

In December of 1955, a very young Martin Luther King, Jr. met with the Montgomery, Alabama city commission. King had just arrived at his first pastorate, the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, and was immediately asked to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association, which was dedicated to securing civil rights for the African American residents of King's City.

In the wake of Rosa Park's defiance of the local transit authority, the Association had engaged in a boycott of the Montgomery bus system, which turned out to be so successful that the all-white City Council requested a meeting to negotiate the organization. King went with the representatives as the spokesperson for the group, convinced in his heart that he had secured his first victory against the apartheid of the south. King's theology was based upon his belief that the universe as created by God was inherently moral: his favorite saying was "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

King's beliefs were shattered, however, by the unmoving hatred of the city leaders – a realization that he talked about in his autobiography: "I soon saw that I was the victim of an unwarranted pessimism because I had started out with an unwarranted optimism. I had gone to the meeting with a great illusion. I had believed that the privileged would give up their privileges on request. This experience, however, taught me a lesson. I came to see that no one gives up his privileges without strong resistance...I went home with a heavy heart."

King had experience the first lesson that comes with acting out our Christian faith in the world. After emotionally and spiritually regrouping, he continued the struggle for civil rights that would lead to his death, but as Rufus Burrow Jr. points out in his recent book, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Theology of Resistance, "Although King was absolutely committed to the struggle for the total liberation and empowerment of blacks and other

oppressed peoples, there were also times when he longed for the day he could leave the struggle and leisurely teach theology in a seminary or a university.”

Aren't there times that we long for a simpler life or an easy answer to an ethical dilemma? Such longing is a part of the human heart, especially for Christians, because doing the right thing in the name of our faith can be extremely difficult, burdensome, and time consuming. One of King's theological influences was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian and Lutheran pastor who was executed by Hitler at the close of World War II.

Bonhoeffer had struggled with the opportunity to join a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, even though he was well aware of the horrors of the Nazi party. As Burrow points out in the same book, “So horrific were Hitler's crimes against the Jewish people in particular, and humanity in general, that Bonhoeffer felt compelled to do whatever was necessary to stop him. And yet, so deep was his conviction that all life belongs to God and is precious to God, that he knew he would have to answer to God personally for the attempt on Hitler's life, as that life also belonged to God.” Burrow goes on to conclude, “The Christian ethic is a very tough ethic by which to live individually, and most especially, collectively.”

The spiritual ancestor of our Christian ethic, the religion of Ancient Israel, was also an extremely tough way to live, even more so because of its view of the law in relation to obedience and suffering. Imagine being a part of a belief system in which misfortune was directly connected to divine judgment - a belief system in which poverty, sickness, and calamity were signs of God's enmity against the individual, the family, or the community. Imagine living in a belief system where sins were publicly exposed and publicly punished, sometimes with extreme violence, and where judgement was lodged in the religious

authority of a powerful few who held the keys to righteousness. Wouldn't those under the yoke of such a system seek a God who would relieve them of their suffering and bring justice to their oppressors?

The prophets as recorded in the Hebrews scripture had never viewed the promise of God's Messiah as an easy answer to the problem of human suffering. While the Messiah was a figure of healing and hope, the prophets also connected suffering to the Messiah's life, connecting that suffering to the spiritual reconciliation of not just Israel, but all creation. But this view of the Messiah as a "wounded healer" was rejected or overlooked by those who viewed salvation and justice strictly from a social or political perspective.

That political perspective of God's Messiah was the overwhelming view in Palestine during the advent of John the Baptist's prophetic ministry. At that time the Messiah was looked for in three possible ways: as a militant leader to free the nation from the hegemony of Rome, a religious leader to make the world subservient to the Jewish religion, or simply one to bring about a Jewish apocalypse and the end of the world. All three were easy answers to those who were searching for God's truth. Some attached those views of the Messiah to John the Baptist himself, perhaps ignoring the fact that John was preaching spiritual repentance in preparation for a spiritual Messiah.

But in the gospel of John the Apostle, we witness that transformative moment when John the Baptist hands over several of his followers to a person from Galilee who has unexpectedly appeared on the scene, a leader like none other any of those who followed John had ever encountered: *The next day he saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. And I myself have seen and have testified*

that this is the Son of God.’ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day.

While we do not know the identity of the other disciple (possibly the Apostle John himself,) but we do know that Andrew’s curiosity led him toward an encounter with Christ. John the Baptist had made a very clear statement about the nature of the Messiah as he pointed to Christ: “Look, here is the Lamb of God.” That phrase, “the Lamb of God,” could not be mistaken for any of the preconceived notions about the Messiah held by the popular religion of the time, but it was in line with the prophetic view. The lamb was an image of love, sacrifice, and a means of reconciliation to God – it was an answer, but not an easy one.

The difficulty of John the Baptist’s declaration is immediately apparent in Christ’s conversation with the two disciples of John. Christ asks them, “What are you looking for?” Perhaps that very question was a test for the disciples. Andrew’s answer could have been out of the traditional religious views of the Messiah’s purpose – “We want to join your army,” or “We want to help you make the world subservient to Yahweh,” or “We want to join you in bringing about the end of the world,” but instead Andrew’s reply clearly seeks a relationship rather than an answer: “Teacher, where are you staying?” to which Jesus simply replies, “Come and see.”

“Come and see...” In one of his writings, Martin Luther King, Jr. states, “Faith is taking the first step even when you can’t see the whole staircase.” In our age there is still a great yearning for easy answers, but when that yearning becomes the foundation of our Christianity, it leads to what Bonhoeffer described as “cheap grace.” Cheap grace is presenting Christ as an end to life in the world rather than the beginning of a new way of living life in the world, Christ as a destination rather than a journey.

I don’t know if you still see them today, but in years past there was a Christian bumper sticker showing a symbol of the fish or the cross with just three large words and an exclamation point: “I’ve Got It!” It implied that salvation is little more than an object to be obtained by the ones lucky enough to get it. It implies that following Christ is little more than a name on a roll, a seat in a pew, a walk up the aisle, a splashing of water, or a dollar in the plate. But Christ’s question and Andrew’s answer does not let us get away with such easy notions of discipleship. “What are you looking for? “Where are you staying?”

Andrew learned that Christ stayed in many places, often the kind of places where most people were not willing to go. Christ stayed with those who lived on the margins of the culture – the sick, the rejected, and the despised. Christ stayed where people were reaching out to God in despair and regret for their sins. Christ stayed where people loved each other, regardless of their differences. Christ stayed in places where he could comfort the judged and judge the comfortable.

Do we dare ask of Christ Andrew’s question, “Where are you staying?” because the answer might not be what we are expecting or what we want. Whatever Christ’s answer is to us, I can promise you this – it will not be an easy one. Following Christ will at times lead us into places we do not wish to go – places in the heart, where we must struggle with our

own sin and self-deception, and places in the world, where we will be called to expend energy and time as we deal with our own discomfort, but as Martin Luther King learned, that is the journey of faith.

Mystery writer Elizabeth George in her novel “Missing Joseph,” writes, “There are no easy answers, there’s only living through the questions.” The good news is that a loving God has provided us a means to live through the questions, even when the answers are difficult or non-existent. Christ is the way, and the truth, and the life, and he is staying somewhere that we need to be – whether or not we go there is up to us.