

# A MIRACLE IN MONTGOMERY

Told by Reverend Joseph Lowery

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**In March 1996**, many of us from the Civil Rights Movement, who had walked the historic path to freedom so long ago, retraced our steps from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. This sacred trail, forever stained with the blood of martyrs, is hallowed by the hopes and dreams of those for whom we walked. We marched again to remind ourselves of the bitter price we paid thirty years ago for the right of all Americans, black and white, to vote, and the painful cost we pay today for failing to exercise that right.

With this march, we hoped to encourage a heightened level of voter activism and a revived sense of energy. We sought to gain support from politicians and dignitaries, from businesspeople and journalists. We accomplished all of those things, and much more. For on this day we were witnesses to a miracle.

In 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. appointed me to chair a committee of marchers assigned to present our demands to Alabama’s governor, George Wallace. This was the man whose troops had brutalized us. He was the man who had called out snarling dogs on black marchers. He was the man who had stood in front of the schoolhouse door, to stop blacks from attending the University of Alabama.

As a Methodist preacher, speaking to a Methodist layman, I told him

that God would hold him accountable for his hateful words, which others had transformed into hateful deeds. Those deeds took a heavy toll on people like Viola Liuzzo, Jimmie Lee Jackson, and many others who lost their lives in the struggle. At the time his response was, at best, indifferent. Yet thirty years later, in 1996, this man welcomed us back to Montgomery!

While some were opposed to granting Governor Wallace's request to participate in the march, I did not dare stand in the door against an act of repentance. Since he had nothing to gain politically, I appreciated his offer of reconciliation. That he wanted to join us and affirm our purpose was like the flash of lightning that shines across a way filled with shadows of malice.

By car, it's less than three hours from the University of Tuscaloosa to St. Jude High School, the beginning to the end of the march. But, by way of the heart, it has taken more than thirty years. That's the tortured distance traveled by Governor Wallace that day. At the end of that journey, here he was, paying honor to those he had stood against.

In 1972, Governor Wallace was shot and paralyzed by an enraged citizen. Later he said, "In a way that was impossible before the shooting, I think I can understand something of the pain that black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain, and I can only ask forgiveness." In his last term as governor, in the late 1980s, he appointed more than 160 blacks to state governing boards, and doubled the number of black voter registrars in Alabama's counties.

Remembering the angry days of the 1960s, the hate, violence, intolerance, and stubbornness of this man, I am amazed at the governor's

transformation. None of us could ever have dreamed that Wallace would come to embrace our cause, hold our hands, and sing our songs.

Well, almost none. Martin Luther King Jr., that dreamer whose life was cut short, had a vision.

*I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with interposition and nullification, that one day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls as brothers and sisters. I have a dream today!*

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

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