That door and all of our front windows were shattered, as were the windows of the B. T. Knox family next door. The roof of our house was raised several inches. Our living room floor was covered with broken glass and plaster dust; the kitchen floor was littered with broken dishes and smashed pots and pans and groceries, as our cupboards had disgorged their contents. Nothing had been spared!

The August bombing had taken place while we were out of town. We had spent the previous week at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, at a workshop dealing with racial desegregation. Mrs. Rosa Parks, our neighbor and good friend, had come with us to the workshop. We still remember the shock we experienced, knowing that we could be the victims of such a cowardly attack. But no great damage was done. And the bombing served to strengthen our relationship with the African American community. Now they all knew we were with them in the "movement."

The January attack was totally different. Our family was home at the time, with a nine-day-old baby! And the bomb exploded at 2:00 AM, jolting us all out of a sound sleep. Minutes later, as I and our neighbors stood outside assessing the damage, we heard sounds that seemed to be other explosions. We soon learned that four churches and two homes had been bombed in Montgomery that night. Ours was the first.

All of us who had gathered in front of our house kept stumbling over something in the driveway, which turned out to be another bomb that had not exploded! That device contained eleven sticks of

dynamite and a container of TNT, all taped to a TV antenna which had served as a handle for throwing the bomb! As stunned as we were, we were still alive. The demolitions experts told us that the bomb that did not explode would have leveled the entire neighborhood. We and many of our neighbors would have been killed.

THE SERIES OF MY REMARKABLE EXPERIENCES of escaping death predates Montgomery by several years. In the summer of 1949, I worked in the green pea harvest in Idaho. It was just after my junior year at Capital University, in Columbus, Ohio. A national Lutheran youth gathering had been scheduled for late that summer in Pullman, Washington. To entice more young men to attend, planners had lined up jobs for students from several Lutheran colleges across the country. We were promised \$1 an hour for twelve-hour shifts, seven-day weeks, with free housing. All we had to do was get there.

As it turned out, the pea growers had had a bad spring, with well-below-normal rainfall. By the beginning of summer, they knew their crops were going to be much smaller than they had anticipated. But commitments had been made, and travel plans had been arranged, so on we came from our various parts of the country, several hundreds of us, to take those promised jobs. We learned when we arrived in Lewiston, Idaho, that at most we would be working two or three days a week in the harvest. I was fortunate enough to pick up an occasional day's labor picking cherries, or filling in at the local cannery or frozen foods plant, packaging peas. When the harvest ran out, many of my compatriots gave up and went home. Because I still wanted to attend the youth gathering, I bummed around looking for odd jobs.

I had the good fortune to link up with another Capital University student, Dan Mathes, with whom I later roomed when we got back to school. Since Dan had a car, we were able to go more

places to find work, though all the jobs we had were short-lived and dangerous. We signed on at a building construction site and were given the task of digging out what would become the bottom of an elevator shaft. Our fellow workers told us that all of them had refused to do that particular job, deeming it unsafe. When the large hole was completely dug and the form was set into place for pouring concrete, our foreman discovered that one corner needed another inch or two of dirt removed to level the form. Since I was smaller than Dan, I was lowered into the narrow space between the form and the dirt wall, some seven or eight feet deep. As I finished digging, Dan saw the ground begin to give way. He yanked me out of that trap by my arm, just as the bank collapsed! I probably would not have survived the cave-in.

We also got jobs on a road-construction crew, where the road builders had set up a rock crusher at the bottom of a limestone hill. Rocks formed by blasting away the side of the hill were then crushed into gravel for the roadway. Boulders would occasionally get hung up on the hillside, requiring someone to work them loose so they could roll down the hill into the crusher. I was assigned to dislodge one particularly large boulder. As I pried loose the rocks that were holding it up, the stone suddenly broke loose, roaring down the hill. I narrowly missed being crushed to death.

