

I've Been to the Mountaintop by Martin Luther King Jr.

April 3, 1968

"We've got some difficult days ahead," Martin Luther King, Jr., told an overflowing crowd in Memphis, Tennessee, on 3 April 1968, where the city's sanitation workers were striking. "But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop ... I've seen the Promised Land. 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" (King, "I've Been," 222–223). Less than 24 hours after these prophetic words, King was assassinated by James Earl Ray.

King had come to Memphis two times before to give aid to the Memphis Sanitation Workers' Strike. On 18 March, he spoke at a rally before 15,000 people and vowed to return the following week to lead a march. James Lawson and King led a march on 28 March, which erupted in violence and was immediately called off. Against the advice of his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King returned to Memphis on 3 April 1968,

seeking to restore nonviolence back to the movement in Memphis.

After arriving in Memphis, King was exhausted and had developed a sore throat and a slight fever. He asked Ralph Abernathy to take his place at that night's scheduled mass meeting at Bishop Charles Mason Temple. As Abernathy took the podium he could sense the disappointment of the crowd, which had turned out in the hundreds to hear King speak. Abernathy called King at the hotel and convinced him to brave the bad weather and come down to the temple. When King arrived, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. After Abernathy introduced King, the 39-year-old leader took the podium and began to speak to the audience extemporaneously. "Something is happening in Memphis," King said. "Something is happening in our world" (King, "I've Been," 207). Surveying great times in history, including Egypt, the Roman Empire, the Renaissance, and the Civil War, King said he would "be happy" if God allowed him "to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century" (King, "I've Been," 209).

As King recalled the events in Birmingham in 1963, he

painted a bleak picture of the times, yet said this was the best time in which to live. As King concluded his speech, he began to reminisce about his near fatal stabbing in September 1958. He exclaimed that he would have missed the emergence of the student sit-ins in 1960, the Freedom Rides in 1961, the Albany Movement in 1962, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, and the Selma to Montgomery March in 1965.

In a prophetic finale to his speech, King revealed that he was not afraid to die: "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.... And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord" (King, "I've Been," 222–223). Witnesses, including Abernathy, Andrew Young, and James Jordan said King had tears in his eyes as he took his seat. "This time it just seemed like he was just saying, 'Goodbye, I hate to leave,'" Jordan supposed (Honey, 424). On 4 April, while King waited for a limousine to take him to dinner at Reverend Billy Kyles' home, he was fatally shot on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.