

“I Have a Dream Today . . .”

A month later President Kennedy sent a strong civil rights bill to Congress. “This nation was founded on the principle that all men are created equal,” he said. “We say we are the land of the free. We *are*, except for Negroes. The time has come for America to fulfill her promise.”

Martin was pleased by the President's words. But he knew that Congress had to vote for the bill before it could become law. “We need to keep the pressure up,” he said.

"What about a march on Washington, D.C. itself?" someone suggested. "I really believe that as many as 100,000 people would come if you asked them to."

But would they? This was the question Martin and his fellow workers asked themselves as they started planning for this march on the nation's capital. Would they care enough to come?

Martin and Coretta arrived in Washington the day before the march. Because they would be so busy they left the children at home. There were four young Kings by now—Yoki, Marty, Dexter, and the baby girl, Bernice. Everyone called her Bunny.

All evening Martin worked on the speech he would give. The next day dawned clear and warm. At first the news was not good. "It looks as though we're only going to get about 25,000 people," an aide said.

But he was wrong. All morning—by car and bus and train and plane—people poured into Washington, D.C. Some rode bicycles. Some walked. One man even

roller-skated all the way from Chicago.

On and on they came—by the thousands, by the tens of thousands. At ten o'clock there were already more than the 100,000 they had hoped for. By noon there were 200,000. And finally more than 250,000 had marched through the streets of Washington to gather on the Mall, a long, narrow park in front of the Lincoln Memorial. It was the largest march in the nation's history.

Martin sat on a platform in front of the Memorial. Around him were high government officials, other civil rights leaders, famous singers, and movie stars.

One after another they got up to speak or sing. It was a good program. But it was a long one. The day was hot, and there was almost no shade. People began to drift away. They had heard enough for one day.

Then the loudspeakers boomed out, "And now we give you—the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.!" At that, the crowds began to come back.

For a moment Martin just stood there.



Behind him was the great statue of Abraham Lincoln. Before him were a quarter of a million people—almost a third of them white. What a moment, he thought. What a time to be alive!

At first Martin read from the speech he had prepared so carefully. But soon he pushed it aside and began to speak the way he did best—from the heart.

“I have a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’”

The crowd had grown quiet now, as they listened eagerly to every word.

“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. I have a dream today. . . .”

More than 250,000 people in front of the Lincoln Memorial as Martin gives his “I Have a Dream” speech.

Martin went on, sharing his dream of a time when "all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!'"

There was a hush after Martin reached the end of his speech. Then the huge crowd began to clap and cheer for Martin's dream of a new America. Many were crying. And two women who had been strangers before—one white and one black—turned and hugged each other.

For Martin it was a year of triumphs—that year of 1963. First there had been the victory in Birmingham. Then the March on Washington. And *Time* magazine picked him as their "Man of the Year."

But it was a year of tragedies, too. A beloved civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, was shot. Only three weeks after the March

on Washington, a bomb exploded in a Birmingham Sunday school class. Four little girls were killed.

Then came the worst tragedy of all. It was November 22, 1963. Martin was in the upstairs bedroom, packing to go off on a trip. The television was on in the background. Suddenly an emergency news bulletin interrupted the program. For a few stunned seconds Martin just stared at the screen. Then "Corrie!" he shouted. "President Kennedy has been shot by someone—maybe killed!"

Coretta rushed into the bedroom. She and Martin sat side by side on the bed, listening to the awful news that the President was dead. Finally Martin said very quietly, "This is going to happen to me, too."

Oh, no, Coretta wanted to say. But she couldn't. She couldn't find a single word of comfort—because she was afraid he might be right. Just as millions of people

loved Martin Luther King, so some hated everything he stood for. All Coretta could do was move closer and grip his hand in hers. ✓



Martin enjoys a rare moment at home.