When we finally got to the youth gathering, Dan and I were early enough to volunteer to help with the setting up. I was assigned to attach a banner to the wall high above the stage. To reach the spot, I had to stand on a box on top of a chair perched on a narrow ledge. After all the close calls I'd had, I'm not sure why I agreed to that assignment; except that no one else was volunteering to do it. By the end of the summer, I reflected long and hard about the many times that God had given me special protection. Truly his angels had carried me in their hands.

Those memories of God's special care came back to me some

five years later. In the fall of 1954, as an “old married couple” with more than three years behind us, Jeannie and I were returning from Los Angeles, California, where I had served for two years as a student pastor. We brought with us our two children, Margee, not quite two, and Bobby, about six months, who had both been born in Los Angeles. We were going back for my final year at what is now Trinity Lutheran Seminary, in Columbus, Ohio. That year, 1954-55, turned out to be perhaps the most difficult year in our lives. For a variety of reasons, we had to move several times during those months. Jeannie also had a series of medical emergencies, including hospitalization for an ectopic (tubal) pregnancy. I got so far behind in my studies that we finally moved Jeannie and the children back with her parents in Pennsylvania, while I moved in with my sister and her husband, Suzanne and Bill Deutschmann. Working a nearly full-time job to pay the bills, I tried to do two semesters of schoolwork in one during the time that was remaining. (Incidentally, the only time I saw my family during that second semester was Easter Sunday; so we knew precisely when our third child, Dianne, was conceived!) It was only thanks to the grace and generosity of my professors that I was able to graduate on time. One of them wrote to me during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, assuring me that what I had accomplished there made up for what I had not completed in class.

In many conversations during that year, Jeannie and I tried to figure out why God was allowing us to endure such misfortune. We kept coming back to the same answer. God must be preparing us for some difficult task that we could not handle without special training. Jeannie made a wonderful “discovery” in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.” (KJV) The

true eye-opener for Jeannie was the realization that in more modern translations the word “temptation” appears as “testing.” God was testing us to be sure we were ready for what lay ahead! Sure enough, in June 1955 we arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, a mere six months before the beginning of the bus boycott.

AGAIN I FEEL COMPELLED to ask, “Why am I (still) here?” I am sure I have a better grasp on the answer now than I did fifty-five years ago, or even fifty. During the intervening years I have had hundreds of opportunities to speak and to preach, write, and teach about the civil rights movement. Jeannie and I never turn down an opportunity to appear in a classroom, from pre-school to graduate school. We now believe we are here to continue to share the message with the generations following us, the ones whom our labor leader friend, Mr. E. D. Nixon, used to refer to as the “Children Coming On.”

During the last ten years or so, we have led a number of groups on what we call “civil rights pilgrimages.” We visit the sites of major civil rights events and introduce our groups to people who participated in those early activities, who then tell their own stories of their involvement. We walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, site of “Bloody Sunday” in 1965. We take our people to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, where four girls were murdered with a bomb on a Sunday morning in 1963. We travel to the church in Montgomery that was served by Dr. King, as well as the site of his entombment in Atlanta. We tour the Rosa Parks Museum in Montgomery. We visit the Trinity Lutheran Church parsonage, our old home, and show where the bombs exploded, with the official Alabama Historical Tree planted in one of the spots. And we explain how we too took part in those activities. The most frequent comment we hear from our participants is “A life-changing experience!”

Jeannie and I believe we have a God-given challenge to continue to tell our stories and to share our lives, as do other participants in the movement who are still able to do so. Both African Americans and European Americans need to be reminded of their histories and of how their ancestors related to one another. We keep in mind the maxim that if we do not remember our history, we shall be doomed to repeat it. Only as we face our past openly and honestly, can we work up the courage to address and correct the wrongs that have been committed by one people against another. So God leads us to share our memories, in order that we may be in a position to be mediators and reconcilers. We feel God has given us the unique privilege of standing with one foot in the black community and one foot in the white. It may not be comfortable; but that is where we are. And until God tells us it is time to slow down, we intend to keep pressing ahead with our witness.